Christians and Poverty

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Supervisor: Prof. D.E. de Villiers
For Mar–Eli,*

angel

sent by God

to facilitate my growth

* Mar–Eli means ‘the bitterness of my God’

[mar (Heb.) - bitter; cry or weep bitterly]
[Eli = my God (Aramaic) (see Mt. 27: 46)]
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Students in South Africa often complain about supervisors - how fortunate I am to have no complaints but only appreciation! Prof. Etienne de Villiers handled me in just the right way. He allowed me freedom to explore and asked me difficult questions to keep me on track, guide me to clarity, and remind me of the academic discipline I am working in. The many shortcomings that remain in the text reflect my inability to respond to his challenges. Thank you Etienne, for your sensitive and intelligent guidance, as well as your friendship.

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My Staffordshire Bullterrier - faithful companion of almost fifteen years - stayed at my side continuously for a third major research project. He was a fragment of God's heaven in my world.

My wife and child suffered for this project - my apologies for my flaws and shortcomings! Thank you for your sacrifices, Trix and Lisa, I appreciate your enduring friendship.

Thanks to the Good Shepherd of Ezekiel 34, for taking special care of a weak and vulnerable sheep. Without You this thesis would not be. Thanks for the guardian angel as well.

H.P.P. (Hennie) Lötter (9630595)
29 October 1999.
CHRISTIANS AND POVERTY — SUMMARY

In this thesis I want to answer the simple question: "What is the message of the Bible about poverty for us today?" To get a simple answer to this question of Christian ethics I do four things. They are as follows: [1] I develop an understanding of the complexities of poverty, [2] I explain the moral issues raised by the complexities of poverty, [3] I analyse Biblical texts related to issues of poverty, and [4] I develop a theory of Christian ethics for dealing with poverty in contemporary societies.

The plan of the thesis is as follows. In Chapter One I draw a profile of poverty in South Africa. Then I look at theological discussions of poverty in recent theology. Afterwards follows a brief methodological justification for the interdisciplinary nature of this study in Christian ethics. In Chapter Two I give a fuller methodological justification for my project. I answer the question whether ancient religious texts from different socio-cultural periods in history can teach us anything about poverty and wealth. I justify a concept of theology as science, based on my conception of science as a complex system. I also develop my own conception of the hermeneutics that are involved. In Chapter Three I develop two arguments, based on empirical team research done in South Africa. One argument shows that Christians ought to take poverty seriously as a result of the serious effects it has on individuals and members of their households. The other argument makes the point that poverty is a threat to democratic societies.

Chapter Four explains the complexity of poverty and the link between poverty and wealth. I give definitions of poverty and wealth. I then discuss the possible causes of poverty and show why poverty is a complex phenomenon. In Chapter Five I explain the concept of justice in political philosophy and demonstrate why this concept is particularly appropriate for articulating the moral issues involved in issues of poverty and wealth.
In **Chapter Six** I analyse and interpret all texts from the Old Testament that might be relevant for understanding or dealing with poverty and wealth. In **Chapter Seven** I analyse and interpret all texts from the New Testament that might be relevant for understanding or dealing with poverty and wealth. In the final chapter, **Chapter Eight**, I develop a comprehensive Christian theory of poverty and wealth. I compare the social context of the Bible with those of contemporary democracies. I link my philosophical analyses of poverty with textual evidence from the Bible. The proposed Christian ethics on poverty and riches are linked to the larger themes of the Biblical message. This is necessary, as I believe the Biblical message about poverty cannot be divorced from many of the major themes of the Bible. Finally, I explore the role a Christian ethics of wealth and poverty can play in shaping public philosophy and policy in contemporary constitutional democracies.

**Key terms:**

Poverty, wealth, liberation theology, Christian ethics, science, justice, democracy, injustice, hermeneutics, biblical ethics
CHRISTENE EN ARMOEDE — OPSOMMING

In hierdie proefskrif wil ek 'n eenvoudige vraag beantwoord: “Wat is die boodskap van die Bybel oor armoede vir ons vandag?” Ek doen vier dinge om 'n eenvoudige antwoord op hierdie vraag te kry. Hulle is soos volg: [1] Ek ontwikkel 'n bewussyn van die kompleksiteit van armoede, [2] ek verduidelik die morele kwessies wat deur die kompleksiteit van armoede opgeroep word, [3] ek analiseer die Bybelse tekste wat verband hou met kwessies rakende armoede, en [4] ek ontwerp 'n teorie van Christelike etiek om armoede in hedendaagse samelewings mee te hanteer.

Die plan van die proefskrif is soos volg. In Hoofstuk Een skets ek 'n profiel van armoede in Suid-Afrika. Daarna kyk ek na teologiese besprekings van armoede in onlangse teologie. Die hoofstuk sluit af met 'n kort verduidelikking van my siening oor die aard van Christelike etiek en die verloop van my studie. In Hoofstuk Twee gee ek 'n vollediger metodologiese regverdiging van my projek deur die rasionaliteit van teologie as wetenskap te beredeneer. Ek beantwoord die vraag of die ou antieke tekste van die Bybel ons vandag nog iets oor rykdom en armoede kan leer. Ek regverdig die idee van teologie as wetenskap, wat voldoen aan 'n wetenskapsbeel van wetenskap as komplekse sisteem. Ek ontwikkel ook my eie siening van die hermeneutiek wat betrokke is.

In Hoofstuk Drie ontwikkel ek twee argumente, gebaseer op empiriese spannavorsing wat in Suid-Afrika gedoen is. Een argument toon aan dat Christene armoede ernstig moet opneem as gevolg van die skadelike gevolge wat dit op individue en huishoudings het. Die ander argument beredeneer die punt dat armoede 'n bedreiging vir demokratiese samelewings is.
Hoofstuk Vier verduidelik die kompleksiteit van armoede en die verband tussen rykdom en armoede. Ek bied definisies van beide rykdom en armoede en toon aan watter sake as indikatore van armoede beskou word. Daarna bespreek ek moontlike oorsake van armoede en toon aan waarom armoede ‘n komplekse verskynsel is.

In Hoofstuk Vyf bespreek ek die begrip geregtheid in politieke filosofie en toon aan waarom hierdie begrip besonder geskik is om die morele kwessies rakende armoede te artikuleer. In Hoofstuk Ses ontleed en interpreteer ek alle tekste in die Ou Testament wat relevant mag wees vir die verstaan en hantering van armoede. In Hoofstuk Sewe ontleed en interpreteer ek alle tekste in die Nuwe Testament wat relevant mag wees vir die verstaan en hantering van armoede.

In die laaste hoofstuk, Hoofstuk Agt, ontwikkel ek ‘n omvattende Christelike teorie van rykdom en armoede. Ek vergelyk eers die sosiale konteks van die Bybel met die konteks van hedendaagse samelewings om vas te stel of boodskap van die Bybel gepas vir vandag kan wees. Ek verbind my filosofiese analises van armoede met die tekstuele getuienis van die Bybel. Die voorgestelde Christelike etiek van rykdom en armoede word verbind aan die groter temas van die Bybel. Dit is noodsaaklik, aangesien ek oortuig is dat die Bybelse boodskap oor rykdom en armoede nie losgemaak kan word van baie van die hooftemas van die Bybel nie. Ten slotte ondersoek ek die rol wat ‘n Christelike etiek van rykdom en armoede kan speel in die vorming van openbare filosofie en beleid in hedendaagse konstitusionele demokrasieë.

Sleutel terme:
Armoede, rykdom, bevrydingsteologie, Christelike etiek, wetenskap, geregtheid, demokrasie, onreg, hermeneutiek, bybelse etiek
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CHAPTER ONE

POVERTY, RICHES, AND THEOLOGY

Christians live in a world where desperate poverty that leads to starvation, preventable deaths, serious disease, damaged relationships, violated bodies, missed opportunities, and moral degeneration are common (cf. Alcock 1997: 48). Many non-poor Christians seem either not to notice, or not to care. Do they have any moral justification to turn away from poor people’s problems? Does the moral vision of Christianity have clear guidelines on whether Christians have responsibilities toward their fellow humans suffering from poverty? Perhaps more important is the question whether Christianity has any special message for poor people themselves. Does God have anything to say to desperately poor people who live next to the luxurious rich? Does He care about the suffering of poor people? Can He help them escape their poverty?

In this thesis I want to explore these issues. I focus on the following question: “What is the message of the Bible about poverty for us today?” This simple question raises many complex issues that must be dealt with before a simple, clear answer can be given. For example, we must determine what poverty is. We must find a way of distinguishing between those who are poor and those who are rich. Furthermore, we must find out why poverty is a moral issue worth considering seriously. What are the effects of poverty on people? We must analyse all the moral issues raised by a complex phenomenon like poverty.

Once we fully understand what poverty is, what consequences it has, and why we must see the moral issues involved, then we can start asking what the Bible has to say about these issues. To eliminate personal bias, all pos-
sible texts dealing with poverty must be read and interpreted. Once that is done, we can try to put everything together into a coherent view about the Biblical message about poverty. Interpreting the Biblical texts, comparing them with current moral thinking, and adapting their message to our contemporary circumstances can help us design a Christian ethics for today that can guide Christians to live responsibly in societies with great inequalities between rich and poor.

In this chapter I want to show where I come from, i.e., what the context is in which I am writing this thesis. I will give a brief profile of poverty in South Africa in the 1990s. This profile is important, as readers will see something of the nature of the poverty that prompted me to undertake this study. After that, I will evaluate the dominant theological response to poverty in the twentieth century, i.e. liberation theology. Knowing something about poverty in my context and the value of the strongest theological response to poverty, I can proceed to indicate the conception of Christian ethics I rely on for developing the rest of the thesis as an exploration of various dimensions of the simple question: “What is the message of the Bible about poverty for us today?”

1. A Profile of Poverty in South Africa

There is no way that I can write about poverty without acknowledging my own context. What I know of poverty, I have learnt in South Africa. Throughout my life I have observed poverty in many diverse settings, experienced friends and acquaintances who were poor, and read scientific research describing and explaining what I have encountered. Although there might be many overlaps with poverty in other countries, I do not want to claim what follows is universally true and fully applicable to all people everywhere. Such a claim would be too strong. However, extensive reading of social science reports from different parts of the world suggests the possibility that poverty has general characteristics that are shared by people everywhere. Thus, the
possibility exists that my views on poverty might be relevant and helpful to people outside South Africa. If my views do apply elsewhere, people in other countries must judge it for themselves to be so. I start this thesis by making general observations about poverty in South Africa, before I look at the ways theologians have dealt with poverty and riches. Afterwards I will indicate how I want to address the issue of Christians and poverty.

South Africa is a country plagued by poverty. Throughout the twentieth century poor people desperately hoped for interventions to improve their quality of life. Military defeat for the two Boer Republics in the Anglo-Boer War that ended in 1902 left many white people poor. The so-called “poor white” problem reached its climax in the early 1930s when a deep recession hit South Africa. As white people had political power at the expense of the other people in the country, the problems of poor white people were addressed effectively through governmental interventions and a host of initiatives from civil society.

Two other major problems of poverty co-existed with the problem of “poor whites,” but had to wait many decades to be taken seriously. The so-called Coloured people, descendants of slaves, Khoisan, and whites, suffered poverty as a result of their position as slaves, restrictions placed on them by colonial governments, and their role as exploited farm labourers, which was their only option after their loss of land through colonial conquest. Only in 1973 did their problems of poverty become visible after a multi-disciplinary research report by a governmental commission. The political will to tackle those problems through governmental interventions had to wait until after the end of apartheid.

Black people’s problems of poverty started with the colonial conquest of their land long before the twentieth century. Throughout the twentieth century their problems of poverty were ignored by successive white governments,
while political restrictions virtually stalled all attempts by organs of civil society to deal with those problems. Churches did manage to do some good work. A multi-disciplinary research report, lead by Francis Wilson and Mamphela Ramphele and funded by the Carnegie Foundation of New York, brought the full picture of poverty among black people into public consciousness in 1989. After the final destruction of apartheid in 1994, the new democratic government made the eradication of poverty one of their major priorities. In their book called "Unlocking Poverty," Francis Wilson and Mamphela Ramphele (1999) refer to the extremes of inequality in South Africa.

How does poverty manifest in South Africa? What are some of the general characteristics of poverty that are easily recognisable to citizens? In what follows, I want to give a profile of poverty in South Africa based on recent information. The profile is not comprehensive, but only intended to provide readers with a glimpse of the nature of the phenomenon of poverty in the context of South Africa.

The information used were gathered in the 1990s. One set of information comes from a major effort of an interdisciplinary team of researchers published in a report called "Key indicators of poverty in South Africa" (May 1995). The report gives statistical descriptions of the major characteristics of poverty in South Africa. The report is based on a multipurpose integrated household survey covering 9000 households throughout South Africa that was done in 1993 by the South Africa Living Standards Survey. This survey measured the standard of living by using consumption levels of households which are based on household expenditure data.

A second set of information comes from a national census held in 1996. The census covers all people in South Africa and provides a wide-ranging set of statistics of which many are relevant in drawing a profile of poverty in South Africa. A major study, based on both interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary team research, provides the third set of information (May 1998). This study
was commissioned by Deputy President Thabo Mbeki and the Inter-Ministerial Committee for Poverty and Inequality. The study was funded by the governments of South Africa, the Netherlands, and Britain, as well as the World Bank, and the United Nations Development Programme. The statistics used in this report comes from the 1995 Income and Expenditure data of the Central Statistical Services (now called Statistics South Africa).

In their book called "Uprooting Poverty," Francis Wilson and Mamphela Ramphele (1989) refer to the extremes of inequality in South Africa as the contrast between grinding poverty and massive wealth. Is this remark true? Does South Africa indeed have a particularly high income inequality that ranks with the worst in the world?

One way of looking at the degree of income inequality is to compare consumption patterns of different income groups. One such comparison of consumption patterns was made between the 40% of households with the lowest incomes and the 10% of households with the highest incomes. The lowest 40% of households comprised 53% of the population, while the highest 10% comprised only 5.8% of the population. These statistics suggest that households in the highest income group are much smaller on average than those in the lower income groups. The consumption patterns of these two groups tell the story of inequality in South Africa. The lowest 40% of households are responsible for 10% of all consumption in South Africa, while the highest 10% is responsible for 40% of all consumption. This means that the rich households consume significantly more than poor households, suggesting high levels of inequality.

A more detailed statistical analysis of consumption patterns show more of the wide gulf between rich and poor in South Africa. In the following table a few selected indicators of consumption patterns for different income groups are compared.
Comparison of Selected Indicators for Different Poverty Income Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Bottom 20%</th>
<th>Bottom 40%</th>
<th>Top 10%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Food as a % of household expenditure</td>
<td>59.2</td>
<td>57.6</td>
<td>14.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energy, water &amp; rates as % of household expenditure</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monthly food expenditure per adult equivalent</td>
<td>69.75</td>
<td>99.81</td>
<td>436.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic dependency ratio</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of household members 15-64 formally employed</td>
<td>23.9</td>
<td>28.7</td>
<td>80.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average people per room</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To show how wide the gap between rich and poor is, I will concentrate on the differences between the top 10% of households and the bottom 40% of households. In the bottom 40% of households food, a basic necessity, forms 57.6% of household expenditure. In the top 10% of households expenditure on food forms a much smaller percentage of household expenditure, i.e., only 14.9%. Looking at monthly expenditure on food from a different angle heightens the contrast. The bottom 40% of households spend R99.81 per month for every adult, while the top 10% of households spend R436.88 per adult. A significant difference!

A similar pattern is repeated in the case of expenditure on municipal services (energy, water, and taxes). The poorest 40% of households spend 12.6% of their income on these services, while the richest 10% spend only 6.3% on theirs. The inequality between rich and poor also shows in the housing that a household can afford for its members. Comparing the num-
bers of persons per room in households obviously ignores many others factors about housing, such as the quality or setting (location). Nevertheless, the differences are telling. In the lowest 40% of households there are one room for every 2.4 persons, whereas in the top 10% of households there are one room for every 0.5 persons. To appreciate the cramped conditions many poor people live in, one must note the number of households with two rooms or less at their disposal. Of all South African households, 32.6% live in two or fewer rooms, ranging from 23.1% of households in the Western Cape to 39.1% in the Eastern Cape.

The vast inequalities conveyed by the above statistics become understandable in the light of high unemployment figures. In the top 10% of households 80.5% of household members between the ages of 15–64 are formally employed. In the bottom 40% of households only 28.7% of household members are formally employed. These employment figures translate into frightening statistics about the number of people dependent on formally employed peo-
people. In the top 10% of households 1.8 persons are dependent on those with an income, while in the bottom 40% of households 5.8 persons are dependent on one person with a much smaller income than the income of those in the top 10%!

The figures depicting the monthly income of employed people show how low the income of a large group of people are — added, the income of those roughly two-thirds of the South African population fortunate enough to have employment.

![Graph showing monthly income distribution](image)

Amongst employed people, 62% earn less than R1,500.00 per month. Roughly 99% of employed people in South Africa earn less than the category where most university professors would have been in 1996, i.e., between R11,000.00 and R16,000.00 per month.

Education is one of the primary means enabling people to adapt successfully in modern industrial societies. It can fulfil this function only if the correct contents and teaching methods are used, and if acceptable facilities and teachers are available. Lack of education results in illiteracy, being not qualified for any career, and an inability to use the resources of the written media
for self-improvement. There are strong correlations between low formal education and poverty. Not providing good quality education for black people in the apartheid society was often deliberate, to exclude black people from the better positions in society. Throughout the apartheid era there were glaring racial inequalities in expenditure for education per head of population.

There is an interesting correlation between the sharp degree of income inequality and educational qualifications. The tendency is clear: better educational qualifications dramatically reduce the risk of being poor. People with no education are most vulnerable to poverty, as 69% of them are poor. Tertiary education, on the other hand, seems like an insurance policy against poverty, as only 2.5% of people with tertiary education are poor. Of the group with a primary education 54% are poor, while only 24% of people with secondary education are poor. The value of education as buffer against poverty is clearly confirmed.

From the statistics presented above the degree of income inequality in South Africa is quite clear. The question now is how these statistics compare with income inequalities in other countries.

**Comparison of Income Inequality in Selected Middle Income Countries**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Poland</th>
<th>Thailand</th>
<th>Venezuela</th>
<th>Brazil</th>
<th>South Africa</th>
<th>Malaysia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GNP per capita (US$ 1994)</td>
<td>2410</td>
<td>2410</td>
<td>2760</td>
<td>2970</td>
<td>3040</td>
<td>3480</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% share of income of poorest 20%</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% share of income of richest 10%</td>
<td>22.1</td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td>42.7</td>
<td>51.3</td>
<td>41.9</td>
<td>37.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gini co-efficient (May 1998: 25)</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>0.48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The following results emerge from a comparison of income inequality in South Africa with selected middle income countries like South Africa. The countries are Poland, Thailand, Venezuela, Brazil, and Malaysia. The comparison is between the percentage share of income of the poorest 20% of people and the percentage share of income of the richest 10% of people. South Africa’s degree of difference between rich and poor measured in those terms is second highest after Brazil. The Gini-coefficient, based on a formula that expresses this relationship, shows how high South Africa’s income inequality is compared to countries with a roughly similar GNP (gross national product) per capita.

An obvious correlation in the statistics on poverty in South Africa is the strong link between poverty and race. This link between poverty and race is starkly portrayed in the poverty rate of 1995.

![Poverty Rate - 1995](image)

Only 1% of white people were poor, while 60.7% of black people were poor. Apartheid did indeed channel resources to whites and took good care of them at the expense of blacks! Coloured people also have a high poverty rate, as 32% of this group are poor. The poverty rate among Indian people are relatively low at 5.4%.

The strong link between poverty and race can be demonstrated another way by using a different set of statistics, one that predicts the probability of being poor by using race, province, and the rural–urban distinction. Rural white
people have a higher probability of being poor than urban white people. Rural whites have between 3.7% and 10.6% probability of being poor, depending on the province where they live. Urban whites have an almost negligible probability of being poor, varying between 1.2% and 2.8%, depending on the province. In contrast to the relatively low probabilities of white people being poor, black people have frighteningly high probabilities of being poor. The urban blacks have the lowest probability of being poor, ranging between 33.6% and 61.2%, depending on the province. Rural black people can almost not avoid being poor, as their probability for being poor range between 61% and 83.5%, depending on the province. The vast difference between the probability of whites being poor and blacks being poor demonstrates how effectively apartheid established the link between the white race and riches and the black race and poverty.

The link between race and poverty is thus not arbitrary nor coincidental. It is the result of policies of successive white apartheid governments that deliberately impoverished black people. The apartheid policies from 1948 onwards reinforced and exacerbated already existing patterns of poverty among people of colour caused by colonial conquest, denial of political rights, and industrialisation. In a country where sections of the population were excluded for decades from participation in the political processes at national, regional, and local levels, one can expect politics to have a major impact on the incidence and degree of poverty.

One obvious reason for the negative influence of apartheid politics on poverty is that politicians at different levels of government make decisions about the use of public resources. Local, regional, and national governments decide on priorities for public spending, thus determining the allocation of public resources to what they think worthwhile causes. Their priorities determine the amount and placement of public facilities, and the people who benefit from them. Systematic and prolonged bias in public expenditure in
favour of an elite section of the population substantially impoverished those who were excluded. Poor black people experienced the deliberate neglect of infrastructure in their areas, such as the provision of water, electricity, sewerage, and roads.

The distribution of income was strongly tilted in favour of whites during the apartheid era. The extent of the unequal division of wealth and income is reflected in the following statistics of the National Manpower Commission of the average income for black, white, coloured, and Indian families from 1980–1984 (Cooper et al. 1986). In 1980, the relative average incomes of members of the four racial categories in which statistics were kept in South Africa were as follows. Black people earned 24.6% of the average income of whites, coloured people 33%, and Indians 43.8%. Despite an increase of 92% in the income of black people from 1980 to 1984, they only earned 25.9% of the average income earned by white people, coloured people earned 35.2%, and Indians 49.4%. The huge wage gap between the races persisted despite dramatic increases.

The legacy of apartheid can be seen in the sharp neglect of the provision of services to black people. Water, electricity, and transport are three services of particular importance to poor people, as their easy access makes more time available for other duties. Rural Africans, who overwhelmingly belong to the poorest 20% of in South African society, spent approximately 189.5 minutes fetching water every day in 1995. Collecting wood took members of the same group 80 minutes per day. More than four hours of these poor people’s time went into fetching water and fuel, time that could have been spent more productively if they had easy access to other sources of energy and water. Difficult access to energy and water means less time and opportunities for engaging in activities that could ameliorate poverty. One example will suffice. Easy access to water can enable poor people to cultivate vegetables for their own use and for generating extra income.
In 1996 access to water has improved as a result of strongly driven government policies to provide poor people access to water.

Households with a tap inside were 44.7%, while 16.7% of households had a tap on site. Access to taps within reasonable walking distance reached 19.8% of households. The rest of the households had access to dams / rivers / streams (12.5%), as well as boreholes / rainwater and water carriers (1.2%) (distance not specified).

Significant to note is the racial divide of households with taps inside their dwellings. As expected do black households have the fewest taps inside, only 27.3%. Coloured households do much better at 72.4%, while white
households follow with 96.4% and Indian households with 97.6%.

Collecting wood for cooking and heating drains poor people's energy and wastes their precious time. Using candles and paraffin for lighting increases the risks of fires in the often highly inflammable housing used by poor people, while also limiting their activities after dark. Electricity further enables people to use a wide variety of electrical appliances that make life easier and stimulate productive activities that could alleviate poverty and promote self-reliance.

In South Africa, 44.7% of households use electricity for cooking, 46.4% use it for heating, and 58.1% for lighting. Wood is used in 23% of households for cooking and in 27.9% for heating. Paraffin is used in 21.6% of households for cooking and in 14.9% for heating. Coal has a much smaller use, only
3.6% of households use it for cooking and 8.5% for heating. Candles are used by 28.8% of households for lighting, while 12.7% of households use paraffin.

Another aspect of poor people’s lives with a strong impact on available time is their means of transport. A comparison between the use of a car or motorbike versus walking to work is instructive. Although not all rich people use cars to drive to work and not all poor people walk to work, the general tendency suggested by these statistics is significant. Only 30% of all South Africans use a car or a motorbike to drive to work. Of this 30%, 6.5% are among the poorest 20% of South Africans, while 76.7% are among the richest 20%. Only 28.3% of all South Africans walk to work. In this case the statistics are reversed. Of the 28.3% who walk to work, only 8.1% are from the
richest 20% of South Africans, while 62% of those walking come from the poorest 20%. Again poor people lose time and energy that they need much more elsewhere.

Housing is a major problem for poor people in South Africa. Most South Africans are familiar with numerous squatter camps (shanty towns) that have sprung up on the outskirts of towns and cities, the traditional housing of black people in rural areas, and the small houses of farm labourers.

In South Africa, 57.5% of households have formal housing, while 18.2% live in traditional housing in rural areas. Informal housing (including shacks) provides dwellings for 16% of households, while 7% of households stay in someone else’s backyard (shacks excluded). A particular important part of any dwelling is the toilet, as the kind of toilet can have an important influence on the prevention of diseases. Only 50.5% of households have access to a flush or chemical toilet, while 32.4% of households use pit latrines. The bucket system is used by 4.7% of households, while 12.4% of households have no toilet whatsoever.

Many well-off people in South Africa cannot imagine anyone living without a telephone. In South Africa, only 29% of households have any kind of telephone in their dwelling, ranging from only 7.5% of households in the Northern Province up to 55.4% of households in the Western Cape. Of all 9,059 million households covered by the census, 1,655 million reported that they
had no access to a telephone – not a public telephone, nor one at a neighbour, or even at work.

Politics influenced the extent of poverty in various other ways. Banning or restricting special interest groups who aimed to mobilise people already poor or at risk of becoming poor, substantially weakened the bargaining position of the poor. For example, banning trade unions left many workers in low paying jobs without effective bargaining power against exploitative employers. Similarly, if people were not allowed to mobilise themselves they could not effectively resist government policies that aimed to relocate them elsewhere. Such relocations often caused poverty because people were dumped at places where making a living was impossible because of overcrowding or adverse climatic conditions. Relocations also destroyed communal and family ties which functioned as buffers against the worst effects of poverty, thus further weakening people’s resistance against poverty.

Relocations were part of a comprehensive policy to move people belonging to certain groups to specified areas, rather than ad hoc measures to remove people from large dam sites or proposed industrial areas. The apartheid government tried to contain members of a racial group to a specific area and those restrictions severely impoverished such people. Laws restricting people’s movement from rural to urban areas, as well as constraints on housing construction in urban areas led to the overpopulation of rural areas, pressing their carrying capacity far beyond their limitations. The concentration of
people led to an overwhelming pressure on the land, which could not carry the burden being placed on it. Under these circumstances normal production quotas were significantly lowered, leading to further impoverishment.

The impoverishment of black people relocated and restricted to already overpopulated homelands (or reserves) comes dramatically to light when one notes the estimate that nearly 70% of poor people in South Africa live in the former homelands.

**Nearly 70% of the poor live in the former homelands**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Former Homelands</th>
<th>Poverty rates</th>
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<tr>
<td>Transkei</td>
<td>92</td>
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<tr>
<td>Qwa-Qwa</td>
<td>88</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lebowa</td>
<td>83</td>
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<td>Ciskei</td>
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<td>Gazankulu</td>
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<td>Bophutatswana</td>
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<td>Venda</td>
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<td>KwaZulu</td>
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<td>Kwandebele</td>
<td>48</td>
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The poverty rates in these areas are particularly high, as between 48% and 92% of their inhabitants are poor. Of the ten former homelands, eight have a poverty rate higher than 60%, while four of them have poverty rates higher than 70%. These extraordinarily high figures can be traced back to the policies of racial separation, dictated by colonial conquerors to militarily subordinated and politically dominated indigenous peoples.

The political actions referred to above are examples of actions that apartheid
governments at local, regional, and national levels did to impoverish people. There were numerous acts of omission that did the same, or simply perpetuated existing conditions of poverty. No provision for unemployment insurance, inadequate old age pensions, and inadequate schooling all contributed to poverty. Though there were limitations on government spending, acts of omission could only be acceptable if government actions and policies were judged to be equitable. That never was the case. The result of pursuing unjust policies was the impoverishment of black people in South Africa.

Wilson and Ramphale refer to the scandalous particularity of poverty in South Africa. Perhaps an appropriate set of statistics to conclude the scandalous particularity of this brief profile of poverty in South Africa is one referring to children living in poor households. Children often suffer in poor households for lack of food, clothing, and money to participate in worthwhile activities. Only in two provinces do less than 50% of the children live in poor households, i.e., in Gauteng and the Western Cape. In the other seven provinces, between 59.2% (Northern Cape) and 77.5% (Eastern Cape) of all children live in poor households. Poverty affects them right from the start.

If poverty seriously affects the lives in people in the ways described above, what responses have theologians offered for dealing with the suffering of poor people? In the next section the dominant theological response to poverty this century, that has developed Christian theology in new directions, will be critically scrutinised.

2. Theology and Poverty Thus Far – Dominant Themes

In the last four decades Latin American theologians have initiated a theological turn towards the poor that dominates debates on Christianity and poverty. They follow an important strand in Christian tradition of care for the poor and they extend the turn towards social issues in European theology that got under way in the twentieth century. Nevertheless, their explicit focus
on the plight of poor people brought a new dimension to Christian theology through the introduction of liberation theology. It soon became liberation theologies, as differences in emphases and results emerged among Latin American theologians. The idea of a liberating theology also spread to other oppressed groups, such as women and black people. In what follows, I want to present the main themes of recent theological debates on Christianity and poverty, based on a representative sample of texts drawn from liberation theology, African theology, and responses to them. I focus on these two kinds of liberation theology, as they deal directly with poverty. I will highlight their strengths and discuss the shortcomings. The latter provide opportunities for me to attempt to make some kind of contribution.

Mossale (1996)

What motivates liberation theologies? These theologies arise from the desperate situations of poverty, oppression, and resultant misery that millions of people in Third World countries experience. Liberation theologians use strong language to describe the experiences of the people they serve. They refer to the “scandal of poverty” (De Santa Ana 1979: 67) resulting from a “world of destitution and injustice” (Boff and Boff 1987: 3). The poor people live in a “human and social hell” (Boff and Boff 1987: 3), with the majority experiencing “tremendous social injustices,” living in “dismal poverty” and “inhuman wretchedness” (Hennely 1990: 114). As a result they describe the poor people as being “millions of debased and marginalised human beings” (Boff and Boff 1987: 3) who are impoverished, exploited, despised, and marginalised (De Santa Ana 1979: 124). Liberation theology aims at dialogue with these “non-persons,” i.e., those people who are kept in a subhuman situation through destitution and exclusion (Núñez 1985: 135).

How did the poor people that liberation theologians care about get into these desperate situations? Liberation theologians call these situations “an oppressive status quo” (Martey 1993: 55), a situation of “domination and dependence” (Núñez 1985: 132), and an “oppressive system” that perpetuates
poverty (Jonsson 1993: 78). The causes of these situations are identified as the history of colonialism, missionary preaching endorsing colonialism, oppressive governments, international economic exploitation, and Western imperialism and domination (De Villiers 1987: 2; Martey 1993: 124). Commenting on the role of missionary preaching in Latin America, Segundo says that “literally millions of people are dying because for five centuries the gospel has been interpreted in a particular way“ (Segundo 1993: 119). One result of colonialism was a colonial mentality instilled in the colonial subjects that passively accepted political domination and social oppression. This mentality became a major weapon to keep poor and destitute people down. Sometimes this mentality affects the practice of theology negatively as well (cf. Mosala 1989).

A dominant question for liberation theologians is: “What does it mean to be a Christian in these inhuman circumstances?” (Boff 1984: 10). The answer to this question aims to restore the credibility of Christianity through showing poor people that God cares about them (Boff and Boff 1987: 8). Liberation theologians want to make Christianity alive for poor people, demonstrating that this faith can make a difference to their lives (Gutiérrez 1972: 192). To show this difference is necessary to prove the authenticity of the mission of the church (Gutiérrez 1972: 222). The existence of millions of poor people challenge liberation theology to rethink the mission of the church, to revise their priorities, and to get to a new self-understanding of its role and function in society (De Santa Ana 1979: 97).

Through restoring the credibility of the message of Christianity, liberation theologians hope to direct the faith of believers to enable them to transform history (Boff and Boff 1987: 14). They want to create an attractive, human picture of how the world can be that will motivate people to work towards its implementation (Maimela 1987: 151). This picture must have a dominant emphasis on promoting respect for human dignity (Hennely 1990: 521). The
picture must illuminate the search for solutions to desperate poverty with the light of faith and indicate the broad lines of action that will lead to liberation from destitution and oppression (Hennely 1990: 500). Through constructive engagement in real problems of millions of suffering people, liberation theologians want to overcome their own intellectual dependence on European theology and make contributions to theology world-wide. They refuse to be quiet and to refrain from speaking out against the ways that the strong are exploiting the weak (Gutiérrez 1972: 105). They want their theologies to enrich bishops and priests, involved with poor people, to improve their ministries by enabling them to co-operate more effectively in solidarity with the poor and to encourage them to protest more vociferously with the poor against their poverty (Boff and Boff 1987: 18).

The method of liberation theology can best be understood from their desire to be organic intellectuals, i.e. intellectuals who are involved in the lives of the people they serve and who use their intellectual work to further the cause of those people. Practising theology follows after the involvement of theologians in the liberating practice that poor people engage in. Liberation theologians must have first hand knowledge of the oppression and the attempts at liberation of poor people. The theologians must somehow be involved in the struggle for liberation through participation in small Christian groups, trade union, political parties, etc. (Hennely 1990: 416–417). From this practical involvement they get to know the real world of oppressed and destitute people that must be drawn into the heart of the process of theological reflection (Gutiérrez 1972: 196; Boff and Boff 1987: 23).

Liberation theology is developed by theologians with a direct involvement in the lives and political struggles of poor people. Their solidarity with poor people must go even further. Their theology must be practised from the core of a commitment to solidarity with the poor. This implies that they try to view the socio-political reality from the perspective of the poor and give priority to
face the questions the poor raise in their struggle against degrading poverty (Boff 1984: ix). They turn to the Bible and the tradition of theology to find adequate answers to the urgent questions that arise for the poor in their quest for liberation (Maimela 1987: 75).

Liberation theologians do not see their theological theories as absolute, permanent, or everlasting, but rather as temporary interpretations that will change as the socio-political practice they reflect on changes (Boff and Boff 1987: 91). If their theological theories change their societies, they have to reflect anew on the changed society and face up to the new questions in the light of their faith (De Gruchy 1991: 68).

For liberation theologians to know the real world of the oppressed poor people, they must be more than just highly skilled in the art of articulation. Through the art of articulation they can articulate the discourse of society and the oppressed, the world of popular, symbolic and sacramental signs, and the faith and normative tradition of the church (Boff and Boff 1987: 19). However, liberation theologians all emphasise the value of the human sciences for providing a detailed social analysis of the situation of poor people. This analysis is a prerequisite for doing liberation theology. They use strong language to depict the importance of the human sciences for their way of doing theology. They describe the human sciences as "absolutely basic requirement" for liberation theology (Ilunga 1978:3), as it is impossible to practice theology without noting their results (Hennely 1990: 352). The human sciences have an importance that "cannot be overemphasised" (Martey 1993: 75) because of its "great significance" for contemporary theology (Hennely 1990: 352).

What do liberation theologians expect from the human sciences? They expect the human sciences to get to the bottom of events, relationships, and structures in society so that they can get the "most exact understanding
available of the causes" (Hennely 1990: 421). In the process the human sciences can use whatever instruments or tools are needed to provide the "most rigorous possible analysis of the mechanism and functioning" of their society (Hennely 1990: 421; Boff 1984: 76). Through such analyses liberation theologians hope to become aware of all the instances of injustice and oppression, as well as of the sites where justice and participation are enabled (Boff 1984: 76).

A detailed, scientific analysis of the circumstances and causes of poverty and oppression is not enough. Liberation theologians insist on combining such analyses with the rich interpretations the poor themselves make of their world (Boff and Boff 1987: 30). Liberation theologians must articulate these interpretations made by the poor through listening to them attentively. Only by combining scientific analyses with the views of the poor themselves will liberation theologians get to the heart of what is going on in a society.

Part of understanding what is going in a society, is to look critically at existing formulations and embodiments of Christian faith. Both the church and theology are targets of this critical evaluation in the light of new interpretations of the Christian faith. For many liberation theologians the process of liberation starts by viewing existing embodiments of Christianity with suspicion as a result of possible collusion between the church and oppressors (Martey 1993: 57).

Difficult questions are raised that aim at establishing a link between oppressive, inhuman behaviour and similarly oppressive, inhuman understandings of the Christian faith (Segundo 1993: 71). The questions arise from the experience that some strongly Christian countries are simultaneously some of the most inhuman countries as well. The question then becomes whether there is a link between oppressive social practices and oppressive interpretations of Christianity (Segundo 1993: 71; Martey 1993: 57). There is no
doubt in the minds of liberation theologians that Christianity can be misused to justify cruel domination, exploitation, and oppression (Maimela 1987: iii). Liberation theologians thus find it important to critically scrutinise the lives, actions, and practices of Christians involved in exploitative economic relations, dominating political practices, and oppressive human relationships (Maimela 1987: 78–84). The issue is to determine whether what is claimed to be Christian really measures up to that highly moral label (Maimela 1987: 84).

Theology itself must be critically interrogated to determine its authenticity as adequate interpretation of the Word of God. Liberation theologians argue that theology itself cannot be politically neutral. So-called neutral theologies are insufficiently aware of their own presuppositions consisting of political and economic ideologies. These “neutral” theologians do not use social analyses that would have clarified their social starting point and the way they themselves have unconsciously surrendered to the norms, attitudes, and behaviour patterns of their societies (De Santa Ana 1979: 121).

The uncritical attitude towards their own contingent platform of theologising places neutral theologians at risk of falling in the trap of the “bourgeois captivity of theology” (De Santa Ana 1979: 116). This means that theology can fall victim to the perspective of the dominant class in society. What happens is this. The theologians do not personally know impoverished, oppressed people, nor do they see their faces, or hear their voices as parts of their everyday or academic lives (De Santa Ana 1979: 116–117). As a result the theologians do not know about the experiences and sufferings of the poor, they do not hear about their needs, and they are unaware of the urgent questions poor people ask to God and the church (De Santa Ana 1979: 116–117). In this way these “neutral” theologians have become blinded to suffering and unconsciously they have kept the poor from their theological agendas.
Critically evaluating existing embodiments of Christianity in society to determine whether they contribute to oppression or liberation is an important part of liberation theology. How do liberation theologians understand liberation and how do they contribute to the struggle for it? Liberation is understood as more than political liberation. Integral liberation includes economic, spiritual, social, and pedagogical dimensions as well (Boff and Boff 1987: 25, 91). This liberation is ultimately liberation from human sin, as human sin is the deepest reason why human beings are enslaved in various ways in oppressive societies (Hennely 1990: 393).

Liberation theologians refuse to judge sin solely as something personal. They define sin in reasonably conventional terms. Sin is turning away from God and others to seek one’s own advantage (Ilunga 1978: 36). Sin can be seen in people’s refusal to love, care for, or engage in meaningful fellowship with other people (Maimela 1987: 95; 113). That human sin is the underlying reason for most human troubles are still conventional enough (Ilunga 1978: 35). However, liberation theologians insist that sin can be embodied in oppressive and destructive structures and social forces (Gutiérrez 1972: 135; Maimela 1987: 95). Thus, political domination, social oppression, and economic exploitation are the result of human sin and its consequences.

God’s salvation of human beings is likewise defined as comprehensive with radical implications for human societies now. Although God’s salvation might be spiritual, it must be embodied in “temporal realities” (Ilunga 1978: 129). The continued practice of preaching in the church presupposes that people can be changed, renewed, or transformed (Maimela 1987: 118). This presupposition rests on Christ’s salvation that makes it possible that a new (African) humanity could arise (Maimela 1987: 113). Christ’s salvation can change people to care for one another, to engage in fellowship with one another, and motivate them to work for the creation of a just society (Hennely
1990: 71; Maimela 1987: 116). Christ’s salvation manifests itself not only in individual conversions of sinful lives towards God, but also in every societal change from a less human to a more human and just society (Hennely 1990: 71). For this reason Christianity is judged to be a “matchless liberating force” (Ilunga 1978: 129). The church, though, is a flawed carrier of this force and therefore needs continual conversion to the fundamentals of this liberating force so that it can be effectively actualised (Ilunga 1978: 130). The truth of Christianity must show itself in transformed societal structures that enables abundant life for everyone. The value and truth of theology must become clear in new and improved action and practices of the church (Gutiérrez 1972: 101). Orthopraxy, in the sense of doing what God commands so that new habits of living in the world are established, becomes the criterion of theology (Bonino 1975: 81, 89; Hennely 1990: 162).

Liberation from sin and its social embodiments comes about through a partnership between God and human beings (Boff and Boff 1987: 91). God’s love for humans goes against all injustice and exploitation (Gutiérrez 1972: 176). God’s Holy Spirit will lead His children to liberation from everything preventing them from being God’s children and from loving God and one another (Gutiérrez 1972: 153). This divine role in liberation does not invalidate human roles. Human responsibility for liberation from oppression and exploitation starts with conscientisation (Gutiérrez 1972: 80). Conscientisation means that human beings discover themselves as subjects of history who have their own part in making and remaking human societies (Hennely 1990: 47). Through discovery of this role they become aware of the possibility of transforming their situation if they can get to an adequate understanding of those situations (Hennely 1990: 7). Oppressed people must rid themselves of a passive oppressors’ consciousness that disable them to change their concrete circumstances (Gutiérrez 1972: 80). Once they realise that they can become actively engaged in attempts to rebuild their society into something more just, they can become aware of the causes of injustice and
the mechanisms keeping their oppression in place. Through this knowledge they come to see possibilities for changing their society. By joining resistance movements aiming at liberation of people and transformation of society, oppressed people become confident of their power to effect change (Boff and Boff 1987: 6). Through conscientisation oppressed, poor people realise their own responsibilities within the overall web of responsibilities for a society and they can play their parts and make their contributions to create a better society for everyone (Ilunga 1978: 7–8).

Liberation theologians realise that their commitment to struggle alongside the poor against oppressive societal structures might become highly controversial within the Christian church. Nevertheless, they are willing to deal with resulting confrontations, as they firmly believe that the demands of the Gospel are in stark contrast to the practices of unjust and oppressive societies (Gutiérrez 1972: 108). Their firm belief comes from the central importance of the ideas embodied in the slogan “the preferential option for the poor”? What does this slogan mean?

Liberation theologians use different expressions to articulate the idea of a preferential option for the poor. Opting for the poor or making an option for the poor expresses the idea that God and people make a choice for taking care of the interests of the poor (Boff and Boff 1987: 44). To be on the side of the poor, or to side with them, articulates the idea of being next to the poor in their struggle against injustice (Boff and Boff 1987: 4; Boff 1984: 59). To lend support to the downtrodden people in society formulates the idea that people unjustly treated are helped in their need (Hennely 1990: 104).

Very similar is the notion of special concern for those trampled underfoot, which suggests that people exploited and treated without respect needs special treatment. Taking up the cause of the poor implies that other people are acting on behalf of the poor to change societal structures for their benefit (Boff 1984: 24). A similar expression states that God “champions the cause
of the poor” (Maimela 1987: 70). The intention is to say that God defends, fights for, or promotes the cause of the poor. A German expression, “Die Hinwendung zu den Notleidenden” (Schwantes 1975: 279) has the element of turning towards those who are in need. An Afrikaans formulation goes as follows: “opkom vir diegene wat geen regte het nie of aan wie geen reg ges- kied nie” (Cloete and Smit 1984: 66). These phrases point to the idea that God stands up for those whose rights are violated and those without any rights.

One can see from the various shades of meaning articulated by different expressions of the core idea of the preferential option for the poor that the justification for this option is that God the Father and Jesus Christ have both demonstrated the option (Boff and Boff 1987: 44; Boff 1984: 40). Throughout the Bible evidence are available that God cares for the poor and vulnerable people of society in a special way. Christ Himself lived a poor life and made many statements suggesting that the poor must be treated in a special way. When both rich and poor people make an option for the poor, they are merely imitating what God has already done (Hennely 1990: 523).

What does it imply to make this option for the poor? From the different expressions for the preferential option for the poor discussed above, two dominant meanings emerge. One is the idea of standing beside the poor and supporting them in their struggle against their poverty. The other is taking up their cause and acting on their behalf. Further implications of the preferential option for the poor are as follows. Poor people themselves are challenged to take up the preferential option for the poor. For them it implies that they make an option for others like them or even poorer, become prepared to join others in a struggle to eradicate their poverty, and thus become agents of their own liberation (Boff 1984: 24; Boff and Boff 1987: 46).

For non-poor people the preferential option for the poor have more implica-
tions. Non-poor people must acknowledge that poor people have rights and that those rights must be defended against oppressors and taught to the poor so that they can know how to use them (Hennely 1990: 104; Cloete and Smit 1984: 66). Not all rights are equal and liberation theologians concur that the right to life is most important, followed by the right to the means of life (Boff 1984: 44). Only then follow rights to political and civil freedoms. Thus, a preferential option for the poor implies that non-poor people will struggle alongside the poor to establish justice in their favour through comprehensive social transformations (Boff 1984: 24). Through proclaiming Christ and His preferential option to the poor, they can enable the poor get resources to restore their dignity, help in their liberation, and lead them to new relationships with God and their fellow humans (Hennely 1990: 256).

How does liberation theologies justify this preferential option for the poor through the use of Biblical texts? It was already noted that they refer to God’s action in history towards the poor and therefore conclude that His followers must imitate His values and actions. Liberation theologians argue that although themes like these might not be the most important themes in the Bible, they are the most relevant for the poor in their situation of oppression and exploitation (Boff and Boff 1987: 33). Thus, when they read the Bible from the perspective of the poor and oppressed, they highlight those aspects that reflect God’s willingness and ability to overthrow unjust regimes, provide freedom to all people, and to give abundant life to everyone (De Gruchy 1991: 75).

Two Biblical texts play an especially prominent part in justifying the preferential option for the poor. The exodus narrative in the Old Testament plays a fundamental role as prototype of all liberation from enslavement and oppression. God listened to the cries of the oppressed and enslaved Israelites and liberated them from Egyptian bondage. This liberation is read primarily as a political act (Gutiérrez 1972: 116). God chooses for the poor, the lowly,
and oppressed and against the mighty, arrogant oppressors. Some liberation theologians read the exodus as both political and religious and give more emphasis to the role of the exodus in the formation of God’s people, Israel (Hennely 1990: 397). This perspective adds to the importance of God giving Israel freedom the fact that He also gave them land, a law, a covenant, and descendants to populate the land (Hennely 1990: 474). In the New Testament the identification of Jesus with the poor, vulnerable, and marginalised people of Matthew 25: 31–46 is strongly emphasised as justification for the preferential option for the poor. Jesus chose to identify so strongly with them that He saw any aid to them as aid to Himself.

Their focus on the role of the human sciences caused liberation theology to move from the study of God’s people in the past to the study of God’s people present in the world today. God’s followers who make the option for the poor are called the evangelical poor. These are people, not necessarily poor, who show solidarity with the poor and place themselves in God’s service to be His instruments and signs of His Kingdom (Boff and Boff 1987: 48). They open themselves completely to God in gratitude for their salvation and do not find the meaning of their lives in accumulating wealth, power, or glory (Boff and Boff 1987: 48). They pursue a simple lifestyle so that they will have resources left with which to help the poor (Roy 1993: 104). Their simple, sometimes poor, lifestyle is simultaneously a protest against the genuine poverty suffered by the real poor people in society (Gutiérrez 1972: 221). However, there are limits to this identification with the poor. Non-poor people have to realise that they will never be as the poor (Boff 1984: x). Although the non-poor can be allies to the poor and show commitment to their cause, they can never “participate sufficiently in their passion,” nor ever be “part and parcel of their crucified lives” (Boff 1984: x). One must note the religious metaphors used to describe aspects of the lives of the poor that the non-poor cannot experience. These limits to full identification with poor people should make the non-poor humble. They will have to allow poor people to be agents of their own liberation. The non-poor can support them in their struggle.
3. Shortcomings in Liberation Theology

The major shortcomings in liberation theologies that I would like to address are the following. Although liberation theologians stress the indispensability of the human sciences for theology, they do not make sufficient use of them. Their social analyses are not detailed enough, especially as far the phenomenon of poverty goes. Their use of Marxism as theoretical instrument for social analysis is not good enough anymore. Recent detailed research on poverty in the human sciences can provide far more refined analyses than a Marxist framework can.

Their focus on the role of the human sciences caused liberation theologians to neglect the role of philosophy. Recent debates in political philosophy on the nature of a just society can provide interesting and useful analyses of the matters of justice involved in poverty. Linking a Biblical ethics on poverty and wealth with the moral issues raised by contemporary understandings of justice might be instructive.

Liberation theologians do not provide enough detailed analyses of all relevant scriptural texts dealing with poverty. Furthermore, they do not focus enough on biblical texts that deal with wealth and riches. I intend addressing these shortcomings through presenting analyses of all texts directly relevant to poverty and riches in the Bible. I do not want to present a theology of poverty and riches, but rather both a Biblical and Christian ethics of poverty and riches. A theology of poverty and riches suggests that it articulates the full or main message of the Biblical texts. An ethics of poverty and riches is far more modest, suggesting it deals with one aspect of the message contained in the Biblical texts. Thus, through this choice I want to deliberately acknowledge that the message of the Biblical texts is immensely richer than just its message on poverty and riches, however important I firmly believe the latter is. But how does one design a Christian ethics of poverty and riches? In what follows, I will present my view of ethics that will guide my attempt to
construct a Christian ethics of poverty and riches in this thesis.

4. The Nature of Christian Ethics

Ethics concerns the acceptable behaviour of people toward other people. Ethics defines what people ought to do for others, what they ought to refrain from doing to others, and what reasons they must present in justification. In ethical debates people argue whether they should only protect their own interests, or whether the interests of other people should also be taken into account. If other interests should count, then ethics usually indicates to what extent we should consider the interests of other people.

What makes Christian ethics unique is the role assigned to the ancient sacred texts of the Bible. The God proclaimed by these texts is judged as sovereign and therefore the sole authority and ground of Christian ethics. Human beings are not the subjects of ethics, that is, the designers of ethical principles and the makers of arguments in support thereof. They are only the interpreters of how the sovereign God portrayed in the ancient sacred texts of the Bible commands His followers to conform to His will and character. Believers are thus not subjects of the ethical statements of Christian ethics, but the predicates to whom these statements apply (Barth 1957: 550). Theologians do not create Christian ethics nor do they lay down the rules, but merely articulate, systematise, and apply what they find the God of the ancient sacred texts saying.

Christian ethics are fully determined by the contents of faith in God. The problem of ethics is not one to be solved by human reason, community values, or tradition as guiding principles or grounding sources. The problem of ethics is understood to be a theological problem. What this means is not only that the moral teaching of the ancient sacred texts of the Bible should always be seen in relation to the full collection of Biblical texts and thus in the theological context of their central teachings. It means that Christian
ethics belongs to systematic theology, and especially to the doctrine of God (Barth 1957: 512). To understand the doctrines of the Christian church, in particular those about God, means to know what God wants from humans. To understand God as Lord that rules, implies to know that He wants humans to obey His (ethical) commands (Barth 1957: 512). Faith in God as Lord of a believer’s life is indissolubly linked to the practice of living according to God’s norms and values. The ground of Christian ethics thus is the God proclaimed by the Biblical texts.

The link between faith in God and an ethical life is found in both collections of ancient sacred texts, namely, the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament texts religion and morality are discussed together in several ways (cf. Kaiser 1983: 4). For their authors God provides the standard of good behaviour and believers must want to embody important characteristics of God, like love, holiness, and compassion, in their lives. To know God thus means that a person will know what is the right and just thing to do. God has saved and delivered the people of Israel in the past, therefore He can demand that they live according to His commands. God’s choice to save Israel is the ground for urging them to live a holy life (Kaiser 1983: 33). The motivation to live ethically comes from a personal relationship with God who made the first move to choose and save people (Kaiser 1983: 5, 6). Their response must be obedience to what God commands.

The collection of New Testament texts also focus on what God has already done for humans and how they thus ought to respond. In the ancient sacred texts of the New Testament God acted through Jesus Christ to benefit all people. Jesus died on the cross and was resurrected to live and rule with God for the sake of humans. His work of salvation has major implications for the daily lives of believers and the Christian church. Anyone who accepts God’s salvation are under obligation to follow the commands of God – to live an ethical lifestyle appropriate to people who proclaim God’s lordship over
their lives and hope for God's new world to come.

The strongest formulation of the unity between ethics and systematic theology comes from Karl Barth (1957: 509). He argues that the ancient sacred texts of the Bible have two major themes that are inextricably linked. The first theme is the divine election of grace, which Barth describes as the content of the Gospel, that is, God's good news to humans (Barth 1957: 510). God's purpose in electing humans to be His followers is to rule over them. For this reason God's election of humans determines their lives to serve Him and witness about Him. God thus claims humans for Himself, puts them under His command, and sanctifies them (Barth 1957: 516). In turn, they must fully accept that what God has done is right.

The second theme found in the ancient sacred texts of the Bible is inferred from the first. Barth is convinced that believers learn to understand what God wants from them and for them by noting what He has done for them. Having thus noted His divine election of grace as that what He did for humans, it now remains to determine what He wants from us and for us. God's divine command is found in the Law, regarded by Barth as the form of the Gospel (Barth 1957: 509). Jesus, in His human life on earth, is the big answer to the ethical question. His whole life was freely and fully subject only to the will and command of God. To be subject to God's commands is to come face to face with the One giving those commands.

This strong link between faith in God and an ethical life, between what God has already done for us and how we ought to respond, between the grace of God and the law or command of God has the further function to communicate the contents of the ancient sacred texts to people who do not believe in God. Thus, not only are systematic theology and Christian ethics inextricably linked, but also Christian ethics and missiology. The accepted way in the Christian church of proving the truth of the ancient sacred texts of the Bible
is to live an ethical life based on their contents. More powerful than any theoretical argument is the demonstration of the truth of the love of God for humans in the lives of believers. What believers confess in faith are best exemplified and validated through ethical conduct fully commensurate with the meanings of the ancient sacred texts of the Bible. Believers making their faith true in everyday life shows to everyone that God's recreation of the world at the end of time is already at work in a transformative healing of their lives. Thus, ethics becomes mission proclaiming hope (Nürenberger in Eybers et al 1982: 227, 247).

Christian ethics figures out what conformity to God implies for people's everyday life. What should be the priorities of believers? What are the contents of a new lifestyle that ought to accompany the transformation that faith in God causes in the life of a person? How should believers take care of the lives, talents, opportunities, relationships, and environments God have entrusted them with? From these questions the unique focus of Christian ethics emerges. The uniqueness results from an exclusive grounding in the meanings of the ancient sacred texts of the Bible to function as normative guide and orientation for its contents.

The unique contents of Christian ethics do not result from the isolation of theological ethics from other intellectual disciplines. Christian ethics needs intellectual disciplines other than theology for the formulation of ethical problems. To formulate ethical problems in sufficient detail is necessary for a satisfactory discussion and an adequate answer to such problems. To understand the world of humans and the details of their situation is a prerequisite for ethical reflection (Nürenberger in Eybers et al 1982: 247). The contents of ethical reflection can be influenced decisively by the detailed analysis of an ethical issue (De Villiers 1978: 178). Ethical arguments depend to some extent on empirical information that must be consistent with results obtained from currently accepted methods of inquiry. They also depend on
beliefs about social processes and the nature of human beings. Such beliefs must be defensible and based on adequate grounds if the ethical arguments are to be convincing. To interpret ethical issues Christian ethics must use research results from other sciences to get a comprehensive picture that must be accompanied by an in depth analysis of the issue.

Interpretations of ethical issues might not be fully impartial and value-neutral, as the interpreter’s moral and religious convictions will play a role in the way the interpreter reads a moral situation (De Villiers 1978: 178). However, prior moral or religious bias can be minimised if Christian ethics actively engages other kinds of ethics and ethical theories in dialogue. Such engagement is important for several reasons. Theologians are influenced by other kinds of ethics and ethical theories and they form part of the Vorverstândnis with which they read the ancient sacred texts (Hays 1996: 2). They ought to be aware of, and acknowledge, such influences. Only through such awareness can they consciously deal with their prejudices and eliminate those seemingly incompatible with their Christian faith. Taking other kinds of ethics seriously will also help them to recognise what sources of moral wisdom other than those drawn from the ancient sacred texts of the Bible play a role in the development of their ethical views (cf. Hays 1996: 295).

There are other important reasons for dialogue with different ethical views. To listen to the legitimate concerns, motives, assertions, and problems expressed by other ethical views provide theologians with sources and material for their own discussions. Two attitudes are appropriate toward these sources and material. An openness to absorb anything that is useful for better understanding of an ethical issue at hand can enhance the intellectual depth with which Christian ethics deals with issues (Barth 1957: 524, 527). Absorbing aspects and insights from different ethical theories has the danger of uncritically accepting their views, methods, principles, or definitions of moral issues. This happens when the categories and concepts of other
ethical discourses are uncritically accepted without subjecting them to sustained critical scrutiny informed by a detailed understanding of the meanings of the ancient sacred texts of the Bible.

To avoid unacceptable influences on Christian ethics as a result of uncritical acceptance of elements of other theories, and to do justice to the privileged perspective assigned to the ancient sacred texts of the Bible, a critical attitude is needed. Through seriously considering different ethical views, engaging in robust dialogue, and carefully examining their implications, Christian ethics can keep to its unique focus. This dialogue must not only be in one direction. Theologians can usefully employ other ethical views to interrogate their own. Critical scrutiny of one's own views can point to shortcomings, such as a lack of clarity, insufficient arguments in support of values, inadequate coherence, and so on.

We have seen that the unique focus of Christian ethics is determined by the way it uses the ancient sacred texts of the Bible to articulate its views. I want to argue that the nature of Christian ethics closely resemble the nature of Old or New Testament theology through important similarities, though significant differences must be noted as well. Hasel (1991: 194–208) assigns three tasks to Old Testament theology. First is the task of writing the theology of each separate text (or Bible book). Hasel stresses that the themes, motifs, and concepts of each text must be explained and interpreted so that the diversity and richness of each text will come to the fore. Next follow the task of inferring longitudinal themes emerging from the various theologies of the texts already presented. Through an inductive strategy these themes are allowed to emerge from the detailed interpretations of the diversity of texts already examined. The final task of OT theology is find the underlying bond that binds the various theologies and themes together. How does Christian ethics relate to these tasks of Old Testament theology?
Christian ethics has a different starting point. OT theology starts by taking the separate texts as given and wants to interpret their meaning. Christian ethics starts with an ethical issue – well understood – that needs to be resolved. Then a Biblical ethics is articulated. This is done in the following way. Instead of analysing a particular text (book), Biblical ethics gathers all textual evidence related to the ethical issue in question. Once the textual evidence has been selected, these sections drawn from Biblical texts are analysed and interpreted in the same way as Biblical theology does.

However, Christian ethicists mostly rely on the professional work of exegetes as basis for their interpretations, as they themselves do not have specialised training or sophisticated skills for textual analysis and interpretation comparable to those of Old or New Testament scholars. Hopefully they have good enough theological judgement for evaluating the results of exegesis and making decisions in cases of conflicting interpretations. Understanding sections of texts properly requires more than good exegesis, it always requires linking the section with the larger context of the text (Biblical book), the collection of Old or New Testament texts and finally the whole Bible itself. For this task the Christian ethicist needs to critically appropriate the research results of theologians specialised in Old or New Testament theology. At this point a Biblical ethics is done, but it does not yet complete the task of a Christian ethics. The Christian ethicist must go one step further to create a dialogue between the unique ethical voice of the ancient sacred texts of the Bible and a contemporary understanding of the ethical issue illuminated by an multi-disciplinary interpretation thereof. This dialogue might lead the Christian ethicist back to the primary sources of the ancient sacred texts, until a dialogue has been established where the answer to the ethical problem is judged intellectually satisfying.

What are the functions of Christian ethics in the church? Christian ethics must teach the community of believers what God expects of them as re-
response to what He has done for them. Christian ethics must provide guidance to believers on how to live meaningful lives that communicate to other people that a loving God exists and cares for all people. This can be done by using the images, categories, values, and principles found in the ancient sacred texts of the Bible to overturn conventional ways of looking at human life and stimulate new ways of interpreting the individual and communal lives of believers.

What are the implications, that flow from the conception of Christian ethics described above, for the next seven chapters of this thesis? I interpret them as follows.

5. The Methodology of the Thesis

Three important matters emerge from the discussions of liberation theology and the nature of Christian ethics that are relevant for the chapters that are to follow. First, the uniqueness of Christian ethics lies in its use of the ancient sacred texts of the Bible as normative guide and definitive orientation for its contents. The God proclaimed by the Bible is judged to be the author and ground of Christian ethics. From this central role given to God follows that Christian ethics posits a strong link between faith in God and an ethical life. What God has done for humans requires them to respond to Him in obedience to His commands. In the chapters to follow I will use the ancient sacred texts of the Bible as definitive of a Christian ethics and be aware of the strong link posited between faith in God and obedience to His ethical commands.

Christian ethics needs other intellectual disciplines in its quest to find answers to contemporary moral problems. This is the second matter from the preceding discussion relevant to the chapters to follow. To give detailed formulations of ethical problems, Christian ethics needs the results, insights, and methods of other scientific disciplines. The social sciences can provide
information based on currently accepted methods of inquiry that accord with state of the art results and beliefs about social processes and human nature. Liberation theologians did not fully exploit the possibilities offered by the contemporary social sciences. Theories of philosophical ethics can provide useful analyses, ideas, and arguments for enriching Christian ethics. Liberation theologians generally neglected the contributions current philosophy can make. When reading philosophical ethics with an open mind to appropriate what is useful and a critical mind to engage them in robust dialogue, Christian ethics can be refreshed to look at ethical issues in a new way. Using such theories wisely to engage one’s own views with a self-evaluative attitude aimed at critical scrutiny, can challenge Christian ethicists to improve the clarity, refine the contents, and better the arguments of their own views.

The method that Christian ethics ought to follow is the third matter to emerge from the preceding discussion. The importance of a detailed analysis of the ethical problem has already been mentioned. Once that is done, all relevant textual material in the Bible must be gathered, interpreted, and placed in context of the larger text of the Bible. Liberation theologians do not use a wide enough range of texts relevant to issues of poverty. The ethics embodied in the Biblical texts can be uncovered when the collected texts are carefully interpreted. This ethics can be called an Old Testament ethics, a New Testament ethics, or when combined, a Biblical ethics. To make a Biblical ethics relevant to our contemporary world, it must be transformed into a Christian ethics. This involves a dialogue between the unique ethical voices of the Biblical texts, our contemporary understanding of the ethical problem, and current moral voices dealing with this problem. From this dialogue a humanly formulated construction of a revisable Christian ethics, applicable to our world now, can be produced.

Throughout the thesis I will make use of textual analysis and interpretation, whether I read ancient sacred texts, their scholarly interpretations, or current
social science reports and philosophical theories.

6. The Plan of the Thesis

In this thesis I want to answer the simple question: "What is the message of the Bible about poverty for us today?" To get a simple answer to this question of Christian ethics I will have to do four things. These things are required by the conception of Christian ethics sketched above. They are as follows: [1] I must understand the complexities of poverty, [2] I must explain the moral issues raised by the complexities of poverty, [3] I must analyse Biblical texts related to issues of poverty, and [4] I must develop a theory of Christian ethics for dealing with poverty in contemporary societies. As will become clear later on, the link between rich and poor is particularly strong in the Bible. For this reason the analysis of Biblical texts will also include texts dealing with riches and wealth.

A slightly more detailed description of the four things I plan to do in this thesis reads as follows.

- I analyse and unpack the personal, social, political, and moral dimensions of the problem of poverty in considerable detail through the use of philosophy and the human sciences. I give a definition of poverty, discuss its indicators and causes, show how to draw a profile of individual cases, and explore the individual and social consequences of poverty. I also give a detailed discussion of the moral issues involved in poverty (Chapters 1, 3, 4, & 5);

- I develop a Christian ethics on poverty and riches based on close readings of relevant Biblical texts in both the Old and New Testaments (chapters 6 & 7) that include a wider spectrum than those usually found in liberation theology. The contents of these two chapters are integrated into a Biblical ethics of poverty and riches. From this Biblical ethics I develop a Christian ethics on poverty and riches in dialogue with the public morality expressed by contemporary philosophical theories of justice
(chapter 8);

- I present a framework of ideas that I believe any person anywhere in the world can use [1] for understanding their poverty and [2] for morally evaluating their situation, despite the fact that I work from within my own South African context (chapters 4, 5, 6, 7, 8).

- I justify the scientific status of theology so as to safeguard the intellectual status of my work. This chapter might be necessary to justify my interdisciplinary approach outlined above (chapter 2).

I am convinced that growth and development in most sciences result from interdisciplinary work. I therefore adopt a strong interdisciplinary approach in this thesis. I make use of recent philosophical theories of justice and hermeneutics, extensive empirical research done by various multi-disciplinary teams in South Africa, sociological explanations of poverty, and theological exegesis and ethics. I see the human sciences as being involved in problem-solving, therefore I draw on any intellectual resources needed to clarify the problem of poverty or the interpretation of the Bible. A creative fusion of various disciplinary perspectives can enable me to show the relevance of Christian ethics for contemporary issues concerning poverty.

The plan of the thesis is as follows. In Chapter One I have drawn a profile of poverty in South Africa. Then I looked at theological discussions of poverty in recent theology. Afterwards followed a brief methodological justification for the interdisciplinary nature of this study in Christian ethics. In Chapter Two I give a fuller methodological justification for my project. I answer the question whether ancient religious texts from different socio-cultural periods in history can teach us anything about poverty and wealth. I justify a concept of theology as science, based on my conception of science as a complex system. I also develop my own conception of the hermeneutics that are involved. Chapter Three explains the complexity of poverty and the link between poverty and wealth. I give definitions of poverty and wealth. I then
discuss the possible causes of poverty and show why poverty is a complex phenomenon.

In Chapter Four I develop two arguments, based on empirical team research done in South Africa. One argument shows that Christians ought to take poverty seriously as a result of the serious effects it has on individuals and members of their households. The other argument makes the point that poverty is a threat to democratic societies. In Chapter Five I explain the concept of justice in political philosophy and demonstrate why this concept is particularly appropriate for articulating the moral issues involved in issues of poverty and wealth.

In Chapter Six I analyse and interpret all texts from the Old Testament that might be relevant for understanding or dealing with poverty and wealth. In Chapter Seven I analyse and interpret all texts from the New Testament that might be relevant for understanding or dealing with poverty and wealth. In the final chapter, Chapter Eight, I develop a comprehensive Christian theory of poverty and wealth. I compare the social context of the Bible with those of contemporary democracies. I link my philosophical analyses of poverty with textual evidence from the Bible. The proposed Christian ethics on poverty and riches are linked to the larger themes of the Biblical message. This is necessary, as I believe the Biblical message about poverty cannot be divorced from many of the major themes of the Bible. Finally, I explore the role a Christian ethics of wealth and poverty can play in shaping public philosophy and policy in contemporary constitutional democracies.
CHAPTER TWO

A SCIENCE OF ANCIENT SACRED TEXTS?

One of the most reprinted debates in philosophy, that might also contain the shortest contributions, was started by Anthony Flew in 1975 (cf. Flew et al 1984). In his brief article, Flew challenged "religious intellectuals" to admit that some evidence might count against their religious assertions through which they purport to convey information about the world. If, as they usually do, they refuse to allow any evidence to count against a fundamental Christian assertion like, "God loves us as a father loves his children," the assertion becomes meaningless, a vacuous proposition that conveys no information about anything.

Flew’s challenge to "theological utterance" was based on his appropriation of Karl Popper’s principle of falsification. For Popper, a philosopher of science, any statement or theory could be considered scientific if it is open to falsification. For Popper this meant that it must be possible to specify in advance what kind of evidence would falsify such a statement. For a statement to assert something about the world, it has to say what is the case and what would count as evidence against the statement being true. If everything is compatible with a particular assertion, then in effect it is saying nothing.

Flew took Popper’s principle of falsification and instead of using it to demarcate science from non-science, he used it to demarcate meaningful from meaningless statements. Unless the conditions can be specified under which a statement will not be true, the statement is meaningless, that is, it tells us nothing more about anything. Flew used this criterion of meaningfulness and applied it to religious assertions. He argued that religious intellectuals react in two ways when confronted with evidence seemingly at odds
with a central Christian assertion, such as, “God loves us as a father loves his children.” Their first reaction is to admit that contrary evidence looks bad, but then firmly state their belief that some explanation exists that will save appearances so that God will still be like a perfectly loving father. When they fail to find that explanation, their second reaction is to refuse to allow any evidence as sufficient reason for admitting their assertion about God as a loving father is meaningless. They rather start qualifying their assertion by saying that God’s love is not like human love, and so on. As a result of multiplying such qualifications, Flew says religious assertions become vacuous and die “a death of a thousand qualifications.”

Flew’s argument has been criticised in various ways. Despite the many flaws in his argument and the shortcomings in the debate, Flew’s challenge provides a useful starting point for a defence of the use of ancient sacred texts in theology and for an explanation of the nature of the scientific status of theology.

Flew’s challenge comes from a philosopher inviting theologians (“religious intellectuals”) to a public debate on whether their beliefs are scientifically justifiable and rationally acceptable. He issues an explicit challenge to the meaningfulness of central Christian beliefs, saying in effect that unless theologians can prove otherwise, their beliefs are vacuous. Flew’s challenge contains two assumptions. One is that cross-disciplinary debates between philosophers and theologians are possible and the other that a public debate about the meaningfulness of religious beliefs is valuable. In science, many people today deny theology such intellectual status that would make it a worthy partner in interdisciplinary dialogue. In politics, religion is treated as a private affair that ought not to be discussed in the public sphere. These two issues are linked, as a theology with an accredited scientific status ought to be able to engage in dialogue through rational arguments with other scien-
tists in the academic world and with citizens of different convictions in the public sphere.

I want to respond to two issues raised by Flew’s challenge. The first issue that I want to follow up is to what extent theology is scientific, i.e., to what extent the methods, contents, theories, and criteria of theology are scientifically acceptable. The second issue concerns Flew’s conclusion that theology dies a death of a thousand qualifications. This conclusion suggests that qualifying any religious assertion inevitably places Christians on a slippery slope towards vacuous, meaningless statements. I want to turn this view around by claiming that theology comes alive through a thousand qualifications. Rather than embarrassing theology by making its assertions empty and nonsensical, the qualifications that I propose make theology vibrant and intellectually appealing.

In what follows, I will show why and how I judge a science of ancient sacred texts of the Bible to be viable and intellectually acceptable. If I succeed, then the ancient sacred texts will not only be relevant to contemporary ethical issues, but a fully developed Christian ethics on poverty and wealth will have to be taken seriously in the public worlds of science and politics. In this chapter I will first discuss the fundamental role of hermeneutics as science of interpretation that enables theology to deal in an intellectually satisfying way with ancient sacred texts. Next I judge whether theology as science functions similarly to other contemporary sciences. In a final section I deal with the Achilles heel of theology as science, that makes it a prejudiced, committed, but also liberatory science.

1. The Oddity of Theology as Science of Ancient Sacred Texts

At the centre of Christian theology as science is a collection of ancient sacred texts referred to by Christians as the Bible. No other ancient sacred texts are studied, except in cases where they may cast light on the Bible or
aid in its interpretation. No other religious experiences are studied other than those reported in the Bible or generated by the Bible, unless such experiences again may aid in better understanding or communication of the contents of the Bible. Why this exclusivist focus? This focus results from the central role assigned to the Bible in the Christian Church where it is believed to be the authoritative Word of God to human beings.

Theology studies various dimensions of the ancient sacred texts in the life of the Christian Church. Some of the dimensions are ways to interpret these ancient sacred texts (Old and New Testament Studies), their use in formulating the doctrines of the church (Systematic Theology), how to implement the contents of these texts in the daily life of the contemporary church (Theological Ethics and Pastoral Theology), ways of communicating the message of these texts to people who do not yet accept its truth (Missiology), and the history of the church as different models that embody varying interpretations of the ancient sacred texts (Church History) (cf. Eybers 1982: 14–16).

The most fundamental task for theology is to understand the meanings of its ancient sacred texts. Thereafter follows imaginative re-interpretations and creative applications of those meanings in contemporary contexts. On this basis, we can distinguish between two kinds of theologians in terms of the level of skill they employ when interpreting the Bible (cf. Jonker 1998: 6–9). Specialised interpreters use sophisticated methods of interpretation focused according to a specific hermeneutic theory. Competent interpreters are experienced readers knowledgeable about interpretative issues concerning the ancient sacred texts of the Bible. They know what kinds of questions to ask and are sensitive listeners to the voices of the texts. Theological ethicists would fall in this category.
If an intellectual challenge to the scientific status and meaning of theological assertions is to be met, the oddity of theology’s scientific status must be explained. The oddity is that Christian theology has been institutionalised as legitimate intellectual discipline at universities for centuries despite its exclusivist focus on ancient sacred texts dominating the Christian tradition. The dominant, powerful role of the Christian Church in the Western world ensured that its interests were studied and its leaders got an education at institutions of higher learning. Assigning exclusive value to these texts rests on a choice based on a kind of faith prescribed by those same texts. Thus, theology as intellectual discipline is grounded on a choice to live in relationship with the God of the texts. Although good reasons can be given for this choice (cf. Van Huyssteen 1986: 176), no rationally convincing arguments exist that are acceptable to sceptics. Furthermore, those texts are not studied as mere literary texts from an ancient era, but given authority to have dominant voices in the orientation and values of theology and the everyday life of the church. Can this be scientific?

The oddity of theology as science can be explained through a discussion of three issues, namely, the central role of interpretation as characteristic of theology as science of ancient sacred texts, the way theology functions similarly to the complex functioning of the other sciences, and the nature of theology as a committed, liberatory science.

The contents of the ancient sacred texts comprising the Christian Bible form the central issues studied by theology. What are the contents of these texts and why are they considered to be so important?

1.1 The Issues of Theology

The contents of the ancient sacred texts comprising the Bible deal with issues arising from universal human experiences. These issues concern human experiences that occur in all humans at some point in their lives. Satis-
factory discussions of these experiences are not yet forthcoming from any of the sciences besides theology and adequate answers to the perplexities raised by such experiences are hard to come by, other than those given by religion. The wisdom of the explanations given for these experiences and the answers to the perplexities contained in the ancient sacred texts of the Bible continue to fascinate millions of people, partly because these texts claim to be from God and partly because of their rich and manifold contents. As a result theology as intellectually disciplined way of articulating the meaning and relevance of ancient sacred texts has a large interested audience, although ministers of religion often are the conduits mediating, transferring, and transmitting the results of theological research.

What are these universal human experiences that the ancient sacred texts of the Bible deal with? The obvious issue that sacred texts ought to deal with is whether any god exists. The question arises from various typical human experiences that are not limited to any culture, society, or historical epoch. Such experiences include the following:

- Humans sometimes experience the breathtaking complexity, overwhelming grandeur, and magnificent wonders of our world. Whether through the everyday experience of our senses or through the amplifying visions of the sciences, humans become aware of their insignificance in comparison to their experience of exquisite beauty and magical intricacies. Where does this world come from? Did somebody make or create it? If so, who? If so, why? Where do I fit in? These questions still grip humans today, as it did thousands of years ago.

- Experiences of beauty, grandeur, and wonder have their opposites in experiences of complete devastation, radical evil, and tragic misfortune. Throughout human history floods and droughts have wreaked havoc in human lives through loss of human and animal life and disruption of food production. Earthquakes, storms, and volcanoes kill people and destroy property. The harsh life of food chains in the animal kingdom and the
disturbing evil of humans witnessed in social conflicts like war and the abuse perpetrated in family life upset many. Survivors of these experiences question the meaning of a world where people suffer intensely from the failings of nature and culture. Is there a way to find any meaning in such events? Is there a God who plans them? If there is a good God, why does the god allow such events to occur? Humans still ask these questions every day, like they did ever since they acquired language.

- The worlds of living beings – especially the more complex ones, humans in particular – abound with love. The self-sacrificing love of mothers for children is touching. The first love of a teenager is exhilarating. The deep love of an elderly couple is moving. The love between friends is exciting. The love between humans and animals is special. What is love? What is similar about different kinds of love? Is there a pure form of love? Why are we so fascinated by, and do we have such need for love? Awareness of various modes of love and its limitless possibilities raises questions about its true characteristics and perfect manifestations today as it has through centuries.

- Experience of true love deepens the effects of experiencing and observing intense pain, suffering, and need of living beings, especially humans. The intense pain of damaging physical wounds, the deep suffering of the loss of loved ones or deeply cherished ideals, and the desperate need for food or love can radically upset people’s trust in concrete human beings who could have made a difference, or in abstract normative ideals like justice and compassion that ought to inspire loving care. The degree of pain, the depth of suffering, and the extent of need can overwhelm people with a sense of desperation. Why should some suffer so much more than others? Why are so many people in pain? If some live in utter luxury, why should others die without food and shelter? Can there be a caring, loving God in a world where millions of people mourn their loss, fight through pain, and struggle to live with unfulfilled needs? Regardless of whether there is a God, who is responsible for taking care of despondent
and wretched people? The contradictions of a world with plenitude and deprivation, love and suffering, pain and delight are puzzling and perplexing. How to make a significant difference amidst seeming hopelessness becomes bewildering, as people through the ages have felt.

- The wonders of our world and the beauty of love intersect with the radical evils and intense suffering in every person’s life at some point. Many people rightly feel that their share of evil and suffering is too high above the human average. Even for the more fortunate ones the question mostly arise as to their place in this world. What is my role in life? What is the meaning of this world? How does my life fit into this world? What is the meaning of my own life?

The ancient sacred texts embodied in the Bible deal with these intensely interesting and deeply disturbing issues and provide intriguing answers to most of them. The texts have held their fascination for humans as they are supposedly from a divine origin, were written as different kinds of literature spanning many centuries, and come from an ancient culture. Moreover, believers judge that these texts merely refer to, and inadequately describe, human experiences of God. The richness of what it means to meet God and experience Him and His work, cannot fully be captured in human language (cf. Van Huyssteen 1986: 179).

Theology as science aims to understand and convey the meanings that these texts have for fundamental human issues such as the origin and meaning of the world, the meaning and purpose of human life, and how humans ought to live. The meanings of these texts are used to make human life more intelligible and to better understand our world and our place in it. The most fundamental issue for such a science is how to interpret these texts to let their voices speak authentically millennia after they were written. What exactly does the problem of interpretation involve in this case?
1.2 Theology and Interpretation

The fundamental problem of understanding ancient sacred texts emerges when texts are distinguished from speech. Persons involved in living speech are present to the situation, surroundings, and circumstances of the speaker (Ricoeur 1991: 107). The environment or world of the speaker is familiar, enhancing the meaning of what it said. The spoken words refer to events, persons, or objects that are near enough in physical, temporal, or cultural distance that a speaker can point to them by an act of showing or through the use of words (Ricoeur 1991: 108). Speech thus becomes fully meaningful to its hearers. Problems of understanding can be addressed immediately through dialogue where interlocutors communicate through questions and answers, statements and responses.

Texts differ in important respects from living speech (cf. Ricoeur 1991: 106–119). The fundamental defining characteristic of texts is that they are the fixation of discourse. This is done by persons who choose to write down their thoughts instead of using speech to express them to a target audience. The writing of a text is separated from the reading thereof, as they occur at different times and places. In the case of the ancient sacred texts of the Bible the distance in time is already thousands of years. With writing and reading separated, no dialogue between author and readers occurs, no questions and answers as in ordinary conversation is possible. Readers are now confronted with the loss of the circumstances, environment, and situation of the author. The reference of the text cannot be determined that easily through acts of showing or explanatory words anymore (Ricoeur 1991: 148–149). In the case of the ancient sacred texts of the Bible, the cultural worlds of different peoples living in different eras must be reconstructed to be able to retrieve something of the world in which the text was written.

The processes of interpretation aim to overcome the various distances between our contemporary world and the world of the ancient sacred texts of
the Bible. To establish the meaning of the ancient sacred texts of the Bible through interpretation is complex. These texts were written in languages that are now dead, that is, they do not anymore exist in the form they were used in those texts. The grammar of the languages and the meanings of their words must be retrieved. The texts were written in different styles and genres (Eybers 1982: 15). The various socio-cultural worlds with political, economic, and social systems unfamiliar to contemporary readers must be reconstructed to understand the background of the texts and references the first readers were assumed to identify easily (Lohse 1991: 3). The texts originated in ways that texts are not often produced today. Some were used as elements in the worship of a religious community. Others were directed to specific audiences. Most expressed religious traditions and in turn were creatively interpreted to renew traditions. Some texts had authors who compiled the texts from other texts and edited them for theological purposes. These purposes were linked to the situation and nature of the readers, of whom very little information survived. These texts were thus not written as theological treatises, but as messages directed to the religious needs of ancient Israel and the early Christian communities (Lohse 1991: 3; Schrage 1988: 5; Kaiser 1983: 25). Archaeology provides a few answers to the social and cultural backgrounds of the readers, through attempting to find indications of the habits, practices, and values current in their world through other ancient texts and artefacts that have survived.

In theology’s attempt to understand the ancient sacred texts of the Bible, various subdisciplines have emerged with aims of studying the origin, genesis, and background of these texts. These processes of interpretation by various subdisciplines are claimed to be intellectually justified and of a scientific nature. After noting what these disciplines can provide on the author, the genesis of the text, the socio-cultural period, and the possible readers, theologians focus their attention on the further analysis and interpretation of Biblical texts. Which Biblical texts? Many theologians today argue that the
The final Biblical text accepted as canon by the Christian Church should be the focus of theology (Hays 1996: 14; Hasel 1991: 113; Kaiser 1983: 27). All attempts at dissecting the origins of this collection of texts have failed to gain general acceptance. All that remains is to work with those texts available as the canon, the authoritative set of texts judged by the Christian church to be the Word of God.

Theologians relate the research results presented by various subdisciplines studying the cultures, historical settings, languages, archaeological evidence, and genesis of the ancient sacred texts of the Bible to detailed analyses of the ancient sacred texts themselves. Analysing the genre and style of a text (Bible book), determining its internal coherence and structure, and figuring out the dominant themes and motifs are typical tasks done by scholars studying the Old and New Testaments. Linking the interpretation of one text to other texts in the Bible's collection of ancient sacred texts is an overlapping function between theologians studying the Old and New Testaments and systematic theologians intent on formulating and testing Christian doctrine. To link the meanings of the ancient sacred texts of the Bible with contemporary life is the task of various theological disciplines.

Theologians generally respect the integrity of ancient sacred texts by trying to minimise misunderstanding based on deliberately distorting parts of those texts or through ignoring relevant aspects of those texts (Van Veuren 1993: 115–119). Not only do they aim to capture the meaning the texts had for their original readers, but they suggest ways the contents of those texts can be appropriated by current readers (Lohse 1991: 3). These aims discipline them to be faithful to what they perceive as the original intentions of the texts and to stay within the determinate range of semantic possibilities offered by each text (Hays 1996: 8). Offering new interpretations of texts are akin to proposing a new hypothesis to be tested (Van Veuren 1993: 138). Theology must be open to critical scrutiny and intersubjective evaluation of its pro-
posed interpretations. These interpretations are judged to be fallible, tentative, and imperfect – therefore they are always revisable (cf. Van Huyssteene 1999: 262).

Testing an interpretation in this case means to judge whether all relevant textual material have been considered and whether the interpretation adequately explains the meanings of the texts. Good interpretations are accompanied by arguments in support thereof, drawing on textual evidence for empirical support. Interpreters can be held accountable for their interpretations. They must therefore present evidence and arguments in defence that can be rationally evaluated by readers affected by, or interested in, their readings of texts (Cf. Du Toit 1998: 52, 53). The interpretations given by theologians are thus “answerable to canons of critical inquiry defensible within the various arenas of our common discourse” (Van Huyssteene 1998: 225).

Theologians assume that ancient sacred texts have relevance to socio-cultural contexts far removed in time and distance from their author or original audience. As a result these texts can influence people outside the original situation they were created for. For these reasons, as articulated by Ricoeur (cf. Van Veuren 1993: 133–142), theologians take ancient sacred texts of the Bible seriously. Many contemporary theologians emphasise the importance of listening carefully to each individual text to determine its unique “voice” (Houlden 1973: vii, 2). Theologians value an approach that allows the diversity of texts to display their variety of messages directed to different original audiences. To force all ancient sacred texts of the Bible into a synthetic account of unity based on some imaginative, artificial construct is rejected outright. The question whether there is an underlying unity or dynamic centre to either one of the testaments or the Bible itself is approached cautiously. Suggestions for working out such proposals converge on a loosely “bottom up,” inductive approach. Discerning patterns of recurring themes
and motifs should be based on evidence gathered through prior analyses and interpretations of individual texts (Bible books).

The difficulties involved in finding a suitable characterisation of the unity underlying the diversity of ancient sacred texts already suggest that these texts are not easily judged to be compatible with a central focus decided upon beforehand by a theologian. If these texts differ significantly in content, how should theologians deal with that? Throughout history the major answer was to either forcibly harmonise such texts, or to ignore problematic ones by focusing on the texts considered to capture the central themes of the Bible. Is this the most appropriate way of dealing with the plurivocity of this collection of ancient sacred texts?

The answer is no (cf. Schrage 1988: 3; Hasel 1991: 155–157). Even single texts (a Bible book) can be plurivocal. The plurivocity of a single text can be understood in the following way. Texts can be interpreted in different ways (Rosenau 1992: 41). Multiple interpretations of the same text make some people uncomfortable. In a sense, the phenomenon of differing interpretations is normal when taking the nature of texts into account. Most literary texts can sustain many interpretations, generated in part by the text and in part by the readers. Texts are often plurivocal. Interpreters find it difficult not to privilege some voices in the text over others, resulting in competing interpretations based on which parts of texts are given priority. Besides plurivocity, texts often contain stresses, strains, and contradictions that might be openly acknowledged or be hidden from view (Rosenau 1992: 37–38; Olivier 1993: 253). Authors often justify group interests through their texts, support power relations in a society, or ignore issues inimical to their favourite people (Du Toit 1998: 45). For these reasons interpreters must explore contradictions, expose ideological positioning, and point to what are being left out and ignored (Du Toit 1998: 53; Olivier 1993: 253; Rosenau 1992: 36–37). Deconstructing texts in this way illuminates the way they were con-
structured and excavates the possibilities and meanings embodied in the text (Mortley 1991:97).

Once the plurivocity in single texts have been explored, the plurivocity of the Old and New Testaments has to be explored similarly (Hays 1996: 1–3). If significant contradictions and oppositions are found, they should not be harmonised at all costs, as it could distort individual voices and limit our understanding of the diversity of views in the Bible (Hays 1996: 187). Rather, they could provide creative tensions stimulating research and debate in new directions. Especially fruitful is to trace intertextual relationships between different texts, locating traces of interaction and influence that can explain differences and similarities.

Although there might be many contradictions in and between sacred texts, the contents of the ancient sacred texts of the Bible revolve around certain foundational events and fundamental values which have an integrative function. The foundational events in the Old Testament include God’s creation of the world and various aspects of the communal life of Israel, such as the founding fathers, the exodus from Egypt, the conquest of Palestine, the kingdom of Israel, the exile, and the post-exilic period. The New Testament revolves around the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the planting and growth of the church, and the future recreation of the world by God. In both testaments a strong focus on individual lives illuminates all aspects of human life pleasing to God and not.

The fundamental values are expressed in the Ten Commandments, the summary thereof by Jesus in the Great Commandment, the reinterpretation of the Old Testament Law by Jesus, and to a lesser extent the Sermon on the Mount. These fundamental values combine with the foundational events to form a kind of canon within the canon that ought to play a fundamental, dominant, and guiding role in interpretation. They can play this role, because
they constitute the main issues the ancient sacred texts of the Bible are concerned with.

The interpretation of the collective meaning of the ancient sacred texts of the Bible is fraught with dangers. Theologians are sensitive not to use a dogmatic or philosophical scheme that makes selective use of the contents of all texts. They prefer an approach that listens to each text's individual meanings. They then proceed in search of patterns in those meanings that might be joined together to establish central themes (Hays 1996: 188–190, 292; Schrage 1988:3; Hasel 1991: 113). This project is made easier by the foundational events that these texts describe, interpret, comment upon, and refer back to throughout most of these texts. At least the authors are often referring to the same events, although with different emphases. This project is also made more difficult by the foundational events that the authors describe, interpret, comment on, and refer back to. The authors of the ancient sacred texts of the Bible describe these events from different perspectives, emphasise different aspects thereof, interpret them with varying purposes in mind, and draw implications from them that are not the same. They do so in different situations, for varying audiences, and in a variety of literary styles. The resulting texts often have complex intertextual relationships with one another, sometimes they deal with the same events, some presuppose the contents of others, or they interpret other texts in their attempts to deal with new events and situations (cf. Hays 1996: 306–307; Olivier 1993: 251; Rosenau 1992: 36). As a result the collection of 66 ancient sacred texts of the Bible have complex criss-crossing interrelationships that form a macro context that mutually determine and shape their meanings. To search for an underlying bond between the texts of the Old and New Testaments can be combined with an approach that takes seriously the rich theological variety of those texts. This search need not imply forcing or distorting the many different witnesses of the ancient sacred texts into one conceptual scheme (cf. Hasel 1991: 114).
When theologians today read the ancient sacred texts of the Bible they are not the first people to do so. These texts have had a *Wirkungsgeschichte* (working history, history of influence) through centuries of Christian and Israelite existence (cf. Du Toit 1998: 46; Van Veuren 1993: 124–133). The texts have created communities of believers with intellectual traditions through which they emphasised certain aspects of some of those texts and excluded others. These traditions are transmitted from one generation to the next, creating a *Vorverständnis* (pre-understanding) in those who are readers of these texts. As a result they develop a *Vorurteil* (prejudice, pre-judgement) which inclines them to look for textual evidence supporting their already acquired interpretations (Hays 1996: 209). Fortunately, ancient sacred texts have their own voices and therefore stand in persistent and creative tension to the communal traditions that foster standard interpretations (Hays 1996: 8). These texts can therefore continually engender new interpretations of themselves that can modify existing interpretative traditions.

The interpretation of texts enables readers to understand themselves better or differently, thereby allowing the fusion of textual interpretation with self-interpretation (Ricoeur 1991: 119). Good interpretation succeeds to overcome cultural and other distances to enable readers to experience the meaning of a text as being contemporary and relevant now (Ricoeur 1991: 119). When this happens, the semantic possibilities of the text can be enacted or realised (Ricoeur 1991: 119). Close reading of a text, detailed analysis, and interpretation of its meaning open up new horizons and possibilities to readers. Readers respond through appropriation of possibilities leading to modified self-understandings or different choices and behaviour. Rejections of the possibilities offered by the text and refusals to consider fusion with the text’s horizons also occur. Nevertheless, awareness of the new possibilities offered by the text already changes readers, regardless of their response to them (cf. Van Veuren 1993: 122–123).
The ability of texts to open up new possibilities depends on the universal phenomenon that humans have intellectual “horizons.” Gadamer coined this metaphor to describe the contents of human minds that determine individuals’ perspectives on everything they deal with and mediate their understanding of everyday affairs (cf. Van Veuren 1993: 124–133). Such horizons can be narrow or broad. Horizons are never constant, but constantly changing. By contact with other intellectual horizons, individuals can modify their own through a more or less creative fusion of horizons. The degree of creativity is determined by the way in which the perspectives of a new horizon are incorporated — whether the new horizon is critically evaluated and independently woven into the reader’s existing horizon, or uncritically embraced and allowed to displace the existing horizon.

Not only humans, but their intellectual products like texts also contain horizons. Interpretation reconstructs these textual horizons and sets up an encounter between text and readers with the possibilities of fusion or rejection. In the case of ancient texts interpretation mediates between past and present with the hope of creating a new, broadened intellectual horizon. Through reading and interpretation of texts readers become aware of the outline and boundaries of their own intellectual horizons. They become aware of the differences between their horizon and the one contained in the text and start an internal dialogue on how to deal with those differences. Where awareness of their own horizons that are different from those in the text leads, depends on the readers’ relation to the text.

Many people who read the ancient sacred texts of the Bible readily submit to what they believe are the divine authority of those texts. In this case they allow the text power over their lives to challenge their intellectual horizon and are easily prepared to modify their intellectual horizon. In other cases, readers are critical toward the claims to divine authority and place themselves in
a position of power over the text, evaluating and rejecting the intellectual horizon embodied in the text. Regardless of the power relations that readers set up between themselves and the text, some texts have the ability to either communicate their message despite the negative attitude of readers, while in other cases texts fail to do so despite the humblest submission.

The relation of power between reader and text is important. When readers assume too much power over the text, they can violate texts by reading parts of them out of their appropriate context, ignoring the socio-historical context of texts, not taking into account their characteristics, and refusing to acknowledge the links texts have with other texts. When readers allow texts too much power over their lives, they do not put their own questions to texts, never critically examine them, do not ask what texts justify, repress, or ignore, and do not limit their validity by placing them in proper context. Appropriate reading strategies might oscillate between these two extremes and will vary according to the purposes of reading and the kind of texts at hand (Hays 1996: 305).

Can theology be a science, with interpretation of ancient sacred texts as its core activity? If concerns about the interpretation of ancient sacred texts of the Bible are at the heart of theology, can theology qualify for the intellectual status of a science that produce reliable results that must be taken seriously?

2. Theology as Complex Human Science

Is theology a science comparable to other (human) sciences? To answer this question, I will evaluate the practice of theology as science, as outlined above, in terms of a conception of science. I present a view of science based on an appropriation of the theoretical framework of the sciences of complexity. The new sciences of complexity modify and deepen our everyday understanding and interpretation of science. Recent developments in
these sciences indicate that we might be on the threshold of startling new developments that could invigorate several sciences in exciting ways. The development of complexity theory with applications across a wide range of disciplines promises to deal with intricate issues and intractable problems (Stein 1989: xiii), develop theories capable of linking sciences across disciplinary boundaries (Stein 1989: xv), and modify the dominant reductionist approach to problem-solving in vogue since the advent of Newtonian science (cf. Cilliers 1993: 4, 5; Casti 1994: 273; Waldrop 1992: 13).

I want to interpret science as a complex system in order to provide a better understanding of science as currently practised. Murray Gell-Mann (1994: 266) claims that "learning and thinking in general exemplify complex adaptive systems at work" and adds that human creative thinking is perhaps the best expression of those skills. If Gell-Mann's remark is true, one could suspect that science as prime example of human thinking, learning, and creativity should be the most complex system on earth. Whether or not that is true, at least an attempt at explaining science as complex system seems justified.

I present a philosophy of science based on ideas drawn from the study of complex adaptive systems. As a result of the spectacular expansion in scientific disciplines, witnessed in the exponential growth of the number of scientists and scientific institutions in the twentieth century, I believe science can be characterised as a complex system. I want to interpret the processes of science through which scientists themselves determine what counts as good science. This characterisation of science as complex system can give an answer to the question why the different sciences are so successful in solving growing numbers of problems and correcting their own mistakes. I argue for three conceptions of science, i.e., a minimal conception of science shared by all sciences, an intermediate conception of science where sciences cluster together on the basis of their shared interests and similarities,
and a maximalist conception of science determined for each individual science by the community of scientists in that specific discipline.

The major issue is whether theology as science functions similarly enough to other sciences dealing with comparable objects of study to qualify as science. By pointing to the various dimensions of the functioning of science as complex system, theology's scientific status can be judged.

### 2.1 Basic Rules Lead to Complex Behaviour

I want to provide a first level of analysis of what science is by suggesting a minimal conception of science. This conception is based on the following four rules that are common to both human and natural sciences and are responsible for generating the complexities of modern science. These rules guide the human quest for intelligibility and optimal understanding of the worlds around and within us (Van Huyssteen 1997: 13). They are as follows (cf. H.W. Rossouw 1993: 95–97).

1. **Use specialised problem-solving.** Humans are continually involved in problem-solving and science is a specialised way of solving problems. In science problems are solved through research. In scientific research a variety of specialised "instruments" are used to deal with research problems, such as theories, hypotheses, technical equipment (microscopes, measuring instruments, and so on), and methods (interviews, experiments, observation, etc.)

2. **Justify your findings.** No findings in science will be accepted if scientists do not provide reasons or evidence in support of them. Findings are as strong as the justifications that fellow scientists can accept.

3. **Refer to previous work.** In every scientific discipline scientists are part of a history of intellectual developments that have preceded them. To produce acceptable scientific results, scientists must demonstrate that they have noted and are building on the important contributions of their predecessors.
4. **Convince your scientific community.** No intellectual work can count as a new scientific contribution if it is not accepted by fellow scientists. To produce new scientific results scientists must convince their colleagues that their work was done according to appropriate methods, that all relevant previous work was taken into account, and that their findings fit in with current, firmly established knowledge.

These four basic rules are applied by scientists to different fields of study, where different aspects of reality and various kinds of problems are studied. In the process of their application, the basic rules are specified and elaborated. Their specification and elaboration depend on the nature of the objects being studied and the results of the meshing of the rules with the subject matter under investigation. The nature of the objects studied, assumed by scientists to be intelligible and open to rational exploration (Van Huyssteen 1997: 219), have a major influence on the development of any science. There is no doubt that theologians follow these rules. They use specialised methods for solving intellectual and other problems, they do justify their findings, they continually refer to work of other theologians, and they have to convince other theologians of the value of their work to get published, read, or quoted. Theologians also assume that the object of their study, namely, the ancient sacred texts of the Bible, are intelligible and open to rational exploration.

Aristotle, one of the greatest scientists ever (cf. Dunbar, 1994: 37–40), argued in his Nichomachean Ethics that his discussion of ethics will be adequate if it has as much "clearness as the subject-matter admits of, for precision is not to be sought for alike in all discussions" (Aristotle 1925: 2, 3). His argument is that the ethical actions he is investigating exhibit much variety and fluctuation and therefore he must be content to speak of his subject with premises that indicate the truth "roughly and in outline." An educated person would expect no more, as such a person knows to look for precision in each
class of things "just so far as the nature of the subject admits." Conversely, Aristotle says, an educated person would not foolishly accept probable reasoning from a mathematician, nor demand demonstrative proofs from a rhetorician (Aristotle 1925: 3).

Aristotle's argument that the degree of precision possible in a science depends on the nature of the subject matter studied is still valid today. His point can be illustrated by remarks made by an economist, Brian Arthur, trying to explain the economy as a complex adaptive system (cf. Waldrop 1992: 141, 151, 255). Arthur argues that the economy is like the biosphere that is always evolving, changing, and exploring new territory (Waldrop 1992: 255). The difficulty of the science of economics is that the objects of study are imperfectly smart agents who are exploring their way "into an essentially infinite space of possibilities" (Waldrop 1992: 151). Arthur's comparison of the complexities that economics have to deal with in comparison to those of physics are worth quoting in full:

"We call our particles 'agents' – banks, firms, consumers, governments.... Our particles in economics are smart, whereas yours in physics are dumb. In physics an elementary particle has no past, no experience, no goals, no hopes or fears about the future. It just is. That's why physicists can talk so freely about 'universal laws:' their particles respond to forces blindly, with absolute obedience. But in economics, ....our particles have to think ahead, and try to figure out how other particles might react if they were to undertake certain actions. Our particles have to react on the basis of expectations and strategies... that's what makes economics truly difficult" (Waldrop 1992: 141).

From Arthur's description of the objects of study in economics, it is clear that similar precision as in physics would be virtually impossible, thus excluding also similarly strong causal explanations and accurate predictions of the be-
haviour studied. This does not imply that scientific advances — new techniques for observation, new findings, new explanatory theories — cannot transform the degree of precision possible in a field of study.

Theology faces several handicaps in terms of the degree of precision it can reach. Very few important results rest on any kind of measurement and many subdisciplines study languages, cultures, and worlds that have stopped to exist hundreds of years ago, providing precious little information to work with. A further complication for precision in theology is the fact that texts allow multiple interpretations and that complex arguments are needed to establish which interpretations best capture the meaning of a complex text, or set thereof. The fact that a text also sets limits to its possible interpretations and that arguments can be made by reference to aspects of the texts, or subsidiary subdisciplines, enable theology to reach a reasonable degree of precision, commensurate with its subject matter.

2.2 Complex Systems Gather Information about Their World

One of the major capabilities of complex systems is their ability to gather information about the environment and store it for future use (Cilliers 1994: 18). The process of gathering new information is crucial for most sciences. Through new techniques of observation, new findings, and new explanatory theories scientists collect, analyse, and interpret data about the worlds around us and within ourselves. The sciences deal in diverse ways with different kinds of subject matter in the process of the gathering of data. The creative methods and ingenious techniques devised by scientists for observation, analysis, and interpretation of researchable problems concerning different objects of study are worth illustrating with two examples drawn from the natural sciences and theology.

The two examples show how the object of study and the nature of the problem under investigation usually dictates the methods and techniques for ob-
ervation and gathering of data. The examples illustrate the ways in which scientists design appropriate tools for investigating particular subject matter. The examples are the exploration of Mars and the interpretation of the meaning of an ancient sacred text, in this case, the book of Revelation.

The recent exploration of Mars is interplanetary science done by a global team of scientists. The exploration is an example of large-scale scientific research funded by government, done by a large interdisciplinary research team led by the Jet Propulsion Centre at NASA, in collaboration with associates from scientific institutions across the globe. Representatives of several sciences had to co-operate to enable Pathfinder and its rover, called Sojourner, to do its observations on Mars. To get the Pathfinder spacecraft to Mars required knowledge provided by physics and cosmology to enable the craft to land within a 60 km diameter after a journey of 190 million kilometres. Further scientific knowledge from mathematics and physics was needed to enable the spacecraft to decelerate from the 26 200 km/h it was travelling when entering the atmosphere of Mars to the 37.6 km/h it travelled when hitting the Ares Vallis (Mars Valley). The protection against extreme heat when entering the atmosphere of Mars, as well as the parachute, rockets, and air bags enabling a soft landing are further proofs of sophisticated scientific knowledge and technology required for the mission.

Pathfinder and Sojourner made meteorological, geological, and visual observations on Mars. Meteorological observations were made by instruments measuring wind speed, temperature, and the quality of air. Geological observations were made by an Alpha Proton x-ray Spectrometer that can detect the presence of minerals through reading the characteristic emissions projected by specific elements contained in Martian rocks. Magnets mounted on Sojourner attract magnetic dust which can be analysed by the spectrometer. Visual observations were made of rocks, patterns on the soil, geological formations, and interactions between the Martian surface and its atmos-
phere. Sets of stereoscopic cameras enabled scientists to estimate depth, height, and distance of the pictures taken of Mars. All these observations had to be digitally encoded and sent to earth via radio signals. Large dish antennas collected these signals and sent them to JPL in Pasadena, Calif., via satellite or cable. These coded signals were decoded by computer, projected by means of video technology, and made available on the Internet.

The technology required for making these observations on Mars and the scientific knowledge behind the whole project are staggering. Several sub-disciplines of physics are involved, as well as sophisticated mathematical techniques for complicated calculations. Geology and meteorology are deeply involved, as are computer science and different engineering sciences. The scale of the project is so large that dozens of scientists were involved besides the multidisciplinary team at JPL in Pasadena.

Many people doubt the scientific status of disciplines studying ancient sacred texts such as the Bible. However, scientists in these disciplines are similarly creative in devising methods and techniques and similarly adept at utilising the results of other scientific disciplines for understanding the meaning of even the most obscure ancient sacred text. To decipher the meaning of the notoriously difficult apocalyptic text of Revelation in the New Testament, theologian Jan A. du Rand (1993a, 1993b, 1996a, 1996b) approaches his research problem in ways similar to those of the scientists discussed above. He assumes that Revelation is intelligible, open to rational exploration, and has meaning as a whole.

Du Rand’s focus is on understanding the meaning of the text of Revelation. As methods he employs textual analysis, literary analysis (aided by insights from musicology), historical analysis, narrative analysis, theological analysis, and the methods of Greek grammar and syntax. With these methods he searches for patterns and structures in the text of Revelation. He interprets
the text as a meaningfully artistic whole through identifying a Leitmotiv, defined as a theme that is "modified on subsequent appearances to represent or symbolise an idea in a dramatic work" (Du Rand 1993a: 304). The idea of a Leitmotiv is complemented by the musicological term, basso ostinato, that he defines as a "short phrase or melody that is repeated over and over in the bass parts" with the function of binding the composition together (Du Rand 1993a: 301).

Du Rand explores the role of concepts like "Zion" and "Spirit" by tracing their meanings in related texts within Jewish religious traditions and through determining their links and contrasts with other parts of Revelation, as well as their function and meaning within the broader theological narrative of Revelation itself. As a result he presents a multitude of textual references to his scientific community as evidence for his interpretation of the concepts "Zion" and "Spirit."

Almost inseparable from these textual analyses are his attempts to place the text within various contexts, leading him to discover intertextual links with texts from the Old Testament, ancient Jewish and Greek literature, and other New Testament texts. He further contextualises Revelation within the history and religious traditions of Israel, the ancient Near East, and early Christianity. His interpretation of the meaning of Revelation rests on the way he activates a multitude of textual evidence to become an intertextual event.

These examples demonstrate the extraordinary ability of scientists to devise new sensors for detecting and observing phenomena and events in the world in order to gather information for adequately modelling the world. Theologians, as demonstrated in the example, do so as well. They continually look at their subject matter with new eyes.
2.3 Complex Systems Model Their Worlds

Complex adaptive systems build models containing assumptions about the world out there that aid them in understanding and anticipating events that influence their behaviour (Waldrop 1992: 146, 177). They have to be able to understand and use the information they get from the world through their sensors. Science as complex system continually and actively search for, and gather, new experience that are packaged as information. Experience must be able to enter the system through sensors. Sensors can be the human senses or methods, techniques, and instruments extending the senses. Characteristic of science is the multiplicity of sensors strengthening, amplifying, and complementing human senses.

Complex adaptive systems must order, classify, and systematise the new information they receive. Therefore, they must identify those regularities and patterns in information coming from their environments that are relevant to their purposes (cf. Holland 1995: 31–32). These regularities are condensed into models that enable action and behaviour in the world (cf. Gell-Mann 1994: 17). Models of relevant aspects of their environment must be modifiable so that they can be improved upon receiving new information. Models are continually tried out to determine whether the complex adaptive system can act successfully on their prescriptions and predictions (cf. Holland 1995: 33–34). The results of the action and behaviour must be monitored and fed back to modify the models, if necessary. In the light of experience, the models must be modified (Waldrop 1992: 179).

The results of modelling in the sciences through observation and interpretation of problems under investigation can be extremely diverse in content and style (cf. Ziman 1994: 179). Despite this diversity, contributions to scientific knowledge usually have a publicly shared, quasi-objective, and schematic form similar to those of maps (Ziman 1995: 72). These maps are attempts at modelling the world that are revised or rejected through critical examination
and testing. Amongst the diversity of maps provided by scientists are experimental measurements, logical analyses, observational data, theoretical calculations, mathematical models, new theories or hypotheses, instrumental techniques, textual analyses, critical surveys, and pictorial communications of pattern recognitions, such as diagrams, photographs, maps, and graphs (Ziman 1995: 71 and 1994: 179).

Gathering new experience, recognising patterns, modelling regularities, and modifying models after critical testing lies at the heart of the sciences. And theology? Theology gathers new experience of the languages, cultures, and lifestyles of the authors and first readers of the ancient sacred texts of the Bible through various subdisciplines such as archaeology, ancient near Eastern studies, and study of the Hebrew and Greek languages. Application of new methods of textual analyses supplies new information and evidence for use in exegesis of texts, while writing theologies of specific texts (Bible books) or collections of texts (Old and New Testaments, the whole Bible) aim at identifying patterns and regularities. Systematic theology produces models of doctrines and practical theology designs models to embody doctrine in church practice. The critical testing of these scientific activities of theology are severe, judged by theological debates in journals, books, and conferences.

2.4 Complex Systems Recombine, Rearrange, and Revise Themselves

Complex systems continually recombine and rearrange their building blocks and revise their structure and organisation (cf. Waldrop 1992: 145–146). Complex systems do this as a result of gaining new experience. Rearrangement of components, revision of structure, and recombination of building blocks are the fundamental mechanisms of adaptation, evolution, and learning, which become necessary as a result of experience (Waldrop 1992: 146). In the sciences rearrangement, recombination, and revision are common occurrences, despite the attitude of many scientists humorously
expressed in the "First Commandment of Academia: Thou shalt not transgress thy disciplinary boundary" (Kline 1995: 5).

This section does not focus on changes in science that result from developments within the boundaries of a specific science, but rather on the way that developments outside the boundaries of a scientific discipline can be used to modify scientific practice within those boundaries. Thus, the focus is not on the effect of new results and theories developed by a researcher of a particular science, but rather on the common phenomenon of rearrangements and recombinations that follow from appropriating new methods, techniques, theories, and results developed elsewhere, by other sciences. The ongoing integration and grafting of elements from other disciplines into one's own are driven by the hope of discovering things in other disciplines that can extend the limits of one's own discipline (Van Huyssteen 1997: 17, 32).

For many decades sciences have been influenced by intellectual developments occurring in other sciences. Obvious examples are the role of mathematical and statistical techniques used for analysis in an ever-growing variety of sciences. But are such influences restricted to borrowing and using these instruments and tools? Are other influences from one scientific discipline to another, such as the transfer of methods, theories, and results, excluded? Definitely not. The two examples of diverse scientific investigations in a previous section demonstrate how various sciences continually rearrange and recombine themselves through selective borrowing and integration of aspects of other disciplines. These recombinations and rearrangements point to the interdisciplinary nature of most sciences.

I want to argue that scientific investigation in one scientific discipline leads scientists to discover overlaps between their field of study and other fields of study. Selective borrowing occurs – without regard for academic frontiers (cf. Ziman 1995: 95) – of methods of investigation, techniques for observation
and analysis, tools for computing, results for background knowledge, and theories for explanation and prediction. The result is that several sciences share various aspects of their methods, techniques, and results with one another. For this reason many sciences have lots in common. For example, mathematics, statistics, and computer technology function as instruments for analysis in many sciences. Which aspects, the extent, and depth to which scientists use the tools provided by mathematics, statistics, and computer science vary considerably in widely differing sciences like botany, psychology, and economics. Similarly, theories and results are often shared in many sciences. For example, nuclear physics play an important role in different scientific disciplines, just as theories of interpretation are shared by a variety of human sciences.

Some sciences are reconstructed through new discoveries, theoretical insights, or new linkages between previously distant disciplines (Ziman 1994: 20, 22). Though scientific disciplines evolve to become more specialised and frequently differentiate and split apart as result, they just as often recombine to form intricate and overlapping connections with one another. Connections are made at theoretical and instrumental levels, boundaries between theories and disciplines are revised, and intellectual mergers between theories and disciplines take place (Ziman 1995: 84). Ziman describes the complexities of these processes as beyond ordinary human understanding (Ziman 1994: 71). Linking previously unrelated information is a typical creative scientific contribution. These recombinations of sciences is a redrawing of the cognitive maps of disciplines and forms a central theme in the developmental history of the sciences (Ziman 1994: 63).

The sharing and borrowing of methods, techniques, results, and theories suggest that there are more similarities between individual scientific disciplines than thus far suggested. An intermediate conception of science can account for these overlaps and similarities. Such a conception aims to give a
description of the nature of science at the level of clusters of individual sciences that are temporarily grouped together through shared interests. The meshing of a few simple rules with the specific subject matter investigated by a scientific discipline does not create sciences that necessarily develop in totally different directions. Shared interests between scientific disciplines abound, as several sciences are closely related. Close relations result from studying similar objects or phenomena, or from using similar methods, techniques, results, and theories. The similarities and overlaps between sciences are not permanent or fixed, as new relationships and overlaps are constantly forged based on new developments in diverse sciences. Nevertheless, individual sciences cluster together on the basis of shared interests in subject matter, methods, techniques, theories, and results.

Theology itself is a good example of integrating the methods, techniques, and results from other sciences. The scientific study of languages and the practice of philosophy are some of the earliest intellectual disciplines that have played a major role in theology. Today theology makes large-scale use of the results, methods, and techniques of a diversity of sciences (Eybers 1982: 24–26). Literary analysis provides methods and techniques for use in the interpretation of ancient sacred texts (Hays 1996: 298), while history and archaeology provide research results for understanding the context of ancient sacred texts better. The similarities between literary analysis in the study of modern and ancient languages and theological interpretation of ancient sacred texts are numerous.

Different clusters of sciences might have little more in common with one another than the few basic rules specified above. Sometimes the detailed interpretation of what the few basic rules require with respect to the subject matter under investigation can lead to further distance between sciences, creating a feeling of fragmented discourses that are virtually incomprehensible for people not conversant with its esoteric language (cf. Lyotard 1979).
This often observed inability of communication between scientists from different fields of study can be explained through a maximal conception of science. This conception deals with science on a third level beyond the minimal conception based on basic shared rules and the intermediate conception dealing with overlapping sciences grouped into clusters. This third level of analysis requires an explanation of the ability of complex adaptive systems to self-organise.

2.5 Science as a Complex System Self-Organises

As the number of scientists involved in a particular field of study grow, the scientific discipline starts to become complex. This happens through the ability of complex adaptive systems to self-organise.

Complex adaptive systems have the ability to change and develop their structures with the aim to better adapt to, cope with, or manipulate their environment. They thus continually transform their structures and organisation as a result of rich interactions between components of the system, as well as between the system and its environment. Interaction with the environment is complex, as many parts of the environment are also evolving. One could thus refer to co-evolution, as individuals try to adapt to their evolving environment (cf. Holland 1995: 10; Waldrop 1992: 259).

Self-organisation does not result from a central controller, as complex systems usually have no central controller with complete control over it. The dynamics of these systems allow a great deal of autonomy, although there might be some tendencies toward central control. The absence of rigid central control results in systems with robust, adaptive, flexible, and innovative organisation (Brockman, 1995: 349; Casti 1994: 272).

Self-organisation clearly plays a major role in science. Science is institutionally embodied in universities, research institutes, and industries. At universi-
ties the sciences often organise themselves into faculties such as Medicine, Economics, Law, Theology, and so on, who cluster together related sciences organised into departments. Some sciences, like particle physics, have become collectivised because research facilities have become extremely sophisticated and expensive. For these reasons they have to be funded by governments and shared by scientists from many different countries, like CERN in Europe (cf. Ziman 1994 and 1995: 364). Not only are these facilities shared, but some experiments involve teams of a hundred scientists and more. Many scientific projects require the input of scientists with various specialised skills drawn from different sciences (Ziman 1994: 60). Similar patterns of collectivisation in other sciences are marked by a large increase in the number of multiply co-authored articles in the last few decades (Ziman 1995: 289).

Through regional and national organisations scientists group together for promoting their disciplinary interests, especially through conferences and the publication of journals. Within organisations specialised interest groups arise who share information and exchange ideas. Even smaller formal or informal research groups are formed that collaborate on projects on various levels. Through publications, i.e., journals and books, important forms of self-organisation take place through the selection of editors, editorial boards, and referees. Funding agencies also appoint referees for advice on suitable candidates or proposals for research funding.

Self-organisation in science results from the absence of central control. Control over what is accepted as science, is widely dispersed throughout the scientific community (cf. Waldrop 1992: 145). Referees, editorial boards, and editors of thousands of journals and publishers share decisions about what is good science and ought to be published. Committees of countless scientific institutions, composed of experts, determine appointments, promotions, funding, and prizes. Individual scientists involved in research make deci-
sions, gather information, and develop arguments for judging existing research and presenting new findings. Individual scientists often have informal networks of contacts with fellow scientists that are kept up through mail, telephone, guest lectures, and conferences.

The richness of the multiple interactions between scientists demonstrates why self-organisation is possible within the sciences through widely dispersed decision-making powers. As a result the nature, contents, and processes of science are continually adapted to fit better with the environment — whether environment here means the objects of study, fellow scientists, or the current state of the art research findings, methods, and techniques setting the agenda for future research.

The result of the comprehensive ability of the sciences to self-organise through widely dispersed control over what qualifies as good science underlies the third conception of science. The maximalist conception of science analyses science at a third level, viz. that of the community of scientists in a particular field of study. This community of scientists determines the nature, standards, accepted findings, and workable theories of their discipline on a continual basis. As community they decide what kind of research is do-able, what the current state of the art is, and what is well-established in the discipline (Ziman 1995: 273).

The critical scrutiny of experts in a discipline temporarily resolves disagreements — a characteristic feature of science — only to be disrupted again (Van Huyssteen 1997: 250). This never-ending redefinition of what science is by leaders in their fields of study is all we have. These judgements come from within a discipline where scientists know well enough how to distinguish ways of proceeding, whether they are justified or not, fruitful or fruitless, reasoned or not. Hilary Putnam's advice (1990) is that scientists should not abandon these knowledgeable judgements that they as doers, practitioners,
and agents of a specific scientific discipline make in favour of judgements from outside their discipline imposing standards of science on them.

Competent judgements within a scientific discipline are possible because scientists can learn from history and experience. Through comparison of new theories, methods, and findings with what has gone before they can judge the significance of new proposals and decide whether they are better estimates of how the world really is (Van Huyssteen 1997: 253). The acceptance of new contributions results in reinterpretation of existing information to determine its correspondence and coherence with what has been judged to be the new standard-bearers of significance. As a result selective forgetting takes place, as lost significance implies the death of scientific work and death means being forgotten.

Theology self-organises just as these processes above describe. Theology itself consists of various disciplines and subdisciplines with their own experts, journals, conferences, and organisations. The sociological functioning of theology is fully in line with the other sciences.

Different maximalist versions of individual sciences are in interaction with one another and are commonly aggregated under the collective name of science. Clustering together are typical behaviour of complex adaptive systems. When similar complex systems are in interaction, they have a tendency to generate other more sophisticated complex systems on a higher level of organisation. Such a complex system of complex systems evolves through the efforts of the complex agents to survive or improve their positions. Such a collective of complex systems are beneficial to the individual complex systems.

Unitary conceptions of science claim to give a reconstructed model of how science, in the sense of complex system of complex systems, works and
ought to work. Thus, what they are doing is to interpret one specific science, usually physics, and generalise those findings to science as the aggregation of complex systems. This generalisation is without grounds. Science as complex system of complex systems is not a single unified and monolithic enterprise, but resembles a "rather ramshackle structure with little coherence among its various parts" (Kuhn 1970: 49). The various sciences cohere on a minimal conception of science, based on a few basic rules, and some sciences cluster together on the basis of shared interests. However, one prescriptive model developed by philosophers of science that applies to all sciences seems out of the question.

2.6 Science at the Edge Between Order and Chaos

The processes through which scientists judge the results of new and existing scientific research can be elucidated by another aspect of complex adaptive systems, viz., the fact that they are poised between the edge of chaos and order. The interplays between order and disorder, stability and fluidity, chaos and regularity, and predictability and unpredictability that complex adaptive systems exhibit are regarded as one of their most striking features (cf. Stein 1989: xiv).

Commonly called the edge of chaos, this expression refers to that part of a complex adaptive system where its components never quite lock into place, yet never quite dissolve into turbulence either. The edge of chaos is described in different ways. Some regard it as the constantly shifting battle zone between stagnation and anarchy (Waldrop 1992: 12), while others interpret it as the tension between regulation through feedbacks and creative response to new conditions. The edge of chaos is described as the zone where complex systems can be spontaneous and adaptive, or where new ideas can nibble away at the status quo (cf. Waldrop 1992: 12).
The edge between order and chaos in science lies at the frontiers of new research where research traditions manifest their dynamism in a never-ending dialectic of continuity and change (Van Huyssteen 1997: 33). In most scientific disciplines opinions simultaneously converge and differ on what are established theories, results, methods, and techniques (cf. Rouse 1990). Scientists have sufficiently overlapping convictions about which important developments have shaped their discipline thus far to enable communication about the significance of new contributions. The shared overlapping convictions enable scientists to discuss differences and to make creative contributions. Yet the overlapping convictions are in continual tension with new contributions that threaten the coherence of the shared convictions of scientists about what scientific results, methods, theories, and techniques are significant and dominate their field.

The edge between order and chaos in science has the stability of some shared convictions about significant work to enable scientists to judge the value of new contributions that threaten to undermine the temporarily established shared convictions of significance. But significance in science means exactly that – to change, modify, or add to the preceding history of significant contributions. Rouse thinks that scientists live within various ongoing stories, all aiming to push the story line in diverging directions. The coherence of the narrative, documenting significant contributions to the development of the discipline, is under continuous pressure to unravel due to new contributions challenging the current state of the art. However, a reasonably coherent narrative is needed that encourages and yet controls controversy (cf. Ziman 1995: 82). By keeping criticism and imagination in continuous tension differences within a discipline can be kept intelligible and a space exists within which creative work can be done (Rouse 1990).

Through significant contributions modifying the existing cognitive landscape of a discipline (cf. Ziman 1995: 275), scientists redefine what the field is
about and provide new opportunities for research. Solutions to important problems in a scientific discipline necessitate that every scientist must re-
consider the contents, methods, and aims of their research programs (Ziman 1995: 279). Scientists read new contributions – published in books or jour-
nals – with the aim of discovering new advances at the frontiers of their dis-
cipline. Such advances include results they must take account of, research opportunities that they could usefully follow up, or methods and techniques that they might employ (Rouse 1990).

The contents of a scientific discipline currently accepted as significant, and thus dominating research activities in the discipline, are constantly exposed to problems, pressures, and challenges (cf. Popper 1981). Theories are ex-
amined for their internal coherence, their coherence with established theo-
ries and results, and for their fit with available evidence. New findings are under pressure to withstand critical examination of the methods used for data-gathering and whether these methods were consistently and impartially applied. Further pressure comes from investigations determining whether the techniques of analysis were appropriately applied and skilfully handled.

One result of stringent critical examination and rigorous testing of existing scientific contributions is the presentation of imaginative, new scientific theo-
ries, results, methods, and techniques. These new proposals aim to correct problems, deal with challenges, and alleviate pressures on existing accepted scientific results. In the process, new contributions proliferate and tend to create a chaotic field of new ideas to be sorted out. Again this leads to crea-
tive tension between already accepted scientific results and the newly pro-
posed contributions whose significance are constantly being determined through academic debates, critical scrutiny, and rigorous testing. When sig-
nificant contributions become accepted part of the body of established knowledge, no state of equilibrium follows. The result rather changes the environment in which scientific research is conducted. The changed envi-
ronment results in new pressures, problems, and challenges that must be dealt with through similar processes as described above.

The nature of the edge of chaos in science as complex system draws attention to another characteristic of complex systems, viz. components of complex systems co-evolve with their environments. In this case, the components of science can refer to the theories, results, methods, techniques, and the conceptions scientists have of their disciplines, albeit often tacitly. Complex systems are characterised by multiple independent agents that interact with one another in many ways. Each agent are constantly reacting and adapting to what the other agents are doing (cf. Waldrop 1992: 145). For this reason the environment of an agent is not fixed, but constantly evolving. Individual agents must change and improve themselves relative to the evolving changes implemented by other agents.

Successful changes thus depend upon what other agents are around, the success of those agents' adaptation, learning, and evolution, the niche an agent fills, the agent's ability to adapt and learn, and sometimes even the past history of an agent. Fitness, in the sense of either successful adaptation to the environment, or appropriate learning from experience, arises "from the dance of co-evolution" (Waldrop 1992: 259). Science is such a system of co-evolving components. Ziman (1994: 78) calls the scientific enterprise a system with closely linked components that are continually evolving. The components — scientists, theories, methods, results, or even disciplines — grow and change in relation to one another.

There is no doubt that theology also fits the description of the edge of chaos. New theologies emerge that undermine currently accepted ones and aim to redefine the narrative of developments in the discipline thus far. Endless critical scrutiny of theologies leads to the development of new alternatives. Theologians must continually co-evolve with new developments in their
fields, as well as new developments in related fields, such as literary analysis, philosophy, or sociology.

The complexity scientists use the concept of the edge of chaos in conjunction with the idea of self-organised criticality. When combined these two ideas suggest that complex systems can tune themselves toward optimum sensitivity to external inputs. In such a state of sensitivity even minor events can start a chain reaction that affects large numbers of elements in the system (cf. Waldrop 1992: 304–305). Such a chain reaction can lead to breakdowns of all sizes ripping through the system and rearranging it. Complex systems in a state of self-organised criticality can be identified if they show waves of changes and upheaval on all scales (Waldrop 1992: 308).

The idea of a state of self-organised criticality in science functions at the level of comprehensive theories. Thomas Kuhn's (1970) concept of scientific revolutions illustrates self-organised criticality at work in major theoretical changes that occur in some sciences. Normal science — in Kuhnian terms — and anomalies prepare the ground for a state of criticality. The research agenda for normal science are defined by comprehensive theoretical frameworks called paradigms. Normal science consists of "puzzle solving," as intricate instrumental, conceptual, mathematical, and empirical problems left unresolved by a new paradigm must be solved. The challenge of fitting all the right pieces of the puzzle functions as an important driving force in scientific research.

Growing specialisation through normal science makes a paradigm more precise, accurate, and complicated. Besides strengthening the existing paradigm, growth through normal science also leads to the gradual disintegration of a paradigm. According to Kuhn, "the more precise and far-reaching that paradigm is, the more sensitive an indicator it provides of anomaly and hence of an occasion for paradigm change" (Kuhn 1970: 65).
Anomalies disturb normal science and threaten paradigms. Anomalies are new, unknown phenomena that defy easy explanation in terms of the existing paradigm. Normal scientists first try to explain anomalies. If explanations fail, scientists modify the existing paradigm. They try to resist anomalies that can overturn the existing paradigm as far as possible. A paradigm whose explanatory power has diminished as a result of accumulating anomalies leads a scientific discipline into a state of self-organised criticality.

A scientific revolution occurs when a new paradigm replaces the existing one. This revolution happens when the new paradigm explains both known facts and anomalies. To reject the existing paradigm is simultaneously a decision to accept the new. The old and the new paradigms cannot co-exist, the older one must make way for the new. Paradigms specify the standards for normal science, therefore a scientific revolution changes the way science is practised. Scientific revolutions destroy the weak parts of existing paradigms and incorporate their explanatory successes.

The relatively minor event of the acceptance of a new comprehensive theory or paradigm starts a chain reaction that affects large numbers of scientists, often in more than one discipline. Breakdowns of all sizes can rip through scientific disciplines and subdisciplines and rearrange how science is done. Kuhn is clear that revolutions of different sizes could occur and that the effects of some revolutions vary on members of different disciplines as a result of the phenomenon that a paradigm can be important for many scientific disciplines, though "it is not the same paradigm for all" (Kuhn 1970: 50).

The influence of an important scientific result can work its way across the conventional boundaries of various disciplines and fields like an epidemic, where "new foci of infection appear unexpectedly at points that are far away from previously affected regions" (Ziman 1995: 94). Galison lists some of the
metaphors that have recently been employed for depicting these modifications of current scientific practice. Instead of gradual accumulation, philosophers of science are now referring to epistemic ruptures or fissures, gestalt shifts, sociological disruptions between generations, or ontological rifts tearing like geological faults between theories (Galison 1988: 204).

The role of paradigms in theology is disputed. Nevertheless, there are theologians convinced of the important role of paradigms in theology. Willem Vorster (1988: 34) describes the role of a paradigm in New Testament studies as follows.

"There can be little doubt about the importance of the historicocritical approach and the application of historicocritical methods, especially during the past century, as the dominant disciplinary matrix in New Testament science. It was within this paradigm that solutions for problems were looked for. Those problems deemed worthy for investigation were determined by this frame of reference. In short, historical criticism as applied by biblical scholars dominated the activities of New Testament scholars and in certain circles it is still regarded as the only way in which any New Testament problem can be solved. This does not mean that there were no other paradigms. I am just arguing that the historicocritical paradigm was dominant, and also that it influenced other paradigms directly or indirectly."

Other theologians also accept the idea of paradigms in theology and claim that conflicting paradigms often co-exist, because old paradigms are not replaced by new ones, but rather live on (Bosch 1991: 186). Bosch argues that an individual accepting a new paradigm does not necessarily abandon all aspects of the old one. A complex fusion of different paradigms often occur in the case of individual theologians (Bosch 1991: 186). Changes in paradigms have often affected theology drastically, as the Protestant Reforma-
tion demonstrates. Theology are also often influenced by paradigm changes in other sciences, like literary analysis. New methods for textual analysis have required almost continuous "retoolings" in theology in the past couple of decades.

2.7 The Rationality of Theology as Science

In most respects discussed above, theology qualifies as a science similar to most other sciences. Theology as science works as a complex system and thus functions in practically all respects just as the other sciences do. The similarities between theology and the other sciences can be explained in terms of the fact that all the sciences use the rich resources of our shared human rationality (cf. Van Huyssteen 1999). Humans employ rationality in all domains of their lives as ways of coping with their lives and their world. Rationality enables humans to make the worlds around them and in them intelligible so as to optimally understand them (Van Huyssteen 1999: 2, 7, 114). Included in these worlds are the questions of theology, like those dealing with meaning and suffering in life and the origin and purpose of humans and their world (Van Huyssteen 1999: 7).

What are the contents of rationality in this context? To be rational can be explained in terms of the four fundamental rules of science mentioned earlier. Rationality enables scientists to define problems and find solutions as part of the quest for intelligibility and optimal understanding of our worlds. Provisional findings and tentative hypotheses need to be justified by giving an account of them and providing them with a rationale (Van Huyssteen 1999: 128). This is done through the ability for critical judgement, that help scientists determine the best available reasons based on appropriate evidence suitable to a specific context (Van Huyssteen 1999: 2, 5, 128, 132, 143). These reasons are determined against the background of responsible decisions about the value of earlier work and with the aim of convincing one’s peers in a discipline. Scientists want to convince their community of
inquiring why their theories or findings are well-supported. They also want to convince their community that they have gathered, linked, and united interpreted experience into coherent hypotheses or theories (Van Huyssteen 1999: 128, 210).

This community of inquirers consists of individuals with sufficient expertise to be competent judges (Van Huyssteen 1999: 171). Through intersubjective examination, critical scrutiny, and continuing evaluation these inquirers help or challenge one another by confirming, rejecting, criticising, or modifying proposals. They are required to present good reasons for their evaluative comments (Van Huyssteen 1999: 171). Failure to rationally undermine any proposal or hypothesis qualifies it as provisionally acceptable in a scientific discipline, pending further inquiry (Van Huyssteen 1999: 26).

As a result of shared rational resources, theology can engage in "cross-contextual, cross-disciplinary conversation" (Van Huyssteen 1998: 214). Rationality makes it possible that humans from diverse backgrounds can communicate through conversation, deliberation, and evaluation whilst busy collectively assessing something (Van Huyssteen 1999: 267). As rationality is operative in different spheres of human knowledge, it provides links between different scientific disciplines and between the strategies of reasoning employed in them (Van Huyssteen 1999: 5). These links enable scientists to communicate across disciplinary boundaries, despite the heterogeneous language games embodied in different scientific disciplines. Not only does rationality enable theology to engage in academic debates with their colleagues from other scientific disciplines, but public, political debates through rational argumentation about the social value and role of theological values become a reality.

Unfortunately, though, the full picture of the status of theology as science cannot be determined only by the similarities between theology and the
other sciences. Although theology shares many similarities with other sciences, its fundamental differences with those sciences must be respected as well (Van Huyssteen 1999: 263). Theology has an Achilles heel that disqualifies it as science in many people’s eyes, despite so many similarities between theology and the other sciences.

3. The Achilles Heel of Theology as Science

If theology resembles other sciences in so many respects, why the persistent suspicions about its intellectual quality and scientific status? The reason for constant doubts about theology as science comes from its Achilles heel as science. Theology – perhaps one should say, conservative Christian theology – demands that its practitioners commit themselves to faith in God and belief in the divine origin and truth of the ancient sacred texts of the Bible (cf. Van Huyssteen 1986: 152, 154, 204, 210). Several reasons are advanced for this requirement. One reason is that large parts of the Christian Church judge the ancient sacred texts of the Bible as the only access to the reality of God – supposedly the focal point of theology as science (Van Huyssteen 1986: 210).

Another reason for theology’s Achilles heel is that the Christian Church accepts the ancient sacred texts of the Bible as the norma normans of its collective life and of individual conscience. Norma normans means that these texts are the fundamental values that determine any other values that might be used by the Christian church or in the lives of individual Christian believers. All other values drawn from whichever source become norma normata, that is, norms that are accepted in so far as they are in agreement with the Biblical texts. The decisive role of the values embodied in the ancient sacred texts of the Bible is thus required as the working assumption of Christian theology.
To accept the dominance of the ancient sacred texts of the Bible in the life of the Christian church implies that theologians are called upon to submit themselves to the moral and religious authority of those texts. Submission to these texts must result in a changed life, as the experience of being transformed by those texts is an important way of understanding the meaning of the text. This requirement asks theologians to accept in faith that God has revealed Himself through the ancient sacred texts of the Bible and that He claims complete obedience from believers to all His commands expressed in these texts.

If theologians comply with these requirements of faith, they can become “faithful interpreters” who have the virtue of “listening patiently” to the ancient sacred texts of the Bible. If they present “fresh, imaginative links” between these texts and our contemporary lives, the credit must go to God’s Holy Spirit for these new interpretations of the texts. Without faith not even the best methods and techniques of exegesis can enable theologians to discern the core message of the ancient sacred texts of the Bible. As Biblical texts witness and testify to the faith of their authors, theologians ought to be tuned into a similar faith to gain a genuine understanding of their meanings. The Bible itself seems to subscribe to such a view. Spiritual truth given by the Holy Spirit, it claims, can only be understood by people filled with God’s Spirit (1 Cor. 2: 13–15).

These requirements for doing good theology boils down to accepting not only the existence of the Christian God, but also that a personal relationship with Him as prescribed in the Biblical texts ought to be established and lived. Even after twenty centuries there is still no rationally convincing arguments to persuade sceptics of the existence of God or the need for a Biblically prescribed and specified relationship with Him. The intellectual disciplines, like natural theology, philosophy of religion, and apologetics, intent on designing and presenting such arguments are at best marginal within the theological
sciences. That does not mean that the choice of Christianity is arbitrary. Adherents of Christianity could argue with ease that the collection of texts in the Bible provide the best available answers to the deep issues that theology deal with. A series of arguments are possible that show that intellectually satisfying interpretations of Biblical texts provide comprehensive frameworks of ideas within which the meaning of life, the existence of suffering, the nature of love, the beauty of creation, the devastation of natural and human forces, and the purpose of an individual’s life can be articulated and understood better than any other comprehensive moral or religious framework can provide. Nevertheless, such arguments are not conclusive to sceptics, like mathematical proofs or scientific observations are.

In the absence of rationally convincing arguments that will change the minds of sceptics, a leap of faith lies at the bottom of theology as science. This leap of faith requires a commitment to an immensely strong and comprehensive set of normative values and a demanding relationship to God that must transform a person’s life to become like God in many respects. What theology here requires from its practitioners is unique among all the sciences. To acquire a religious orientation and moral values as additional qualifications besides relevant intellectual knowledge and excellent research skills in order to practice science, is the Achilles heel of theology, leaving it vulnerable when attempting to defend its intellectual status as science. Van Huyssteen (1999: 115) acknowledges that the “high degree of personal involvement and commitment in religious faith ...present a very special challenge to any theory of rationality in theology.” How many sciences specify similar subjective, personal requirements as prerequisites for being researchers contributing to human knowledge?

The requirements of theology are so much more than other sciences expect from their researchers, the truth of Christian religion so controversial in pluralist societies, its moral orientation so biased, and the publicly available
evidence to support faith and belief so ambiguous, that the scientific status of theology is radically questioned. Can any intellectual discipline requiring this degree of personal commitment from its practitioners be called a science if it is not based on publicly accessible data available for inspection and rational evaluation by anyone?

The strong requirement that Christian theology asks of its practitioners, i.e., that they submit to the authority of the God that the ancient sacred texts of the Bible testify to, has profound implications for the moral and religious lives of theologians. They must live their whole lives, whilst doing theology and whilst not, according to the ethical guidelines embodied in the Scriptures. Few other sciences prescribe such stringent requirements on the lifestyles of their researchers. Nevertheless, some human sciences do prescribe certain attitudes and moral values to their researchers in order to be able to engage in reliable research. These prescriptions are found in cases where researchers themselves become measuring instruments through participant observation and interviews.

The prescriptions for researchers in the human sciences are limited to the practitioner’s role as researcher and do not necessarily extend beyond that role. Still, it is interesting to note the similarities. In the use of in depth interviews and field research in the social sciences, researchers are encouraged to accept research respondents unconditionally, treat them with respect, place their interests first, avoid any harm to them, listen to them attentively and with empathy, be authentic in order to win their trust, be honest and respect their confidentiality, be tolerant of lifestyles different from their own, avoid moral judgement of respondents, and become aware of their own assumptions and be willing to re-examine them in the light of new information and experiences. Theology demands similar attitudes and moral values towards the ancient sacred texts of the Bible, although the values of the texts must be sincerely assimilated into the life of the theologian as coming from a
Higher Being. Theology also requires its researchers to exhibit an attitude towards the ancient sacred texts similar to those human scientists in the literary sciences ought to exhibit towards the texts they study. Their attitudes must be to have respect for the integrity of the text, the assumption that the text has something meaningful to say, and judgement of the text within its own genre, period, and context.

Does theology’s commitment to the authority of the ancient sacred texts of the Bible, its Achilles heel, disqualify it as science? Not necessarily. Theology has many similarities to many sciences with secure scientific status. If one furthermore understands theology as akin to a critical social science, it gains more intellectual legitimacy. To identify critical social science only with the “Frankfurt School” or neo-Marxism, would deny the full, rich variety of scientific theories and results produced by critical social science (Fay 1987: 6). Critical social science shares with theology an explicit commitment to a science that is not “value-free.” It has a strong commitment to emancipation, that is, to free people from oppressive social conditions and to empower them to freely determine their own lives. The concern of critical social science is similar to that of religion, that is, that by offering the truth to people about their lives, they will be set free. This concern rests on the assumption that humans are unfree, but need not be, therefore they can be liberated through an increase in knowledge. This is a secular and humanist version of self-estrangement theory, of which theology is a religious version (Fay 1987).

Critical social science differs in important respects from theology. Critical social scientists are heirs of the Enlightenment who reject belief in God, while embracing the assumption that human reason can discover the good life for humans (Fay 1987). They are also convinced that humans can solve their own problems through their capacity to transform their lives. Science is a fundamental instrument in the process of emancipation as a result of its
transformatively transform the power to understand and improve our situation (cf. Braybrooke 1987).

A comparison between critical social science and theology is instructive. Although it gives theology somewhat more scientific credibility for allowing the presence of values in a legitimate social science, it also reinforces the uniqueness of the Achilles heel of theology. Nevertheless, the acceptance of the power of human reason as designer of human values and solver of social problems appears to be as much an assumption that cannot be conclusively proven as the assumption that accepts the wisdom of the ancient sacred texts of the Bible as being relevant to our lives today. Perhaps dialogue on the value and limits of these two approaches and a possible combination can prove useful again today.

Despite many criss-crossing overlaps between theology and many diverse sciences, theology will always suffer a lack of intellectual esteem as a result of its Achilles heel. The reason for this permanent scientific disability is the violation of fundamental scientific values, such as the idea of public access to a research domain and the notion that results should not be decisively influenced by personal values. Theology as prejudiced, engaged, committed, confessional science of ancient sacred texts that explores the value, worth, significance, and truth of those texts in the light of an assumption that they were inspired by God, will thus always struggle to be recognised as an intellectual equal in the world of the sciences.

There is however, some kind of check and balances built into theology as science that minimise the effect of the Achilles heel of theology. We have already looked at the rationality embodied in interpretation and the social functioning of theology as complex system. From these two matters emerged the important role of rational argumentation, the provision of good reasons, the use of empirical evidence comprised mainly of a textual, his-
torical, and archaeological nature, critical discussion, and peer evaluation. Although these factors cannot eliminate the Achilles heel, they might keep it somewhat in check.

4. Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to justify the intellectual status of a science of ancient sacred texts. I used Anthony Flew’s challenge to theology as starting point to present my views on the status of theology as science. Having done so, how can Flew’s challenge be answered? I have selected two issues emanating from Flew’s challenge to respond to. One issue is the question to what extent theology is scientific, i.e., to what extent can the methods, conceptions, and criteria of science be applicable to theology. The other issue concerns Flew’s conclusion that theology dies a death of a thousand qualifications, suggesting that qualifying any religious assertion inevitably places Christians on a slippery slope towards vacuous, meaningless statements.

In this chapter I have argued that theology qualifies in many respects as scientific. Theology shares in many characteristics of science and frequently makes use of the results, methods, and techniques of other sciences. However, theology has a weak spot in its quest to be accepted as scientific by the other sciences. This Achilles heel is theology’s commitment to the truth of the ancient sacred texts of the Bible. Being a commitment based on reasons not entirely rationally convincing to sceptics, it implies something that theologians (and intellectual believers) have a strong preference for and that they refuse to easily substitute or trade for something else. For this reason contrary evidence to the meanings of ancient sacred texts will not be easily accepted, especially not evidence against simplifications of the complexities of those meanings.

Despite theology’s tainted status as science, it does not die a death of a thousand qualifications. Instead, theology comes alive through a thousand
qualifications. All attempts by individual theologians to synthesise their interpretations of the diverse contents embodied in the ancient sacred texts of the Bible will lead to multiple qualifications. These texts have complex intertextual relationships aside from the inner complexities embodied in each individual text (Bible book). There is no way that definitive formulations of any doctrine can be given or any doctrine can be simplified into one sentence to be tested against empirical evidence. New interpretations constantly emerge as a result of modified research practices, different contexts, and changing circumstances of theologians. Also, constantly changing intellectual horizons and new societal problems focus theologians' interests on often neglected parts of the set of ancient sacred texts.

Does this mean that no contrary evidence is allowed to count against theological statements? In a sense all theologies are mere provisional hypotheses to be tested, modified, or rejected in the light of new research results. However, this testing takes place within the safe environment of theology as committed, engaged science. Flew's challenge rather concerns the issue whether thinking Christians would ever accept evidence that would prove the falsity of their beliefs. Some Christians do. In such cases the reasons might be different from the ones Flew wants them to take seriously. Not necessarily the intense suffering of children in general will be taken seriously, but acute personal suffering of one's own child which disrupts the personal relationship with God can challenge faith in God.

Intellectual believers who become aware of the human origins of the New Testament and the similarities of its contents with other systems of thought of those times always seriously question the divinity and credibility of the ancient sacred texts. Part of the legacy of the Enlightenment also disrupts many believers in their faith. The value assigned to the freedom and autonomy of the individual to choose their own moral values makes intellectual believers sceptical to accept divinely revealed moral values that make radi-
cal demands. The spectacular, continuing success of the sciences has the effect that many people only accept ideas that are scientifically plausible. Whatever in Christianity does not seem to fit a scientific worldview is rejected as not possible and therefore unbelievable. In these cases it is not so much contrary evidence that leads believers to drastically modify or even reject their faith, but alternative sets of ideas that cohere more easily with the dominant thought systems of our times.

Furthermore, the emphasis in Christianity that believers must live the truth of the faith they confess suggests another kind of evidence that Christians will consider as counting against their faith. Lack of integrity and unwillingness to bear the consequences of the radical demands of Christian faith can negatively influence people’s faith. For this reason the influence of theology must not only stimulate Christians to be aware of the missionary dimension of their everyday conduct. Theology must cultivate the idea that an authentic Christian lifestyle is both an argument for the truth of Christianity to unbelievers and serves as encouragement to believers to persist on their pilgrim’s road to God’s new world (cf. Eybers 1982: 227–247).
PART 2

UNPACKING THE PROBLEM

In Part Two of the thesis I unpack the ethical problems involved in poverty. To do so, I first give my understanding of the phenomenon of poverty in Chapter Three. This understanding is based on social science reports that provide in-depth analyses of poverty.

Next I show in Chapter Four why poverty raises major moral issues that deserve careful consideration, serious reflection, and strong action from all people.

In Chapter Five I analyse the moral issues raised by poverty in terms of the categories provided by our contemporary understanding of the demands of justice, that represent questions raised by the public morality embodied in a society.
CHAPTER THREE

THE COMPLEXITY OF POVERTY

What is poverty? Could it be that we still do not adequately understand this phenomenon present in most human societies? Poverty is easily recognisable everywhere in the world and most people are capable of identifying cases of poverty correctly. However, its causes and effects are often not fully understood. Non-poor people react differently to people suffering from poverty, ranging from complete indifference or blaming the victims, to giving aid to strengthen dependency or restore dignity and self-worth. If persons, groups, organisations, or governments commit themselves wholeheartedly to address problems of poverty and inequality it becomes imperative to understand all the complex dimensions and multiple causes of the easily recognisable phenomenon of poverty.

This chapter wants to contribute to a better understanding of the complexities of one of the most devastating and degrading conditions human beings could find themselves in. For Christians to articulate their deepest moral values appropriate for dealing with poverty, they need to understand exactly what poverty involves and where it comes from. Understanding the concept of poverty and its causes thus becomes important background knowledge in any attempt to develop a moral response to poverty. Such guided moral responses could then be translated into appropriate action to provide help that can make a real difference to poor people’s lives.

In the first section I will attempt to define the concepts "poverty" and "poor" as it is mostly used in everyday language. In the second section I want to illustrate how social science research on poverty extend, modify, and refine everyday explanations of poverty and present us with deeper insight into the
complex nature and causes of poverty. Everyday explanations of poverty justify people's attitudes and actions towards poor people. Insight gained from social science research can enable us to get a firmer grip on what is really going on in the lives of poor people, thus leading to appropriate measures to alleviate poverty. In this way misguided aid that waste resources can be avoided.

In this chapter I will use social science research to deepen our understanding of the concept of poverty and its causes. The social sciences can deepen our insight into the nature, extent, and causes of poverty, whereas moral reflection by philosophers can give a systematic and coherent account of the different sets of moral values present in a society and demonstrate their full implications for addressing complex phenomena of poverty. Unless we challenge people's perceptions of the nature, incidence, and causes of poverty in society, we will not be able to design effective policies, get access to adequate resources, or be able to motivate non-poor people to take the issue of poverty seriously. Theological reflection on the values contained in Scripture for dealing with poverty needs a detailed understanding of poverty to highlight the central ethical issues involved.

1. Poverty and Wealth in Everyday Language

1.1 The meanings of "poverty" and "poor"

The dominant shade of meaning of the concepts "poverty" and "poor" refers to a condition where people do not have sufficient means to procure either the comforts or the necessaries of life. Ordinary language use refers to two kinds of poverty, differing in degree. In the one case, it refers to people unable to afford the comforts of life, i.e. people without sufficient money, wealth, or material possessions to afford anything more than the barest necessities to keep themselves alive and well. They are described as poor
because of their position relative to other people in society who have the means to afford much more of the comforts of life, once they have provided for their more urgent needs.

The second meaning of poverty refers to people who do not have the means to provide for the necessaries of life, i.e. their basic human needs, such as food, shelter, or clothing. Such people cannot secure their survival and are dependent on others for help. Gifts, allowances, or charitable relief stand between their subsistence and ill-health or even death. This kind of poverty, where people are in desperate need of the minimum food, clothing, or shelter and dependent on the goodwill of others for their survival, is often called absolute poverty.

The concepts "poverty" and "poor" are used with several meanings related to the ones above. These related uses further clarify the dominant meaning of these concepts. One example is the meaning of poor as lacking an essential property, for example, when someone speaks of spiritual poverty, or poor soil. The soil has a deficiency in the desired qualities and thus yields little and is described as unproductive, inferior, and of little value. In the case of soil, the desired properties needed for a good crop are scanty and inadequate. Growing crops in that soil does not go well, but rather badly. The soil cannot be used with any success. The words used to explain the meaning of "poor" and "poverty" in this context clarifies the ordinary language understanding of the condition of poverty as a situation where people lack means, experience deficiencies in the provision of their needs, and have access to scant or inadequate resources.

People in such unfortunate circumstances deserve some kind of pity. This is reflected in the use of the concept "poor" as referring to people who deserve pity, who are unfortunate, unhappy, miserable, and pitiable. For example, one could speak of the poor fellow who was killed in a car accident, regardless of this fellow's socio-economic status. In this use the focus is on the person afflicted by unfortunate circumstances, who deserves to be pitied.
Again, this use clarifies the dominant use of the concepts "poor" and "poverty." Poor people are often pitied, seen as miserable and unhappy, and regarded as unfortunate to suffer from desperate circumstances.

Everyday use of the concepts "poor" and "poverty" also suggests that poor people are sometimes to blame for their poverty. The concept "poor" is often used to refer to a performance unworthy of a person's position or ability. The cricket player played a poor shot that cost him his wicket, or the ballet dancer gave a poor performance of the lead role of Swan Lake. It could be that both stars gave performances far below their ability, or that they do not have the ability to perform according to the standards required of top performers in their field. This clarifies the condition of poverty by pointing to some people's inability to provide adequate means for their survival, or their below standard performance – for whatever reason – that fails to deliver the required goods.

The insignificance and low position of poor people are also reflected in the everyday use of the concepts "poor" and "poverty." Sometimes we speak of someone as a poor creature, or refer to a person's view as a poor opinion. This can mean that person and opinion are despicable, insignificant, humble, lowly, or of little consequence. Sometimes people refer to themselves, their performances, belongings, or what they offer to others as being poor. In such cases they are either modest or apologetic, attempting to depreciate themselves, what they have, or offer to others. Again this clarifies the human condition of poverty by pointing to poor people's low position in society, without substantial influence. For this reason many people look down on them. Many poor people resist identifying themselves as poor. To identify themselves thus, would be a negative portrayal of oneself as someone with a pitiable problem in need of help. Poor people trying to live with dignity in a society prejudiced against them might not voluntarily want to adopt "poor" as a self-description (Alcock 1997: 208).

The main dimensions of the meaning of the concept of poverty can now be
drawn from the discussion above. The concepts poverty and poor refers to people who might
- have insufficient means to procure the comforts or necessaries of life
- lack essential properties, have deficiencies in desired resources, or who have access only to inadequate or scant resources
- have a low position in society without substantial influence
- perform unworthy of their position or ability

To contrast the meanings of "poor" and "poverty" in everyday language with the meanings of their opposites, i.e. "rich" and "wealthy," might be highly illuminating.

1.2 The meanings of "wealth" and "wealthy"

When we use the concept of wealth in everyday language, we refer to things considered to be valuable, precious, or luxurious. Wealth refers to goods, money, commodities, land, possessions, or products which some people own an abundant share of. Their wealth have utility and can be exchanged in various ways, as wealth can be appropriated in exclusive possession. The concept of wealth only applies in cases where the abundance owned far exceeds the shares of the majority of members of a community or country. This concept thus denotes something that is relative to the communal or societal context where it occurs.

Being wealthy refers to something of great worth or value that is rich in any sense. The word wealthy refers to prosperous or flourishing people or conditions that reflect comfortable or luxurious conditions of life. Wealthy people have more possessions, qualities, or advantages than most other people. They are more plentifully furnished or supplied with something appreciated for its monetary or economic value. People described as wealthy have abundant means, usually possessions or money, at their command. Similarly, wealthy communities or countries command substantially more riches than others.
The main dimensions of the meaning of the concept of wealth can now be drawn from the discussion above. The concepts wealth and wealthy refers to people who might

- have valuable, precious, or luxurious possessions of great value or worth
- have an abundant share of material goods or command abundant means that far exceed those of the majority of the population
- have goods with utility that can be exchanged
- be prosperous, flourishing people living in luxurious, comfortable conditions

1.3 The meanings of "riches" and "rich"

The concept of riches refers to a condition of having a lot of money or possessions, or more generally, having abundant means considered valuable in society. Riches thus refers to the total of valuable means and possessions of individuals, families, groups, or countries. Riches furthermore refers to qualities of great value that things or persons have in abundance. Examples include references to the riches of our language or to the country's riches in petroleum.

People are called rich when they are amply provided with money or possessions. Having large quantities of money or possessions means being regarded as people with abundant means to fulfil your purposes or dreams. The words "abundant," "amply provided with," and "large quantities" suggest that people are rich in comparison to the majority of members in their society.

The other dimensions of the word rich extend the meaning described above. When we talk of a mine rich in iron ore, we mean that this mine contains large amounts of valuable resources. A rich imagination produces many creative, new ideas. A rich country abounds in natural, material, or human resources that yield many things judged valuable. Similarly rich soil can produce good crops because the soil abounds in qualities conducive to the
production of good crops.

An important dimension of the meaning of the word rich is that things or persons described as rich possess something precious that is of great worth or value. A rich voice is full and rounded, abounding in sweetness and harmony. Rich food has choice ingredients and therefore particularly strong stimulative or nourishing effects. A rich interpretation of a musical work describes a highly developed or cultivated performance demonstrating superior skill, knowledge, and insight.

The main dimensions of the meaning of the concept of riches can now be drawn from the discussion above. The concepts "riches" and "rich" refers to people who might
- have large amounts of valuable resources, be amply provided with or have a lot of money or possessions, or command abundant means considered to be valuable in a society
- possess precious things considered to be of great worth
- have qualities of great value
- yield or produce things considered to have great worth

A comparison between poverty and wealth and riches reveals the following. In the case of poverty the focus is on negative terms like inadequate, insufficient, deficient, unworthy. People whose living conditions are described in these terms deserve pity and have a low position in society. The meanings of wealth and riches turns on positive terms such as precious, valuable, luxurious, prosperous, worth, and abundance. Rich people are described in similar positive terms—signalling the admiration they often receive—and the focus is on their power to command a large share of the valuable resources available in society. The comparison between the meanings of these concepts points to major inequalities concerning people's everyday living conditions and well-being. How can these inequalities be adequately described and interpreted? How do they arise? These are
questions to be answered in the following sections.

2. Indicators of poverty

Social scientists sometimes take a basic definition of poverty and operationalise it so as to provide indicators that can lead to a detailed description and measurement of poverty (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 16; Townsend 1993; Haralambos and Holborn 1991; Erikson 1993). Operationalisation of concepts is common practice in social science, as scientists need to carefully select observable phenomena representative of the set of meanings of the abstract concepts they investigate. Despite the possibility of misleading figures, skewed statistics, and scientists deliberately ignoring the non-measurables, such measurements and figures can provide extremely useful profiles of various aspects of a multidimensional phenomenon such as poverty. Poverty emerges as a complex human phenomenon in the multiple indicators available thereof. However, no indicator is sufficient in itself to describe all dimensions of poverty. Several indicators combined can provide a profile or index of a specific case of poverty.

However, the limitations of these quantitative measurements and statistical profiles must be kept in mind (cf. Alcock 1997: 115). What counts as poverty in these profiles often depends on the standards or indicators designed by middle class experts doing poverty research, as well as the standard of living accepted in a given country at a certain time (cf. Allardt 1993). Furthermore, there are dimensions of poverty that are not easily measurable. How would one quantify the degradation or loss of human dignity often associated with poverty? Or could one measure the inability to adapt to changing circumstances that sometimes causes poverty? Not all aspects and dimensions of poverty are measurable. Nor does quantified descriptions of the extent and reach of poverty tell us all we need to know about poverty. We must also note qualitative indicators of poverty and
integrate them with statistical profiles of poverty. Qualitative indicators make dry statistics vivid and insightful. The strengths of quantitative measurement and qualitative description can be combined for a profile of greater depth and clarity (Alcock 1997: 128). For this reason scientists must involve poor people in their research by attentively listening to their subjective experiences of poverty (Alcock 1997: 128).

An illustration of an approach that takes qualitative indicators of poverty seriously can be found in the Second Carnegie Inquiry into Poverty and Development in South Africa (Wilson & Ramphele 1989: 14). The leaders of the project sent their researchers into the field without any explicit theoretical or operational definition of poverty. Their reason was not to restrict the meaning of poverty to characteristics which researchers "living within the sheltered walls of an urban university" think important. Rather, field researchers were to go out in the country and listen to how people who experienced poverty, and those who lived or worked with such people, understood the concept. From such an understanding of poverty they were to develop their indicators, make their measurements, give descriptions, and interpret people's experience. Their assumption was that the use of the concept of poverty in everyday language—amongst those knowledgeable about the experience of poverty—is the one to be operationalised into reliable indicators of poverty.

The concept poverty refers to insufficient means to adequately sustain human well-being. Social scientists take these means to be income and employment, health, food and water, basic services, housing, and education. More general measurements of poverty include measurements of the distribution of poverty and people's levels of satisfaction with their lives. Statistical manipulation of the vast amount of information yielded through these measurements enables social scientists to draw different kinds of poverty profiles. The use of these indicators and resulting profiles needs to be explained in somewhat more detail.
2.1 Income

Income and employment can be measured in different ways (cf. Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 18–21, 54, 171). Income can be measured as an individual’s annual income and compared to patterns of income found in a society. Often household income is taken as the basic unit to be measured, as several members could contribute to, or live on, the income of a single household. Annual income might, however, not reflect some people’s access to productive resources, such as land (however small) to farm on. To take such access into account provides figures useful for comparison. Income thus measured give a good indication of the financial resources a household has access to. Sometimes researchers prefer to use expenditure patterns rather than income. Gaining information on how people use income often gives a better indication of whether people are poor or not. It is possible to estimate a minimum level of consumption needed in a specific society (or region) to fulfil basic needs adequately. People with lower levels of financial resources available for consumption can be considered to be poor, or, to live under the poverty line.

2.2 Employment

Similarly, employment can be determined by taking into account whether someone has a job or not, whether it is full time or part-time, permanent or temporary, and seasonal or non-seasonal. Furthermore, the time of unemployment can be measured, as well as the attempts made by a person to find new employment. The effect of unemployment in causing poverty can be determined by linking the figures on the income or expenditure of households with the number of unemployed in those households (cf. Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 54, 234–244; May 1998a: 4, 37, 75–83; May 1998b: 45, 80).

2.3 Health

Health provides various measurements regarded as reliable indicators of
poverty (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 99–120). Ordinary human bodily development provides one indicator. Poor children are often stunted in their growth, as they are more often than not undernourished, do not have access to adequate health care, and suffer from many avoidable diseases poor people are susceptible to. A good example of such a disease is gastro-enteritis. Vulnerability to this disease increases with poor nutrition, sanitation and water supply. As people living in poverty often suffer from these conditions, social scientists have found that the incidence and severity of gastro-enteritis provides a "fair reflection of socio-economic status" (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 112). For this reason the incidence of such diseases, including also diarrhoea, tuberculosis, and fever, which are easily controllable by affordable and available medicine, provide necessary information for drawing profiles of the diseases and living conditions poor people are subjected to (cf. RDP 1995: 23).

Not only bodily development or the prevalence of diseases are indicators of poverty, but also figures on the incidence of death at various ages. The general rate of life expectancy often reflects people's access to adequate nutrition or affordable health care. So too does the infant mortality rate, determined as the number of children who die before their first birthday out of every 1000 children born alive. An even better indicator of poverty is the child mortality rate. This is the number of children who die before their fifth birthday out of every 1000 born alive. This death rate reflects factors such as nutrition, sanitation, communicable diseases, and accidents in and around the home. Although not all deaths in these rates are affected by poverty, comparing the rate amongst poor people with the rate amongst the better off provides important insight in the often deadly effect of poverty on people's lives.

2.4 Food

There are also various ways for measuring poor people's access to food and water (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 100–107; May 1998a: 116–117). One
can analyse and quantify the daily diet of poor people and compare its nutritional value to the accepted daily requirements in a society. The required diet of individuals can vary according to their body size, daily activities, and their social roles and responsibilities. The types of food produced in a society and available at markets will also influence poor people's diets.

Poor people's diet is often severely deficient in nutritional value, whether through lack of resources or ignorance. They often do not have easy, or any, access to clean water for household use. Indicators of poverty are the daily use of water per household, the quality of the water available, and the time and distance travelled to obtain water. Limited and low quality water resources have a major effect on bodily health and personal hygiene.

2.5 Access to services

As in the case of water, poor people often have no access to services thought to be basic in a society (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 62–65; 123–131; May 1998a: 136–137, 139). Access to energy for lighting, cooking, and heating is a good example. One could determine the amount of people with access to electricity, wood, coal, and so on. Social scientists also measure the time and cost involved in securing these energy resources. Sometimes the energy resources of poor people cost more per unit than those readily available to non-poor people (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 46). The kind of sanitation available and whether refuse are collected can also be determined and compared with the geographic distribution of income groups. Such comparisons often illustrate the neglect of poorer areas, sometimes due to the relative lack of bargaining power poor people have with local authorities.

The presence or absence of public services and utilities, such as libraries, recreation areas, open spaces in urban environments, transport, medical services, postal and telecommunication services, and policing can often
significantly influence the quality of life that poor people have (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 132). The presence, quality, and quantity of such services and utilities can be measured and compared with the geographic distribution of different socio-economic groups. Such comparisons often show a clear bias toward the richer areas, whereas poor people have difficulty in reaching and making use of such facilities and amenities. This kind of profile of urban and metropolitan areas can assist town planners and local councillors to significantly improve poor people's quality of life by placing public services and amenities where they can be to the benefit of poor people too.

Access to welfare services, such as old age and disability pensions, is also important in determining people's rank order in terms of poverty and wealth in a society. For example, many poor households and even smaller communities in South Africa would collapse if no such benefits were provided by the government.

2.6 Shelter and clothing

Although housing is often regarded as a public service, it needs not necessarily be so. Nevertheless, the nature and quality of housing can be important indicators of poverty (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 123–130). The nature of people's accommodation can already be significant. One could quantify the number of households living in houses, flats, rented rooms, shacks, huts, or who just have a bed for themselves (as in migrant hostels). The size of people's accommodation could be determined by looking at the number of rooms and how many people they are used for. These data must be correlated with what is customary available to members of a society, the nature and severity of the climate, and the social meanings that people in a society attach to a dwelling. In some societies houses (dwellings) are used for a variety of social purposes that are not universally found in human societies. Space to cook, play, or for privacy of different family members have different meanings in different societies.
People's available clothing often reflects whether they are poor or not. Poor people are unable to buy clothes needed for protection against cold weather, or clothes minimally appropriate for social gatherings at places of education, business, employment, and recreation.

2.7 Education

Poverty is often associated with a lack of education or illiteracy (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 138–149). Literacy and appropriate education are almost prerequisites for successful living in modern industrial and information societies. The literacy rate can be determined by using years of schooling completed or through designing a literacy test. This rate could indicate the link between literacy and socio-economic status. It can also measure the successes and failures of the educational system of a society. In the same way one could measure the levels of education present in a society by asking people about the years of schooling completed. Social scientists also measure government spending on education to determine whether regions, educational sectors (primary, secondary, and tertiary), and various groups within the society are equitably treated.

One of the effects of education is to enable citizens to read for various purposes. Social scientists can measure which books, newspapers, and magazines people have access to, as well as their reading habits. Especially important is reading for self-improvement or enhancing job performance. In some cases of poverty, the closing of minds associated with nearly absent reading habits contributes to reinforcing cycles of poverty.

2.8 Self-respect and dignity

Qualitative indicators of poverty are also important. People suffering from poverty carry a heavy burden, additional to the burdens of life shared by all human beings. These burdens have various origins, some are self-inflicted, some are inherited, some are imposed on them, some follow from or are caused by being poor. Regardless of their origins, these burdens of poverty
complete our picture of the description of poverty.

Self-respect is defined as a moral notion, where people have a proper regard for the dignity of their own person, a sense of their own value. Self-respect also refers to people's confidence in their abilities to live their lives valuably and dignified. This implies that people who do not value their own lives cannot live them fully, or with joy and pleasure. Those with little or no confidence in their abilities cannot successfully pursue what they regard as valuable in life.

However, not just a person's own judgement is relevant. Other people and social institutions affirm or deny people's sense of their own worth, appreciate and confirm people's person and their deeds, or not. Thus, people and institutions can substantially influence the self-respect of others.

Self-respect within a democratic context is closely aligned with the idea that citizens are free and responsible agents, autonomous persons who are fully participating members of their political community (Walzer 1983: 279). Poor people often lose their self-respect, as they feel less than full members (Grosskopf 1932: xviii). They become dependent on others, unable to make independent contributions to society. Often other people treat them as such, stigmatise them and use aid to show them their proper place in society: "in, but not wholly of the community" (Walzer 1983: 77).

One of the important burdens associated with poverty is a loss of self-respect and human dignity. Poor people often view themselves negatively and develop feelings of degradation and humiliation (Willcocks 1932: 173–174). These negative self-images are reinforced by similar negative stereotyping by the rest of society and by the visibility of poverty. Other people will obviously notice your lack of good clothes, the accommodation you make use of, or your limited means for providing in your family's needs. Your personal situation is open for public viewing. That could be humiliating.
Another burden associated with poverty is fear and insecurity. Poor people fear unemployment or the high crime rate associated with lower socio-economic areas (Alcock 1997: 93; May 1998b: 108; Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 130–131, 134, 152–154, 158–159). The insecurities created by limited financial resources is exacerbated by alcohol abuse (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 159–160). Alcohol abuse often accompanies poverty, and leads to gripping fear amongst non-abusers about the behaviour flowing from the abuse. Domestic violence often results, adding to the insecurities of a family life already difficult to maintain under adverse conditions (May 1998a: 41; May 1998b: 54; Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 270–271). Domestic violence is mostly committed by men and directed at women, whose lives can be shattered (Alcock 1997: 94). Poor people’s bodies are not only affected by alcohol abuse and interpersonal violence, but also through lack of adequate medical care and a poor diet. These factors often combine to undermine school achievement and job performance through lack of concentration and motivation.

2.10 Participation in the lifestyles of a community

Poverty can also be gauged by noting the extent to which people do not have the resources to participate in the lifestyle and activities available in their communities (May 1998a: 3; May 1998b: 38, 45, 109). Poverty is a burden in the way it restricts possibilities available to poor people. In a culture dominated by the electronic and print media with all their advertising, poor people must live knowing they can only have the barest minimum of everything the commercial sector of society has to offer. Poverty restricts their options for diets, clothing, recreation, reading, housing, interior decorating, travel, education, and entertainment. This means the development of their person—through a healthy diet, interesting experiences, exploring new worlds, and beautifying themselves and their surroundings—is severely limited. Although these restrictions generate
feelings of anger and bitterness, people exposed to poverty over time often have feelings that their poverty is inescapable. They acquiesce in their situation and accept their lot as inevitable.

Poor people sometimes find it difficult to perform the roles customarily expected of them as adult members of a society. They might have problems maintaining friendships due to lack of time or not being able to reciprocate gifts, invitations, and visits. Sometimes poor communities have good relations of trust. Such relations between people loosely networked together in society enable individuals to be collectively productive and stimulate mutual co-operation. Mutually beneficial productivity and co-operation strengthens social cohesion which in turn becomes an important social asset in the struggle to escape from poverty or the vulnerability of becoming poor. Relations of trust and resultant social cohesion solidify into a social fabric. In poor communities this social fabric can easily be threatened by the influx of large groups of strangers or through crime, violence, and its related manifestations.

Poor people's involvement with community organisations may dwindle for lack of funds for membership and participation in scheduled activities. Lack of time and suitable clothing, as well as feelings of worthlessness can detract poor people from participation in communal activities, often forfeiting opportunities to be part of decisions directly affecting their lives. They often also do not get to know of opportunities and aid already available to them (May 1998b: 124). The cumulative effects of poverty on poor people can cause them to lose self-respect. For these people it is difficult to appear in public without shame. When their material conditions deteriorate seriously, the social relations of poor people might also deteriorate significantly.

2.11 Personal abilities to use and convert resources

Poverty often varies greatly between households who command similar levels of resources. The cause of such variations is the abilities of
individuals in charge of household resources to effectively utilise and convert them into instruments for the satisfaction of important needs (cf. Terreblanche 1977: 105; Sen 1993: 30–36). Individuals differ in their relationship to, and use of, resources. Households might also differ according to the abilities of those in charge to convert income into buying nutritious food at affordable prices, for example.

In some poor households men might lay claim to disproportionate shares of income for buying alcohol (Budlender 1998: 70). Such behaviour increases risks of violent conflict with outsiders, as well as emotional or physical abuse among members of the household, with accompanying feelings of fear and insecurity. At the same time income is not converted effectively to address the consequences of poverty.

2.12 Power

Some people regard the loss or absence of power as one of the defining characteristics of poverty (May 1998a: 41; Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 152–158). What does this mean? If humans are defined as active beings who use resources to satisfy their needs, pursue their interests, and follow their goals and dreams, then their rank order in terms of wealth or poverty at least partially determines their scope of action. By commanding resources individuals can consciously control and direct part of their lives to satisfy needs and fulfil goals. The fewer resources people have, the smaller their area of command becomes and the lesser their influence on the circumstances of their lives. When the resources they command are so far below the resources commanded by most of the other members of society, poor people become excluded from the generally available lifestyles and activities that most other people have a choice to engage in or not.

2.13 Profiles of poverty

By using both qualitative and quantitative indicators of poverty as those described above, social scientists can give various profiles of poverty in a
society. Profiles of regions, specified groups, individuals, age and gender groups can be given. A profile of a poor rural region could include figures on the carrying capacity of the area compared with the actual population density. This profile can indicate the extent of overpopulation that leads to wasteful exploitation of the land. Such profiles can be extremely useful as descriptions of the extent of poverty in selected cases.

Profiles of poverty should not only be cross-sectional, but also longitudinal. The interpretation of poverty through time is important, as some kinds of poverty are transient, while others are chronic. What does this mean? Chronic poverty is long term poverty, something poor people are trapped in and cannot easily escape. This kind of poverty can have many causes, but characteristic is the inability of people to shake of its shackles, as well the ways in which one generation transmits their poverty to the next. Transient poverty is temporary and are resolved over a shorter term. An example would be poverty due to unemployment that gets resolved after members of the household secure stable employment again. Some kinds of transient poverty are seasonal, depending of the seasonal availability of food produced by poor people themselves, the demands of a colder climate in winter on energy resources, or the availability of seasonal employment as a result of holidays, etc.

Profiles of poverty might also indicate which sections of a population show a vulnerability to become poor. This vulnerability manifests in some people's inability to deal with threatening changes due to their lack of backup resources or inadequate strategies for coping with crises.

The indicators of a person or household's rank order in terms of wealth or poverty in a society suggest the relativity of poverty. What does this mean? Rank order in terms of poverty and wealth is connected to and stands in relation to factors that are subject to variation within and between societies. The factors mentioned above are all relative to the context of the people where they are observed and described. For example, resources do not
have value regardless of the societal context where they are used. Certain kinds of skills training, such as mining skills, might not be considered valuable in societies where mining activity does not exist. Some skills, such as manual labour skills, might become obsolete if machines can manufacture similar products more efficiently and productively.

3. Causes of poverty

3.1 Everyday explanations of poverty

Ordinary people know how to apply the concepts "poor" and "poverty" and have a reasonable understanding of the conditions they refer to. The explanations of the causes of poverty prevalent in a society fulfil a strong guiding role for non-poor people's actions and attitudes toward poor people. They guide people to what is going on in their society and how they should react to it. These explanations are socially shared amongst large groups of people and thus influential in determining social policy and collective action to address poverty. Everyday explanations of poverty are the result of people's lived experience of their own or others' poverty over a period of time, their moral values, their prejudices, and a possible trickle down of the results of social scientific studies. There is no guarantee that such explanations provide appropriate understandings of poverty or give us adequate guides for addressing and alleviating poverty. The main reason why many of these explanations of poverty fail is their simplicity in dealing with complex problems.

For this reason we must note such explanations and challenge them if they are distorted, misguided, or simply wrong. The results of social science research can make us aware of the complex nature of poverty and deepen our understanding of this complex phenomenon. Through public criticism of everyday explanations and by presenting better explanations of poverty, we might be able to convince non-poor people to act differently towards poor
people.

A striking feature of everyday explanations of poverty is whether poor individuals are held responsible for their own poverty. Some explanations hold individuals wholly responsible, while others blame societal structures and institutions for poverty. This issue is important, as aid for poor people often depends on whether non-poor people hold them responsible for their poverty. If people are responsible for their own misery, other people are less inclined to help than when misery results from unforeseen and uncontrollable circumstances. Although it is debatable whether responsibility for misery ought to play a role in determining aid, it nevertheless does.

There is another reason for determining persons’ responsibility for their own poverty. Through knowing the nature and extent of people’s responsibility for their own poverty, it becomes easier to determine the kinds of aid needed to alleviate their poverty. For this reason the responsibility of people for their own poverty deserves investigation. To know how to help poor people escape from poverty we need more information. We must therefore ask about the causes of poverty.

In the rest of this chapter I will focus on ways how insights from social science research can enable us to criticise, correct, extend, and modify everyday explanations of poverty prevalent in a society. The results of good social science research, based on well developed theory and carefully planned empirical investigation, are more detailed and sophisticated, logically more coherent, and probably have a higher truth content than everyday explanations of poverty (Rainwater 1984: 162).

South Africans are fortunate to have access to several major social science studies on poverty. These studies – the two Carnegie reports (1932 & 1989), the Theron Commission (1973), the RDP study (1995), the study commissioned by Deputy President Thabo Mbeki (1998), and the National Speak out on Poverty (1998) – were done over the past seven decades and cover
different sectors of the population. Despite their shortcomings, they provide a wealth of information describing vividly the conditions of poverty at various stages amongst different groups of people. They also give in-depth analyses of the causes of specific kinds of poverty, which are thoroughly placed in a wider societal and historical context.

These research reports are extremely useful for the following reasons. They involved all kinds of research methods, such as descriptive, explanatory, liberatory, and normative methods. These methods were used complementary, as they use “hard” statistics and “soft” interviews to get a fuller picture of poverty. The researchers listened to the poor and involved them as participants. They took both a broad view and an in-depth one so as to get a holistic picture and particularistic details. They noted general (statistical) trends and individual stories of poor people. They focused their studies diachronically, looking at developments through time, as well as synchronically, noting links and relationships between all relevant factors now. Their scope was multidimensional, exploring all factors that could possibly be relevant. In all these research projects various scientists were co-operating. They co-operated in the inter-disciplinary sense of scientists from different disciplines working together and sharing a theoretical framework. They also co-operated in the multi-disciplinary sense of scientists from different disciplines adding their own perspectives and contributions without having a shared theoretical perspective.

There are striking common features in these reports. One such feature is a resistance to individualising poverty, as if it is a human condition which individuals involved caused themselves and for which they are therefore responsible. The tendency to individualise poverty is avoided by the second striking feature common to these reports. This feature is a persistent attempt to understand poverty in a broader context, that include major current, recent, and past events, whether they are of a political, economic, or social nature. This awareness of multiple factors involved in the phenomena of
poverty leads to a third striking common feature. The reports refuse to view poverty in isolation, or to look only at some aspects of its various manifestations. The emphasis is squarely placed on a global or holistic view of poverty, which emphasises the complexity of its various causes, circumstances, and factors interlocking with, and reinforcing, one another.

An approach based on these features immediately neutralises any attempt at simplifying poverty, or its solutions. It also stimulates an awareness of the complexities of this human phenomenon and challenges everyone to carefully consider all possible factors involved in causing and sustaining poverty. The complexity of poverty means that an adequate explanation of a specific case of poverty must take into account multiple possible causes. These causes could operate alone or in different combinations. Whether individuals are affected by poverty would depend on whether such causes touch their lives, and the extent of their vulnerability and susceptibility to such influences.

What can we learn from the experiences and interpretations of poverty documented in these reports? The challenge is to combine insights from South African social science reports on poverty with social science research done elsewhere in the world. Maybe these insights can be developed into a coherent theory that can help us better understand the complexities of poverty. Part of such a coherent theory of poverty ought to be an explanation of the different causes of poverty. I will discuss the more common ones.

3.2 Inadequacies and shortcomings of poor people

The first two explanations of poverty find the causes of poverty in shortcomings, inadequacies, and deficiencies of individual poor people themselves, whether it be their own fault, the will of God, or biologically (genetically) determined. One such explanation is a religious one (cf. Forgey 1994: 11). Influenced by the Calvinist work ethic, this explanation contends that poverty indicates either God's punishment for sin – whether their own or
their forebears' — or the fact that God has not chosen them for his blessings. Closely related is a moral explanation of poverty that blames poverty on a lack of moral integrity and deficient moral characteristics. These poor people do not want to change their lives; they do not have the moral inclination to better themselves (Terreblanche 1977: 122). They lack motivation, are deficient in traits that lead to success, have no self-discipline, or have an inferior set of values that disables them in a quest for survival (Willcocks 1932: 172–173). As a result of their character deficiencies they are unwilling or unable to provide for themselves (Grosskopf 1932: xvii–xviii). Sometimes poverty relief is believed to engender similar attitudes, as poor people become dependent on aid. They develop expectations that others will look after them and therefore they do not have to take responsibility for themselves.

Thus, either God wills that some people should be poor, or some people do not have the moral character to provide resources adequate for their own well-being. These people are seen as poor in morality or religious blessing. This explanation leads non-poor people to pity poor people for their misfortune, but they are not inspired or obligated to help them improve or change their lives. If they do attempt to help poor people, the religious explanation demands that the poor sinners must be saved through programmes of evangelical outreach. The moral explanation requires that the immoral behaviour of poor people must be punished or controlled and poor people themselves must be reformed.

A second explanation finds the cause of poverty in an analogous poverty that poor people exhibit, viz. a biological poverty (Terreblanche 1977: 122). In this case they are seen to be less gifted or have physical deficiencies. They are inadequate or deficient in terms of the human characteristics that ensure success in society. Through natural selection they are the losers in the struggle for survival and are thus eliminated from society. This explanation is applied to individuals, but sometimes also to groups. In racist
versions a race group is viewed as biologically below standard or genetically inferior. Again, such people deserve pity, but should not actually be helped. Poor people are losers in the economic struggle for existence. It is in the interest of the majority that the strongest shall prevail and that poor people ("the weak") should go under as a result of a natural economic process. If anything should be done, those better equipped and more suitable should take decisions on their behalf and for their benefit.

A variant of the biological or genetic explanation of poverty is to argue that mental or physical disabilities lead to poverty. People that have serious mental or physical disabilities are not easily employed and thus become dependent on family, welfare organisations, or the state. Many disabled people need specialised care or treatment that implies they need more resources for their daily needs than other people. The cost of their specialised needs can also have an impoverishing effect on the households of their families (cf. Alcock 1997: 182).

3.3 Disasters

Most of the explanations and causes of poverty discussed so far are the result of individual or collective human behaviour. This is not to deny the role of natural disasters or misfortunes in causing poverty. The familiar experiences of drought, floods, severe storms, epidemics, disease, and pestilence can all play significant roles in causing poverty to certain sectors of a population (May 1998b: 31). Drought, with its slow onset, can lead to a loss of jobs, food, or assets (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 170). Similarly, sudden disasters such as floods, fires, or earthquakes can plunge many people into poverty as a result of the loss of life, property, and livelihood.

A human-made disaster, such as war, can also lead to widespread poverty (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 227). The loss of productive family members, the harm to an economy, and the cost involved in waging war can impoverish large sections of a society (Grosskopf 1932: 85). A personal
disaster, such as the death, long illness, or permanent disability of a productive family member can be a severe shock to a household, especially those close to the poverty line (May 1998a: 130).

3.4 Poverty

Poverty can perpetuate itself, thus poverty can cause more poverty. Many negative personal characteristics are often associated with poor people, whether they be the cause or consequence of poverty. These associations, and the blame they involve, might not be justified or fair, but their effect on the employment of poor people are far-reaching. Purported negative characteristics, such as irresponsibility, lack of ambition and industriousness, and instability, often make poor people unwelcome candidates for employment or unattractive employees in low-paying jobs (Terreblanche 1977: 92). Poverty can also be perpetuated in farming areas, where poor people often have inadequate resources to farm with (May 1998b: 104–105). Money for seed or fertiliser is not available, nor for fencing or labour (Budlender 1998: 25, 36). Poor people often do not have the money to buy materials needed to make goods to sell (Budlender 1998: 18). Similarly, poor and unemployed people in towns in remote rural areas often cannot afford to travel to large urban and metropolitan areas in search of employment, nor can they afford lodging in those areas.

In some cases a culture of poverty can develop in a poor community. The younger generation can learn and share a community’s inadequate responses to breaking the cycle of their poverty. The adults transmit their strategies and life styles for coping with chronic poverty to the next generation, causing a perpetuation of chronic poverty (cf. Terreblanche 1977: 62–65).

Not only can poverty cause further poverty, but some of the remedies for poverty can do the same. Aid for sufferers from poverty can perpetuate poverty. Certain kinds of aid can demoralise poor people through stifling
their personal responsibility and by making them lose their independence (Grosskopf 1932: xxxi–xxxii). Paternalistic aid, whether from government agencies or other benefactors, can immobilise personal initiative and create feelings of inferiority (Willcocks 1932: 87–89). In this context, some poor people develop the idea that they have a right to such aid, so they abdicate their own responsibility to do things for themselves (Grosskopf 1932: 172, 219). Although this negative dependence on aid is a consequence of poverty, it perpetuates poverty by creating expectations amongst people that they have a right to be fully dependent on the benevolence of those with means (Willcocks 1932: 96).

3.5 Education

The inability to adapt to changing circumstances has featured prominently amongst the various causes of poverty discussed so far. The social science reports under discussion value education as one of the primary means of facilitating people’s ability to adapt (Grosskopf 1932: viii). It can fulfil this function only if the correct contents and teaching methods are used, and if acceptable facilities and teachers are available. Lack of education results in illiteracy, not being qualified for any career, and an inability to use the resources of the written media for self-improvement. There are strong correlations between low formal education and poverty (May 1998a: 33; Malherbe 1932: 351, 366).

A recent South African report on poverty estimates that among the unemployed poor 50% have only completed primary education or less. Those who are employed but poor are judged to have had inadequate access to education and training. These judgements by poverty researchers are confirmed by poor people themselves who regard education as their highest priority need, as they view education as the most effective route out of poverty (May 1998a: 96).

Education itself can cause poverty if its contents are regarded as irrelevant
to both the world of the children and the society they are living in. The contents may not be expanding children's experience of their own world, and fail to present them with skills for coping with a changing world. The methods of teaching can contribute to poverty, when they lead to an authoritarian atmosphere where children must listen, be quiet and passive, rather than employing methods stimulating self-reliance, initiative, and cooperation (Grosskopf 1932: xxvi; Malherbe 1932: 363). The contents and methods can either reinforce existing attitudes and actions perpetuating poverty, or can be used to counter them and develop independent, self-reliant citizens capable of taking care of themselves and co-operating with others. Lack of education, or inadequate education can thus cause poverty, or reinforce it. In good cases, however, education can be one of the positive forces to eradicate poverty.

Not providing good quality education for black people in apartheid South Africa was deliberate, so as to exclude them from better positions in society. Glaring inequalities in expenditure per head of population clearly testify to that.

3.6 Gender

Gender can be a significant cause of poverty (May 1998b: 36, 48–49, 54, 59, 79–80, 102, 111). The expression "the feminization of poverty" is often heard in discussions of poverty. This expression refers to the ways that women are impoverished in societies as a result of oppressive and discriminatory measures based on their gender. Researchers have found significant differences between women's and men's experiences of poverty (Alcock 1997: 135).

Poverty based on gender can start at home as a result of the unequal distribution of resources within a household. Some women can be judged to be poor although they live in non-poor households. This poverty results from the gendered power relations within patriarchal households where husbands
(or male partners) unilaterally allocate resources—mostly unequally. However, women have to manage the limited resources so allocated and make tough decisions on priorities so as to cover the main household expenses (Alcock 1997: 136). Many women still accept such dominance—for different reasons which need not concern us here—and fail to actively press their claims on the income of male partners (Budlender 1998: 65–67).

Such claims to significant portions of the income and other resources of male partners can be justified by most women's unpaid labour, such as taking responsibility for most household duties, rearing children, and caring for sick, disabled, and elderly family members. The demands of these unpaid labours have another consequence for women. The endless demands on their time and energy limit their options for pursuing further training or education. Many women rely on men for income, thus creating dependency which make it difficult for them to break off abusive and exploitative relationships (Alcock 1997: 150).

The exploitation of women in the personal sphere of family relations is not the only factor contributing to the impoverishment of women. Many women still suffer from unequal pay and lesser opportunities for promotion. Their employee benefits are sometimes still inferior to those of male colleagues and married women often lose benefits such as old age pensions, that they had access to before their husbands died or divorced them. These discriminatory practices are often explicitly endorsed by the state or implicitly sanctioned through the absence of rights to equality or legislation to terminate gender discrimination.

3.7 Economics

This explanation finds the causes of poverty in systemic or structural aspects of the economy of a society. The assumption often is that the cause of poverty is the wealth of the powerful, self-interested members of society. Some people believe that the capitalist economic system is designed to
reinforce the favourable economic position of those already wealthy. For these reasons it is useful to discuss poverty in relation to the wealth available in a society to become aware of the degree of inequality sanctioned or tolerated by a society. The justice of the distribution of resources in a society needs critical examination. Although supporters of this explanation pity poor people, they also want to mobilise poor people to demand fundamental changes of the economic system. They believe that changes are possible and ought to benefit poor people, rather than making the rich even richer.

Various economic factors can lead to poverty. Macro-economic trends can impoverish many people unable to adapt or without adequate reserves to see them through. Poor people do not have any control over events such as economic depression, a lack of employment opportunities, a downturn in the economy, or the ways in which an economic system limits their options. Similar macro-economic trends with major impacts on poverty are recession and inflation. Recession can cause massive unemployment resulting in poverty, whereas strongly rising prices of consumer goods can be devastating for poor households and those close to it (May 1998a: 54). They have little savings or other reserves for lessening the impact of price hikes on essential goods (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 251–253).

A rapid macro-economic change, such as from an agrarian to an industrial economy, can rapidly and unexpectedly cause widespread unemployment and poverty amongst people unable or unwilling to adapt to new circumstances (Grosskopf 1932: viii, 48–53). If the new economy demands a foreign (international) language, such as English, for participation, many newcomers could be sidelined from a potential remedy for their poverty (Malherbe 1932: 364).

Modernisation of sectors of the economy can also cause poverty. For example, technological and scientific developments in agriculture has led to
the mechanisation of ploughing, harvesting, and weeding of maize. As a consequence the need for manual labour vastly diminished, causing major unemployment for workers dependent on the agricultural sector (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 242–243). Whereas technological and scientific developments benefited farmers, while disadvantaging the labourers no longer needed, inadequate or wrong farming practices often led to the impoverishment of farmers themselves. Wasteful exploitation of land and outdated farming practices often led to poverty. Furthermore, many farmers failed to adapt from one style of farming to another. For white farmers in South Africa at the end of the 19th century the transition from living as conquering pioneers and settlers off the richness of the African land to becoming farmers on small patches of land, was difficult. Many farmers showed an inability to adapt. This was compounded by the practice of fairly dividing a farm between sons (and sometimes daughters) which led to farms becoming smaller and thus non-viable economic units (Grosskopf 1932: 115–116; Willcocks 1932: 170).

Besides macro-economic trends, lack of economic know-how and business practices can significantly harm poor people and those at risk of becoming poor. Some people become poor as a result of their own lack of knowledge, sophistication, and experience of consumer matters. They waste money on non-essential goods, and spend money in ill-considered ways (Terreblanche 1977: 105). They literally impoverish themselves. Some businesses exploit these consumer weaknesses through shrewd marketing, offering easy credit to people who do not have adequate financial means and who cannot foresee all the implications of easy credit schemes (Terreblanche 1977: 106–109). In default of monthly payments, these people often lose the purchased item and lots of urgently needed money. Similar patterns manifest themselves in the way poor people borrow money from relatives, friends, acquaintances, shop-owners, and micro-lenders (May 1998b: 63). Micro-lenders who lend small amounts of money to poor people exploit their
vulnerable position of being unable to loan money from commercial banks. Some of these lenders charge exorbitant interest rates of up to 100% and more. Shrewd exploitation of consumer weaknesses thus impoverishes many people.

3.8 Politics

Quality of life are significantly influenced by events in the present or the recent past, especially events of a political or economic nature (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 152–166). For this reason such events figure prominently as explanations of causes of poverty. In a country where sections of the population were excluded from participation in the political processes at national, regional, and local levels, one can expect politics to have a major impact on the incidence and degree of poverty (Budlender 1998: 9; cf. Bundy 1992).

One obvious reason for the impact of politics on poverty is that politicians at different levels of government make decisions about the use of public resources. Systematic and prolonged bias in public expenditure in favour of a section of the population can substantially impoverish those who are excluded. Local, regional, and national governments decide on priorities for public spending, thus determining the allocation of public resources to what they think worthwhile causes. Their priorities determine the amount and placement of public facilities, and the people who benefit from them. Areas inhabited by poor people often do not have infrastructure accepted as normal by other sections of the population. Services such as street lighting, telephones, decent public roads, and public transport are often unavailable. The absence of such services further detracts from poor people's quality of life and makes crime prevention more difficult.

In contrast to an unjust society where one group dominates political institutions to benefit its own members, a constitutional democracy opens up opportunities for every citizen to participate in political processes. Citizens
elect their own representatives to speak on their behalf during the formulation and implementation of policy. In addition, citizens can mobilise themselves to form pressure groups advocating policies to benefit the poor, or use opportunities for public comment on draft policies offered by a democratic government.

The issues and interests of poor people are often not heard or noticed by politicians, even in constitutional democracies. Due to their lack of income, poor people do not have sufficient resources to influence public opinion through costly ways, such as advertisements, lobby groups, or paid officials. Their public action is often constrained by the shame of poverty and others often champion their cause. The lack of power of poor individuals and their resultant weak bargaining position make them vulnerable to be politically ignored (cf. Alcock 1997: 207; Terreblanche 1977: 115–116).

Racism can play an important role in causing poverty. In a political system based on race some races get benefits and privileges, while the others—victims of racism—are disadvantaged to the point of being severely impoverished. The view of the ruling racists on the place that the subordinate races ought to have in society can lead to various measures with the function to keep them there. The view that ruling racists have of subordinate races are often based on vague impressions, single cases, and prejudice. Such a view combines with rationalisations of their privileged position to distance themselves from any responsibility for the conditions of poverty or their improvement. In this way poverty is both caused and maintained by racist attitudes.

But racism can also impoverish racist people—the perpetrators of racism—who look down on other races. Poor racist people have often refused to do work that are done by members of the supposedly inferior race. It is not whether the nature of work is hard, difficult, gruelling, or degrading that counts, but whether it is work only done by members of the
disadvantaged race (cf. Grosskopf 1932: 166–172). This attitude led to many missed job opportunities; thus, also to continued unemployment and poverty.

Politics can influence the extent of poverty in various other ways. Banning or restricting special interest groups aiming to mobilise people already poor or at risk of becoming poor, can substantially weaken their bargaining position (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 161). For example, banning trade unions leaves many workers in low paying jobs without effective bargaining power against exploitative employers. Similarly, if people are not allowed to mobilise themselves they cannot effectively resist government policies aiming to relocate them elsewhere without their consent. Such relocations often caused poverty in apartheid South Africa, because people were dumped at places where making a living is impossible because of overcrowding or adverse climatic conditions (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 161; Budlender 1998: 27). Relocations also destroyed communal and family ties which functioned as buffers against the worst effects of poverty, thus further weakening people’s resistance against poverty.

Relocations were part of the comprehensive apartheid policy to relocate people belonging to certain groups in specified areas, rather than ad hoc measures to remove people from large dam sites or proposed industrial areas. If a government tries to contain members of a group to a specific area, it can severely impoverish such people. Laws restricting people’s movement from rural to urban areas, as well as constraints on housing construction in urban areas, can lead to the overpopulation of rural areas, pressing their carrying capacity far beyond its limitations. It leads to an overwhelming pressure on the land, which cannot carry the burden being placed on it (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 39, 43). Under these circumstances normal production quotas are significantly lowered, leading to further impoverishment (Budlender 1998: 22–23).

The political actions referred to above are examples of acts of commission
that governments at various levels can do to impoverish people. There are numerous acts of omission that can do the same, or simply perpetuate existing conditions of poverty. No provision for unemployment insurance, inadequate old age pensions, or no proper schooling can all contribute to poverty. Though there are limitations on government spending, acts of omission will only be acceptable if government actions and policies are judged to be equitable. The result of pursuing unjust policies often is the impoverishment of sections of the population.

Related to acts of omission is the lack of knowledge, expertise, and skills of government officials to formulate or implement appropriate policies for addressing poverty. Lack of management skills to co-ordinate governmental programs across different government departments or bureaucratic attitudes unsympathetic to poor people can also slow down the delivery of services to poor households and communities.

3.9 History

Most people are not aware how events in the past function as causes for people's poverty in the present. However, the assumption that the past has shaped and formed the present leads to significant perspectives for understanding poverty. If we do not understand how the present has grown from the past, we will not be able to transform the present into a different future. Many examples exist of how events – even from the distant past – still influence poverty today (cf. Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 5, 7, 190–204).

Some South Africans are descended from slaves. Slavery as practice existed from the 17th century up to the early 19th century in South Africa. The slavery experience of many generations made them dependent on, and subordinate to, people who owned them as property. Slaves were also subject to the racist attitudes of their owners which had to keep them down and in their place, being that of lowly servants with meagre incomes. These experiences were internalised as negative self-images and transmitted from
generation to generation. The interaction between bad working conditions, few opportunities for development, racist attitudes and practices, and low self-esteem created an interlocking set of circumstances forming one of the main factors leading to chronic poverty amongst their descendants. This shows how events in the distant past can still have effects on the quality of people's lives in the present (Terreblanche 1977: 80–88).

The more recent past of apartheid policies based on privileging whites at the expense of blacks will reverberate through the South African society for many years to come. Many social science studies done in South Africa convincingly show that the inequalities resulting from apartheid might become self-perpetuating. The contemporary high levels of inequalities were established over decades by a government manipulating public funds to enrich a racial defined minority whilst impoverishing the majority of black people. The history of mining and capitalist development over the past century is deeply intertwined with the growth of inequalities and governmental exploitation of the blacks (cf. Bundy 1992). To undo the impoverishing effects of more than a century's exploitation, domination, and oppression will take time, resources, expertise, and an attitude of self-reliance.

3.10 Immorality

Various kinds of immoral behaviour can cause poverty. Losing an employed family member through death or injury as a result of violent crime can significantly impoverish a household. Theft of valuable goods or robbery of income gained through employment or state grants can also cause short term poverty for vulnerable households. A recent study in South Africa found robberies of pension pay points to be a frequent occurrence and thus a serious problem.

Immoral behaviour that has effects on more people is corruption by government officials (cf. Camerer 1997). Some officials exercise power in
governmental departments without sufficient checks and balances and they therefore have opportunity to misuse their discretion to use public office and to appropriate public funds for their private purposes. Corruption flourishes where governmental institutions are not transparent in their operations and they do not require stringent accountability from officials.

In South Africa analysts estimate that approximately 10% of the country's budget for social security gets lost through corruption. Besides reducing resources available for poverty relief, widespread corruption in a society has indirect effects which impacts on long term efforts to reduce poverty and inequality. Corruption can deter economic growth and foreign investment, increase the costs of government and business, and create a culture where people steal public property. Widespread corruption can harm public trust in a government and undermine its credibility.

4. Profiles of Poverty as Complex Phenomenon

To what extent are individuals, communities, societies, and countries responsible for their own poverty? To what extent are other people, circumstances, or natural causes responsible? Can we draw a profile of every case of poverty consisting of [1] a clear description of all factors involved and [2] an adequate explanation of the causes and reasons for the poverty?

The answer to this question depends on how one deals with the complex interweaving of the contingent circumstances of each case. The preceding discussion points to several factors beyond the control of any individual, such as institutionalised racism, changing macro-economic trends, and no access to decent education. Other factors point to individual responsibility for poverty, such as the inability to adapt to new circumstances or unwillingness to acquire new labour skills. What is clear though, is that no simple answer is possible concerning who are responsible for poverty. Each
case needs detailed investigation of all possible factors involved in causing poverty. Through such investigations poverty will emerge as a multi-dimensional complex human phenomenon requiring aid in diverse forms, depending on what is needed in each case.

What does it mean to describe poverty as a multi-dimensional complex human phenomenon? Something is described as complex when it consists of a number of parts that vary in kind and importance. Language is a common example of something described as complex. It consists of many kinds of words and sentences, that can combine in endless ways according to many rules. In complex phenomena the relationships between parts differ, are intricate and complicated. Human beings are often described as complex, in part because of the intricate and complicated relationships between differing parts, such as mind, hormones, emotions, and body. Nevertheless, in complex phenomena these parts combine into a complicated whole with characteristics of its own. A skyscraper requires the complex construction of many different materials in varying relationships, but nevertheless the skyscraper forms a complicated whole with describable characteristics.

The combination of parts into a whole can be described in various ways. The parts can be interwoven, connected together, involved in various degrees, intimately mixed, intricately intertwined, entangled, or united. The way different parts are combined in human beings differ from the combinations of parts found in skyscrapers or language. When phenomena, events, or behaviour are called complex in ordinary language, this indicates that people judge such events, phenomena, or behaviour not to be easily analysed or understood. Rather, it is difficult to determine the factors involved and disentangle them. Not even the best minds in medical science can easily analyse the functions of the parts of human brain as a complex phenomenon, nor explain their complicated interactions.

When poverty is called a complex human phenomenon, it means the
following. What poverty consists of, the effects it has on persons, and the causes of poverty consist of many different parts related in many ways (cf. Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 14). These parts combine to form a unique configuration in each individual case. Nevertheless, the configuration exhibits characteristics easily recognised as belonging to the complex, multidimensional phenomenon of poverty. The complexity of poverty can be seen both in its multitude indicators and causes.

How can we draw a profile that would do justice to the complex configuration of indicators and causes operative in each case of poverty, whether personal, communal, national, or continental? In what follows, I want to present a checklist of factors involved in poverty as causes, effects, or associated phenomena that can be used to draw a profile of the poverty experienced by specific cases of individuals or groups. The checklist of factors is based on Julian May's revision of Singh's proposal (May 1998a: 7). The factors are organised into four categories called human capabilities, social and institutional factors, natural factors, and human-made factors.

4.1 Human Capabilities

Human capabilities are those things that enable human beings to function effectively to earn an income. Capabilities include a diversity of skills, such as technical, administrative, entrepreneurial, artistic, intellectual, numerical, leadership, and social skills. Having one or more of these skills enable people to function effectively in jobs where they can earn money, provided the skills are relevant to the contents of their jobs. A combination of skills are usually needed to enhance a person's labour power, although knowledge and virtues appropriate to a specific job are necessary as well. The level of knowledge and education, whether gained formally or informally, through textbooks or experientially, determines the level of skills and how effectively they can be applied. One can gauge the relevance, the quality as well as the quantity of a person's education and training. Continuous, lifelong learning impacts on personal growth and leads to improved job performance. The
degree of a person’s employability is finally determined by the ability to employ various capabilities simultaneously to do a job and earn an income.

Capabilities like skills and knowledge mean little if a person does not also have appropriate personal, interpersonal, and social skills. People without capacities for coping behaviour are bad employees for failing to deal with conflict, stressful situations, disappointment, and change. Employees unable to articulate their ideas and feelings and thus unable to speak for themselves might cause lots of trouble at work. Inabilities to co-operate with colleagues, or negotiate effective working relations can further diminish employability. A capacity and willingness to work hard, a commitment to honesty and fairness, perseverance to reach goals, and reasonable loyalty to colleagues and employer can enhance employability. Lack of self-confidence and self-respect can diminish effective performance in the work place. Not only psychological health contributes to employability, but physical health as well. Disabilities may seriously impact on a person’s employability, as may being prone to illness. The quality of nutrition may also have negative effects on a person’s job performance.

4.2 Social and Institutional Factors

Various social and institutional factors are related to poverty and have effects on the incidence and degree of its occurrence. The extent to which people can make legitimate claims for aid, loans, support, advice, and friendship on their households, extended family, and their communities determine part of their vulnerability to the ravages of poverty. The nature of the community life in which poor people share plays an important role whether they have access to friendships, advice, role models, mentors, creative and recreative activities, and the sharing of resources for survival.

Another part of people’s vulnerability to poverty is determined by the legitimate claims they can make on governments and employers for pensions, medical aid, and housing subsidies – benefits that provide for
urgent needs in difficult or desperate situations. Governments might have policies favouring poor people, but whether promised aid and benefits reach the poor depends on the pool of managerial, administrative, and governing skills available to implement those policies and serve the citizens with diligence and care. Corrupt officials who abuse governmental positions to benefit themselves, their families, and friends can significantly drain the resources to alleviate poverty and block attempts to improve the lot of the most vulnerable people in society.

Whether governments have policies beneficial to the plight of the poor depends on poor people's access to, and influence on, decision-making power and structures at communal, local, regional, and national levels. Without significant voices making them audible and meaningful political activity making their situation visible, poor people would not have any significant impact on public policies. The extent to which a society takes care of the poor people in its midst depends on the culture and value systems according to which they live. If altruism plays an important role, then poor people might benefit from that. Racism, ideology, and other prejudice might negatively influence poor people's chances for receiving appropriate aid if they possess the offending or supposedly negative characteristics. Many comprehensive moral and religious views stress the value and importance of aid to the poor. However, whether those values are actualised depends on the degree to which adherents are prepared to overcome a tendency to stand by and refuse to get involved in the need of other people.

4.3 Natural Factors

Many natural factors can influence the profile of poverty in specific cases. Access to land as means of production of food and associated consumer goods plays a definitive role. Land itself does not ensure escape from poverty. The availability of ground and surface water in part determines the fertility and productivity of the land. Often the climate plays a dominating
role. Low rainfall and high temperatures can devastate whatever productive capacity land might have. Natural disasters like drought, floods, storms (tornadoes), and earthquakes can devastate whatever productive activities are done on any kind of land. Epidemics and disease can decimate a population and many economically active and productive members of households might die, leaving the remaining members destitute.

The ground cover and biodiversity of land are important when judging the economic potential of the land. Forests, wildlife, and good plant material for grazing enhance the value of land as buffer against poverty. Whether the possession of land is individual or communal can make a major difference. Communal grazing land is notoriously known for overgrazing.

4.4 Human-Made Factors

Several factors made or fashioned by humans influence the degree of people’s poverty. Although many of these factors come from natural origins, all are shaped by human activity. A good example is time. Although time seems like a natural factor, determined by the earth’s rotation around the sun, both people’s experience of time and their available time are strongly influenced by themselves and other people. Household demands of taking care of others strongly influence the time poor rural women have available for income-earning activities. Household duties prescribed by traditional gender roles, such as washing clothes and dishes, and fetching wood or water, further limit women’s available time.

Several other human-made factors impact on poor people’s ability to do something about their poverty. The amount of savings available to them and their access to credit determine whether they have money available to start new ventures. If they have debt to repay, they might be unable to generate new income for productive investment. Part of the requirements of being able to do a job is to have the tools of the trade. Today that could imply having the right machinery, equipment, books, livestock, or seed and
fertiliser to produce crops. Adequate housing and other buildings for setting
up a small business and protecting assets are important as well. Clothing
appropriate for different purposes and for different settings can influence
people’s poverty as well. People look down on poorly clad employees and
job-seekers. Inadequate clothing often enhance susceptibility to illness and
disease.

Available infrastructure of different kinds plays an important role in removing
or reinforcing poverty. Productive infrastructure include those kinds of
infrastructure that facilitate economic activities like production, marketing,
and consumption. The availability of transport networks to enable movement
of people and goods impacts heavily on people’s ability to find and keep
jobs and to buy and sell goods. The availability of basic resources for the
production of goods and personal use, like energy, water, and information
can stimulate activities for generating jobs and income. Their absence can
complicate matters and stifle initiative. The means of communication that
poor people have access to can enable them to utilise and create
opportunities, or lose them.

The social infrastructure of a society includes schools, centres for further
learning, institutions providing medical care, and services ensuring safety
and security. The absence of such services means lack of growth and
development, the prevalence of ill-health and disease, and fear and loss
through crime. Even the presence or absence of non-productive
infrastructure affect the lives of poor people. Their residential areas are often
neglected in the provision of non-productive infrastructure, like spaces for
recreation and facilities for sport. Lack of opportunities for recreation and
sport diminish their quality of life even further.

Several larger social forces created by human decisions from individual to
international level can drastically influence the wealth or poverty in people’s
lives. Gender is a good example. Many women all over the world suffer
poverty as a result of a gendered division of labour that shift the bulk of time-
consuming household duties onto their agenda. In this way the numerous social constructions of gender throughout the world benefit mostly men, while disadvantaging and impoverishing women. A hefty struggle lies ahead to fully eradicate the disastrous results of sexism in many countries and communities of the world.

Many economic factors can impoverish – or enrich – people; it is not as simple as to say that the industrious are rewarded and the lazy penalised. Macro-economic trends like inflation or recession can impoverish many skilled, knowledgeable, industrious, and hard-working people. A modernising shift to new ways of production, like industrialisation or the move to a knowledge and information driven economy can cause widespread poverty and wealth, outdating certain skills and mainstreaming others previously only on the periphery. Even at micro-levels of the economy people can be impoverished through inadequate consumer skills and knowledge, while trusting buyers and sellers are easily exploited.

Further social forces impacting on people’s level of wealth and poverty are their histories. People’s personal, family, communal, regional, national, or continental histories might have had and still have adverse effects that impoverish people. The burdens that legacies of the past impose on people might be strongly contributing causes to their present poverty. A history of conflict and especially war often have particularly devastating consequences that often directly cause poverty. Loss of lives, destruction of poverty, loss of the economic contribution that soldiers would have made, and the cost of financing weapons and personnel can cause poverty on a major scale in a country. The impact of smaller social conflicts are similar, though perhaps less severe and more restricted to specific geographical areas.

The remedies for poverty, the way aid is given for example, might themselves contribute to reinforcing poverty. Aid given to humiliate people and keep them dependent does a lot of harm. Such aid does not create
circumstances conducive for poor people to escape their poverty. Often circumstances are unfavourable to some individuals and by chance or lack of luck they lose major investments, property, health, or loved ones. In such cases the unpredictable nature of human life with all its troubles and traumas is behind a person's experience of poverty.

5. Conclusion

What does this chapter contribute to our understanding of, and coping with, individual cases of poverty? The chapter implies that to understand the poverty of an individual person, a community, or a country is an extremely complex matter. A detailed (quantitative) description of the scope and extent of a specific case of poverty is needed. Added to that a detailed analysis of all possible factors involved in causing or reinforcing poverty must be given.

Often individuals, communities, or countries find themselves where several complex societal systems, such as local, regional, or national governments or economies intersect. The manner of such intersections could amplify the effects of some factors and strengthen their causal role. Furthermore, it has to be determined why a specific individual, community, or country were susceptible or vulnerable to the set of circumstances and factors that led to poverty. The combined results of such a detailed investigation, constructed to present a personal, communal, regional, national, or continental profile, are the necessary prologue to any appropriate and effective aid. Such profiles are also prerequisites for any detailed moral evaluation of the manifestation of poverty in a given context. The next chapter analyses the moral issues raised by poverty.
CHAPTER FOUR

WHY POVERTY IS A SERIOUS MORAL ISSUE

Poverty is one of the major social and political issues in Africa today. Not only in Africa, but throughout the world millions of people are suffering from poverty and its crippling effects. The effects of poverty on human beings are so drastic that the phenomenon of poverty merits the serious attention of governments, human and natural scientists, relief organisations, and especially, Christians.

Preventable death, for example, is one of the effects of poverty. Poor people can die for several more reasons than other people, such as a lack of food, diminished resistance to disease as a result of inadequate diet, deficient or no medical care, and exposure to cold weather as a result of insufficient clothing or shelter. Preventable death is by far not the only effect of poverty; others include stunted physical or mental growth, lack of education, deprived opportunities for personal growth and development, and so on.

Unfortunately the global community of states, churches, and aid organisations cannot claim progress in eradicating poverty or its effects, as the number of poor people still continues to grow today. The 1980s are called the "lost" decade, as life for the approximately 900 million poor people worldwide has steadily worsened (Wilkins 1992:169).

There is no doubt that poverty causes immense suffering to millions of people world-wide. Although poverty devastates the lives of millions of people everywhere in the world, especially in Third World countries, many non-poor
people ignore the plight of poor people. Why should all non-poor people in the world take poverty seriously?

Why is poverty a serious moral issue? There is a simple reason why everyone should take poverty seriously. The "scandalous particularity" conveyed by a detailed picture of what being poor means should function to "jolt people into an awareness that something must be done" (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 8). Poverty inflicts damage to individuals and poses serious threats to societies with large numbers of poor people. Poor individuals function far below their optimum level and societies with a wide gulf between the extremes of "grinding poverty" and "massive wealth" can slip into social unrest and conflict (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 17).

In this chapter I want to show in somewhat more detail why poverty should be high on the agenda of all people. Firstly I will show how poverty threatens the lives of individuals. The information for this profile of the effect of poverty on persons comes from social science reports done in South Africa (Budlender 1998; Grosskopf 1932; Malherbe 1932; Willcocks 1932; Terreblanche 1977; Wilson & Ramphele 1989; RDP 1995, May 1998a & 1998b). Secondly, I will argue that ignoring the plight of poor people seriously threatens the fundamental moral values and political health of democratic societies.

1. Poverty damages the lives of individuals

Poverty damages the lives of individuals. As in all cases of hardship or trauma, the damage that poverty does can stimulate positive growth and develop valuable qualities in people. Nevertheless, poverty does harm in varying degrees to its sufferers. The effects of poverty on the lives of people vary according to the duration of poverty, its intensity, personal characteristics, and the social cohesion of a community. Poverty might not be the sole cause of certain effects, though it often acts in concert with other causes. Poverty
often triggers behaviour by providing the spark that sets things off, or poverty exacerbates existing problems.

In what follows, I want to sketch a profile of the harm that poverty can do to people. I do not want to deny that poverty can have positive effects on people, that poor people often have creative ways of dealing with poverty, or that people can give deep meaning to their experience of poverty. Although some people suffer deeply from poverty, they are not necessarily victims. Some are victims, but others show resilience by making all kinds of plans in their efforts to survive (May 1998:18).

I also do not want to claim that all cases are similarly affected by the harms that poverty can do to people. I merely want to show the negative effects that poverty has had on South Africans of all races, creeds, languages, genders, ages, and origins. My purpose is not to assign blame or ascribe responsibility for the negative effects of poverty, but merely to show the possible consequences that poverty can have on its sufferers.

Who are the poor people? These people are often easy to recognise, especially when encountered at their home environment. Some people come from families that have been poor for generations. Other people may be recently impoverished, due to retrenchment or a natural disaster, such as a drought, flood, or volcanic outburst. Children are often a significant proportion of the poor, as poor people often have more children than the affluent members of society. Women are particularly vulnerable to poverty, as the oppression of a patriarchal society increases their risks of becoming poor.

Who amongst the more affluent are at risk of becoming poor? In a sense, everybody. A sudden natural disaster, like a flood, or a human disaster, like war, can impoverish the most affluent members of society. Unexpected loss of employment, sudden death, or serious illness of an economically active
member of a household can impoverish even rich people. More likely at risk of suffering from poverty are those people with few resources who cannot absorb the impact of sudden changes, like a downturn in the economy, retrenchment, death, disability, or illness of a member of the household.

How does poverty harm people’s lives? In what follows I present common trends found amongst poor people in South Africa. I rely on comprehensive social science reports on the poverty of different groups in South Africa.

1.1 Poor people have difficulties satisfying their basic needs

People who slip into poverty find it difficult to provide the basic necessities of life for themselves and their dependants. Poor people lack income or resources that can be used to buy or trade those commodities needed for physical survival. Some poor people are unemployed and therefore have no income. Others earn wages that do not cover the expenses for their basic needs (Wilson & Ramphele 1989: 54). A lack of income means that people do not have money to buy enough food. In this context, reliance on other sources of income is crucial. People with little or no income have their incomes supplemented by remittances sent by family members who work as migrants elsewhere, or by old age pensions granted to elderly relatives (Wilson & Ramphele 1989: 54). If these sources are not available, poor people may resort to borrowing money from family, friends, relatives, shop owners, or employees (May 1998b: 63). Women are more inclined to borrow money, as they are most in need and more often take responsibility for running the household. Borrowing money is a common practice that characterises the lives of many poor people (May 1998b: 63).

Without an adequate disposable income poor people are not able to acquire those commodities necessary for survival, or they might have greater difficulties gaining access to them. Food is a good example. Many poor children
do not have food to eat before leaving home for school in the mornings (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 147). Children – and adults – who go without enough food, or whose family cannot afford food to ensure a healthy diet, suffer from malnutrition and all its associated effects, that cause poor performance at school and work.

Access to water is another example of the problems poor people face to satisfy their basic needs. The absence of a dependable, accessible, and affordable supply of water can incur heavy costs on poor people. These costs include money, time, health, and loss of economic opportunities. In urban areas where poor people do not have access to piped water, they often pay up to 30 times more for water than other citizens pay local councils (May 1998a: 217; Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 48). In some rural areas women spend 3 hours per day on average to fetch water. Carrying water over these long distances exposes their bodies to injury and places them at risk of assault and sexual harassment (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 48). A further health risk is the lack of proper hygiene due to insufficient water available for washing themselves, their clothes and kitchen utensils. Poor health and loss of time contributes to the inability to utilise opportunities to generate income, just as the lack of water inhibits opportunities to grow food for own use or marketing purposes (May 1998a: 139).

People need sources of energy to provide light, warmth, and heat for cooking. Poor people often lack energy too. Sometimes they have access to electricity, but do not have enough income to pay for its sustained use (May 1998a: 148). Often electricity is not even available as an option. Alternative fuels, such as paraffin and wood are commonly used. These fuels are dangerous, as the risk of fire is always present. The risk of fire is exacerbated in areas of high density housing such as shanty towns, where housing is constructed from highly flammable materials, such as wood and plastic (May 1998a: 65). As a result of the high density of such areas, the absence of ac-
cess roads, and the general neglect of such areas by local councils, protection by fire brigades is not particularly effective. The use of wood as fuel has negative side-effects, especially in overpopulated areas. Women lose a lot of time collecting firewood, as well as being exposed to sexual assault (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 44; May 1998b:65). Using wood as fuel in densely populated rural areas in a dry country with sparse vegetation leads to environmental degradation. In a short space of time many rural areas lose its vegetation, implying that poor people find it all the more difficult to find wood for use as fuel. At the same time the damage to the ecology of the area harms its agricultural productive capacities and destroys its aesthetic appeal as recreational areas (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 44).

If poor people have difficulties in providing food, water, and sources of energy for their own use, then the provision of adequate housing will be an issue too. Overcrowding is common in poor homes, as is living in inadequately constructed houses that are often in desperate need of maintenance (May 1998a: 4; Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 124). Desperately poor migrant workers do not even rent a house or a room, but a bed in large communal rooms in hostels, which they share with wives and children. This bed is called "home" and dramatically presents the problems of overcrowding suffered by many poor people (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 124; Ramphele 1992:). Couples have no privacy, children have no place to play, storage room is minimal, and it is uncomfortable to entertain visitors (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 124).

Lack of sufficient income to provide for urgent needs affects poor people's ability to take proper care of their medical needs as well. Being unable to afford doctors in private practice, poor people have to rely on public health services. Poor people often do not use these services, as the location of the public health service might be too far a distance for them to travel, the reduced rates they have to pay might still be more than they can afford, and
the hours that public health services are open might not be accessible to working poor people (May 1998b: 60, 61). As a result many poor people also make use of traditional healers, herbalists, and self-medication (May 1998b: 118).

Local councils often neglect the residential areas of poor people, resulting in negative consequences. Services dealing with sanitation, refuse collection, roads, and water drainage are often inadequate and badly maintained (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 132). Badly maintained, or no services of these kinds lead to environmental degradation in urban residential areas and health hazards for residents. Poor residential areas also often lack appropriate recreational facilities, like swimming pools, playgrounds for children, sports fields, as well as shopping centres, post offices, public telephones, and libraries (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 132).

The inabilities of poor people to procure sufficient resources to satisfy their basic needs makes them vulnerable to some of life's changes (May 1998b: 3). Poor individuals, families, communities, or regions can be threatened by slowly occurring changes over a long term, such as drought or an economic recession. Drastic changes that occur suddenly, like floods, or the death of productive family members can have devastating effects too. Changes in the seasons occurring in normal annual cycles, like harvests and holidays can further increase poor people's vulnerabilities (May 1998b: 3). Persons' vulnerability depends on whether they can deal with the negative effects of such changes and whether they can recover from those effects (May 1998b: 3). Poor people's vulnerability is increased by their lack of resources and income. If their health is good and they have a decent education, they might have at least some resources to use in a recovery process. A further asset that some poor people might have available, is the strength of the social networks they have established prior to such changes and the extent to
which the people forming those networks have the capacity and willingness to assist them (May 1998b: 3).

1.2 Poverty affects people’s bodies

People without sufficient resources to provide adequately for their basic needs might easily suffer the consequences of an inadequate diet. Studies of poor people’s diets confirm that although only a small percentage of the poor do not have enough food to eat, most of them cannot afford a healthy and balanced diet (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 100; Murray 1932: 126). While some poor people can manage to include some proteins and vegetables in their daily food intake, very poor people’s diets are severely deficient in basic foods needed for a healthy body (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 100). Not all cases of inadequate diets are caused by a lack of resources; sometimes poor people are ignorant about what a proper diet ought to consist of (Murray 1932: 127).

Not enough food or an inadequate diet leads to malnutrition and its negative effects on the bodies of poor people. Researchers note how strikingly often they encounter poor health as a result of malnourishment among poor people (May 1998b: 118). Malnourished people are constantly tired, both physically and mentally (Murray 1932: 47). Their ability to concentrate, work productively, and resist disease is significantly reduced as a result of malnourishment (Murray 1932: 47). Many poor people, especially children, die from diseases that are triggered by malnourishment (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 100).

There is no doubt about the links between inadequate food intake, malnutrition, and many of the diseases that poor people suffer from (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 120). Gastro-enteritis is regarded as a poverty related illness. The incidence, prevalence, and severity of gastro-enteritis, especially
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for children, are regarded as reasonably indicative of the socio-economic status of a community (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 112). The correlation between the socio-economic status of a community and the incidence of deaths resulting from gastro-enteritis is striking in one South African study (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 112). Gastro-enteritis was the most common cause of death in the Coloured community (176 per 100 000), the second most common cause in the black community (86 per 100 000), and almost insignificant in the case of the white community (4 per 100 000) (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 112). Poverty related diseases are not the only source of harm to the bodies of poor people. Ill health can also be caused by dangerous or bad working conditions that often accompany low paying jobs (May 1998b: 118). The fumes from fossil fuels used for household energy requirements also contribute to deteriorating health (May 1998a: 35).

Some poor people are responsible for harming their own bodies. The widespread abuse of alcohol is a prime example. Alcohol abuse occurs amongst certain poor communities and men do so a lot more often than women. Alcohol abuse can easily lead to domestic or interpersonal violence or criminal behaviour (Terreblanche 1977: 64). The consequences of alcohol abuse, such as violence against vulnerable bodies and a drain on limited resources of poor households, are more devastating for poor people than for well-off people with more financial, social, or emotional assets available to deal with such behaviour (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 159). Poor people often acknowledge their inability to deal with alcohol abuse, making it yet another example of their powerlessness to manage their lives satisfactorily (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 159).

Harming others through interpersonal violence frequently occurs among poor people and not only as a result of the abuse of alcohol. Poor people suffer more from interpersonal violence than the rich. A national survey on people's experience of the most important crimes committed against them yielded
telling results (May 1998a: 130). Half of the poor people indicated assault as the most important crime they experienced, while only 10% of the rich had similar experiences. After assault, poor people thought child abuse and rape the most important crimes (May 1998a: 130). Again, these crimes are interpersonal violence through which frustration and dominance are expressed. The consequences of frequently occurring interpersonal violence are high levels of fear and distrust in a community that tears social bonds asunder, minimises communal co-operation, and diminishes space and opportunities for making full use of their human and productive capacities (May 1998a: 256—257).

Women and children are at special risk from interpersonal violence. Women in poor communities, according to their responses to a survey and judging by cases reported to the police services, suffer more from rape than women from more affluent areas (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 153; May 1998a: 130). Violence against women in the domestic sphere results from conflicts over food or money and the risk of such violence increases with increasing poverty and male unemployment (May 1998a: 131). Poor women are often trapped in abusive relationships where they endure violence as they depend on the abusive male for money, food, and shelter (May 1998a: 131).

Children are often victims of interpersonal violence in poor communities (May 1998b: 18). Tired parents sometimes discipline children through cruel physical abuse, as they are too tired to take proper care of the children through more appropriate verbal communication (Terreblanche 1977: 76). At times poor adults vent their anger and release their negative emotions of failure, frustration, and powerlessness through abusive and violent behaviour towards children (Terreblanche 1977: 76). From a young age children's bodies bear the scars of the inability of adults to cope with too few resources.
1.3 Poverty harms people's mental well-being

People without sufficient food to eat, who do not have enough water for household use, do not have an adequate income, are at risk of disease and violence, and who do difficult work for low wages experience considerably more stress than others without these problems. Researchers consistently find high levels of stress and feelings of frustration and anxiety among poor people (May 1998b: 50; May 1998a: 41). Worries about income, food, school fees, violence, keeping warm during winter, and the well-being of family members can negatively affect the mental state of poor people.

Besides stressful worries about everyday necessities and responsibilities, poor people often experience themselves as powerless in the face of life's adversities (Terreblanche 1977: 66; May 1998a: 41; Willcocks 1932: 69). Many poor people cannot visualise themselves as agents who can actively work and strive to change their circumstances. They have lost belief in their ability to influence events and live with a consciousness of their own powerlessness and inability to influence or change anything (Terreblanche 1977: 66; May 1998b: 50; Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 267). This attitude also concerns the events and history of their own lives. They experience life as something happening to them and not as though they are co-makers of their own history (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 267). As a result poor people often show a lack of diligence, motivation, or initiative (Terreblanche 1977: 68; Willcocks 1932: 51).

Poor people with strong feelings of powerlessness tend to become dependent on other people, the state, or relief organisations to aid or take care of them (Willcocks 1932: 24, 172, 219). Some poor people in special circumstances, like farm workers, are wholly dependent on their employers for housing, water, and transport. In some cases they also depend on their employers for the provision of schools and entertainment (May 1998b: 26).
Giving aid to poor people in wrong ways can stifle initiative and self-reliance but reinforce dependency (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 262; Willcocks 1932: 87). Wrong ways of aiding poor people can create an attitude that they deserve aid and have a right to it (Grosskopf 1932: 219).

Lack of essential resources for a decent life, feelings of powerlessness to do anything about it, and dependence on others lead poor people to develop a negative self-image, experience strong feelings of inferiority, and to resign themselves to their situation (Terreblanche 1977: 68, 70; Albertyn 1932: 19; Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 267). Negative views of themselves due to their lowly position compared to those of others in society, and their inability to change that position, give poor people feelings of fatalism, hopelessness, and resignation (Terreblanche 1977: 69; Albertyn 1932: 19; Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 267). They accept their situation and lose motivation or willingness to even attempt any changes.

In some cases of poverty that stretches over generations, a culture of poverty arises where several of the factors already mentioned combine to form a network of mutually reinforcing and interlocking barriers trapping people in poverty (Terreblanche 1977:79). In such cases poor people can become virtually immune to rehabilitation (Terreblanche 1977:79). For successful rehabilitation to break the stranglehold of this entrapping network, a comprehensive strategy must address their circumstances, as well as the harms to their mental well-being described above (Willcocks 1932: 176; Albertyn 1932: 98).

1.4 Poverty damages people’s relationships

Poverty can have a devastating impact on human relationships. The dangerous mix of stress about inadequate resources for need satisfaction and the negative self-image formed from feelings of personal powerlessness can
wreak havoc on interpersonal and social relationships. Family (household) relationships suffer the most. Researchers frequently refer to fractured or unstable families with broken relationships where especially fathers and husbands are absent or children live apart from their parents (May 1998a: 4, 30; Terreblanche 1977: 67, 76). Rural men and women often migrate to urban centres of economic activity in order to find jobs, while leaving their children behind in the care of family members such as older children, grandparents, or uncles and aunts. Parents from urban areas send their children to family in rural areas for lack of space, time, and resources to take care of their children themselves (May 1998b: 78).

Patriarchal gender relations can become particularly strained when families suffer from poverty. In patriarchal marriages women take full responsibility for managing and executing household duties, while men make decisions concerning household income. Women's unpaid work of household maintenance take up most of their time and energy, leaving them exhausted. Consequently they are unable to take proper care of their children, to engage in activities to generate income, or to utilise opportunities for education or self-improvement (May 1998b: 80). Striking is the fact that even unemployed men with little to do will not assist women in domestic duties to ensure the maintenance or survival of the household (May 1998b: 102).

Conflicts between male and female partners concerning decision-making about resources are often resolved through violence or the threat thereof. Women challenge men's waste of precious resources on alcohol (wine and beer), tobacco, and other women (May 1998b: 48). Violence is an important means of control that men use against women that function as a deterrent for women to press their claims against men in cases of child support or an equitable division of household resources (May 1998b: 54). That many poor women have negative perceptions of men should thus come as no surprise. They perceive men as drains on their resources who expose them to the
risks of emotional, sexual, and violent abuse. Men are furthermore perceived as interfering with women's time and decision-making about household matters (May 1998b: 111).

The impact of poverty on families can disadvantage women in other ways as well. Risks of sexual abuse and pressures of sexual harassment often lead to teenage pregnancies and early marriages which rob women of valuable opportunities for education and put a heavy strain on limited resources available to a poor family (May 1998: 59). A further disadvantage for poor women comes from their own family's attitude towards her education. Poor families still often argue not to invest in the education of female children who are going to marry into another family. For them it makes more sense to invest in the male children who will generate income for the benefit of their own family (May 1998b: 59).

Children can suffer much from the consequences of poverty on poor families. They are often part of unstable and fractured families, or live apart from one or both their parents and raised by people other than their parents. Lack of resources within households imply that children are often malnourished, poorly dressed, and without money for educational requirements (May 1998a: 30).

The inability to continuously be a parent to one's children constitutes one form of neglect, besides others. When poor parents live with their children, they often do not have the energy to be involved in their children's lives to give spiritual, moral, emotional, or educational guidance (Terreblanche 1977: 76). Although the parents might be physically present, they are emotionally or psychologically absent from their children's lives. Often the only way they are involved is either by getting rid of their frustrations through their children or by enforcing overly strict and cruel discipline. Frustration can be expressed through various forms of abuse and discipline is often arbitrarily
enforced and accompanied with severe corporal punishment (Terreblanche 1977: 76).

Researchers use strong language to refer to these aspects of poor children's lives. Children in poor households are seen to be "massively vulnerable to violence of many kinds" and are said to face "appalling conditions" (May 1998a: 30). Although these conditions include deprivation of basic necessities of life, the abuse of poor children "in all forms, is pervasive" (May 1998b: 18). Abuse includes physical violence, sexual abuse, rape, and being forced into prostitution (May 1998a: 30). Besides being subject to violence from relatives, poor children are exposed to many negative experiences, such as violence against women and substance abuse. They cannot fail to observe such behaviour in the cramped conditions of overcrowded homes and residential areas. The impact of these negative experiences on their early childhood leaves scars that can hardly be erased in later years (Terreblanche 1977: 76).

Poor people are often isolated and alienated from their surrounding communities. One reason is that non-poor people often look down at poor people with contempt and show no sympathy towards them (Grosskopf 1932: 16). Non-poor people might feel ashamed of members of their own family, ethnic, linguistic, religious, or national group who have become very poor and consequently ignore them with resentment (Grosskopf 1932: 16). As a result poor people might be uncomfortable in the presence of non-poor members of society, unable to engage with them on a sociable level (May 1998b: 38).

Perhaps more important is the inability of poor people to join organisations or even self-help initiatives due to their lack of resources such as time, energy, and money (May 1998b: 109). Their social isolation increases and they lose their ability for social co-operation (Willcocks 1932: 37). This can be seen in the following example. The much celebrated African ethical value of
Ubuntu, which implies sharing whatever little you have available with others, has been "severely eroded" by poverty (May 1998b: 85). This erosion implies a deterioration of social and familial ties that could have functioned as valuable assets to decrease vulnerability to the devastation that poverty can cause.

Poor people often suffer from social illiteracy. Social illiteracy means not to have information about how your society works, not to know what means are available to you, and to be ignorant about ways to influence policy makers and public officials to do things for your benefit. This means that poor people are often ignorant about assistance they are entitled to request, nor do they know whom are in positions to provide them assistance. They are unaware of policies made for their benefit, they do not know how to let policies work for them, and they do not know how to influence a government to take their interests seriously (May 1998b: 124). As a result available aid, assistance, and knowledge do not reach them. The comfort that their situation is being addressed by governments or non-governmental organisations, albeit incompletely, never reaches them either.

1.5 Poverty erodes people's moral values

Poverty erodes people's moral values as desperation to make a living gives them an incentive to be immoral. They are too poor to be moral. If you need to lie or steal for you and your dependants to survive hunger and desolation, can you afford not to? Poor people may argue that morally acceptable methods of earning a living did not work for them, therefore they are in a position where making a living through immoral means become a serious option (Willcocks 1932: 78). They do not have the material means to continue living a moral life (Terreblanche 1977: 70). In this way poverty becomes a cause of moral decay (Willcocks 1932: 78).
Moral decay starts by poor people becoming dishonest or telling lies in order to make a quick profit, to present a good impression to prospective employers, or to get aid from government or relief organisations (Willcocks 1932: 78). Moral decay goes further when poor people decide to enter the "underground economy" by engaging in illegal trading of goods like alcohol, diamonds, marijuana, or sex (Willcocks 1932: 83, 85; Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 156). Others make stealing a career and steal food, cars, household goods, farm animals, water, or become poachers that steal game (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 156; Willcocks 1932: 83, 84).

Once people’s moral decay starts by contravening fundamental moral values for the sake of their survival, the issue becomes whether they will stop in time before becoming serious criminals inflicting great harm to other people. If immoral behaviour leads to financial success it might become so much more difficult to return to a moral lifestyle rather than slipping deeper into immoral and later criminal behaviour. For this reason, poor communities are often beset by serious problems of crime, from petty stealing to assault, rape, and murder (Terreblanche 1977: 63). Crime is regarded as one of the "most tangible social consequences" of poverty (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 152).

High levels of crime have devastating effects on poor communities. Poor people may lose some of the few material assets they have and so be further disempowered from engaging in entrepreneurial activities aimed at improving their lives (May 1998a: 256; May 1998b: 18). Their quality of life can be reduced by high levels of fear and distrust, which also erodes social cohesion and co-operation (May 1998a: 257). Criminal behaviour and lack of resources create insecurity among poor people. When these feelings of insecurity combine with the frustrations poor people experience in their desperate circumstances, they often lead to various forms of abuse and violent crimes. Significant to note that poor communities suffer more from interper-
sonal crimes, like assault, rape, and child abuse than from property crimes (May 1998a: 130). A consequence of a high crime rate is that investors, able of creating employment opportunities or improving facilities and services, avoid those areas.

1.6 Poor people have problems with employment

A major cause of poverty is unemployment. Poor communities are often characterised by the virtual absence of people who are formally employed (May 1998: 75). To be unemployed does not necessarily imply that people are unskilled or uneducated. Although many poor people are unskilled, some have skills that are not in demand by the current economy. Even highly skilled people can become unemployed during times of economic recession.

However, this does not mean that all poor people are unemployed and unable to find suitable jobs. Many poor people are employed, but the nature of their jobs contribute to their poverty. Some employed people do not earn wages that are sufficient to provide for the needs of them and their dependants (May 1998a: 4; Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 54). These jobs often do not provide the security of permanent employment, as they might be employed on a seasonal or casual basis (May 1998b: 45). Often such jobs have no prospects of increased salaries or status attached to them (Terreblanche 1977: 79). Many of the inadequately paid jobs are done by poor people in dangerous conditions (Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 72). Such jobs involve heavy physical effort, carry health risks, and expose people to injuries or death (May 1998b: 80).

Poor people are often inadequately qualified to be considered for better jobs. One reason might be that they do not – and did not – value education as a means to land a better job (Willcocks 1932: 19). This might be a less common reason today than decades ago. Another reason that is becoming
less common is that some female children are denied an education as they
are to marry into another family (May 1998b: 59). More common reasons for
poor people's lack of skills are that they often find access to education
difficult, as the costs involved are too high, the distance too far to travel, or
the quality of facilities or teachers available to them inadequate (May 1998a:
34; Wilson and Ramphele 1989: 144).

1.7 Poor people are exposed to injustice and exploitation

Poor people are often the victims of injustice and exploitation. If people are
deprived of political rights and thus excluded from participation in govern-
ment as a result of their group membership, those people stand a good
chance of being impoverished through neglect.

People are often poor because governments at local, regional, and national
levels deny them an equitable part of public resources. People thus impov-
erished are not part of the politicians' priorities for public spending. Excluded
people's needs are ignored and they are allocated vastly unequal shares of
government budgets. Vulnerable groups excluded from government receive
less public services, benefits, and facilities than those provided to politically
powerful groups. Favoured groups benefit from the bias in public expendi-
ture at the cost of the excluded people, who are more and more impover-
erished through deliberate neglect.

Politics can impoverish people in other ways as well. Special interest
groups, who aim to mobilise people already poor or at risk of becoming
poor, can be banned or restricted. Such repressive measures weaken poor
people's bargaining position to change the priority politicians assign them.

The business world often exploits poor people. Poor people are sometimes
naive and unsophisticated consumers who are ignorant about the finer de-
tails of many kinds of business transactions. Many business people have exploited these weaknesses to trap poor people in bad debts or to let them incur monthly payments they cannot afford (Willcocks 1932: 40). Through these exploitative business practices naive consumers with very few financial resources often lose their purchased items, as well as the money already used as down payments.

In addition, some poor people are unwise consumers who go on spending sprees they cannot afford over the longer term. They waste precious resources on luxuries they do not need, while neglecting much needed basic necessities (Grosskopf 1932: 111). Through unwise spending – aided by unscrupulous business practices – many poor people further impoverish themselves. This kind of reckless spending often occurs when poor people’s financial position suddenly improves, thus ruining chances of a true improvement of their quality of life (Willcocks 1932: 49).

2. Poverty threatens the norms of democratic societies

Besides the harm that poverty does to individual lives, it can also threaten the well-being of democratic societies. This is another reason why people should take poverty seriously, as harm to a society threatens the interests and well-being of all its members.

A high incidence of poverty threatens the moral foundations of democratic societies, as the fundamental values embodied in democratic societies seemingly commit members of those societies to address issues of poverty. I want to claim that failure to do something about poverty means neglecting, ignoring, or deliberately violating some fundamental values of democratic societies. This failure could have negative consequences for all involved.
The Australian philosopher, Peter Singer (1972, 1981, 1993) argues that non-poor people in rich First World countries have a moral obligation to address poverty in their own countries and in poor Third World countries. Failing to do so means that they are allowing desperately poor people to die through acts of omission. Allowing people to die while being able to prevent that without serious risk or harm to oneself violates the important democratic value of equal respect for individual persons.

Singer's appeal to moral notions widely accepted in democratic societies and the strong conclusion he draws from them have intuitive appeal. I want to argue like Singer that non-poor people violate and seriously threaten the moral values underlying democratic societies when they ignore the lot of poor people. Singer touches this issue briefly, but fails to explore it in depth. I want to take expand his approach by elaborating this argument for a moral obligation to eradicate poverty.

The nature of the supporting arguments for the moral position I am expounding conform to Charles Taylor's interpretation of practical arguments (cf. Taylor 1993). Taylor describes practical arguments as *ad hominem*, as they appeal to what the opponents are already committed to. In this case I want to appeal to the public values embodied in modern constitutional democracies that I assume citizens of those democracies are at least partially committed to. In my argument I hope to show that ignoring poverty is unconscionable on premises that democratic citizens accept. Not dealing appropriately with poverty is the result of errors based on confusions, impermissible exclusions, or lack of clarity on the meaning of public values (cf. Taylor 1993).

In the next section I want to discuss the normative foundations of modern constitutional democracies. Having explained what the fundamental moral values are, I want to show in the following section how poverty threatens
these normative foundations in various ways. In the third section I draw the conclusion that eradicating poverty is an urgent moral imperative for all citizens, organs of civil society, and governments of modern constitutional democracies.

2.1 The normative foundations of modern constitutional democracies

When discussing the degree of moral responsibility that citizens, organs of civil society, and governments ought to take for the eradication of poverty, it makes sense to start the discussion by referring to the moral values embodied in the constitutions of modern democracies. These values were so important to citizens of modern democracies that they wrote those values into constitutions – foundational documents – that can only be changed by special majorities in the highest governing bodies. These values provide the moral framework within which democratic citizens enjoy their rights, exercise their freedoms, and live their lives. What do these values – that are foundational to democratic societies – imply for the phenomena of large numbers of people living in different degrees of poverty?

I want to argue that social and political institutions and their accompanying practices fashioned by the notions of equal political liberties and democratic rights for all mature members of a society are ultimately based on the principle of equal concern and respect for all people in the design and administration of the societal institutions under which they live (see Dworkin, 1978: 180; Rawls, 1975: 539, 548; Lötter 1993). This principle is best suited to capture the political wisdom of the Western democracies acquired through the political struggles and moral reflection of the past few centuries. Although varying interpretations of this principle can be given, the principle does place a sufficient limit on the kinds of institution compatible with it.
What does the principle of equal concern and respect imply for citizens in modern constitutional democracies? The equal respect part of the principle means the following. Equal respect is universally applicable to all citizens of a country. We can call this recognition respect, which means that kind of respect which we owe all persons simply because they are human beings (Darwall, 1977, pp. 38, 39, 45).

Bernard Williams (1971: 118) argues that to say all people (persons or individuals) are human reminds us of the following. These people belong anatomically to the species homo sapiens, they speak language, use tools, live in groups or societies, and they can interbreed despite belonging to different races. Furthermore, being human implies that they are alike in having capacities to feel physical or emotional pain. They also share the capacity to feel affection for other humans, as well as all the consequences of such affections, like the loss of loved ones or the frustrations of failed affection.

To owe other human beings recognition respect requires that we treat them in ways that do not neglect the characteristics mentioned above, nor overlook or disregard their possession of such characteristics (Williams 1971: 119). Recognition respect differs from respect based on merit or desert, where respect depends on the quality of people's performance in sport, the value of their intellectual contribution, or the beauty of their human characteristics.

To have equal recognition respect for every human being means that some things are due to them because they are human, regardless of desert, merit, race, moral or religious views, and lifestyle. In modern constitutional democracies the implications of equal respect for all citizens are taken to mean that all citizens are equally worthy of having the vote, for example, of owning personal property, or of getting married. People may be deprived of such things only if they lack the necessary abilities for possessing or doing them.
Equal respect implies that human beings can decide for themselves how they want to live their everyday lives, which kinds of relationships they want to engage in, and the values, norms, and beliefs they want to hold and live by. It also means the freedom to choose to which political party to belong and which political activities to join. As a result individuals can make their choices and live thereby, as long as they do not take away the freedom of others to do likewise. Finally, the principle of equal respect implies that each person should be represented in any governing body, such as local, regional, or national government.

Further implications of equal respect are that simply because another human being exists, we are wrong to treat that person in some ways and right to treat the person in other ways. For example, no person may inflict bodily injury on any person without having sufficient reasons, acceptable in a court of law, for doing so. Equal respect implies that individuals must be allowed to develop their own view of life, religion, culture, and politics, and live according to it. According one another equal respect allows people – who have equal dignity – the space and opportunity to be different from one another (see Taylor 1994: 38–44). Obviously, in being different they must be subject to the limitations set by democratic values.

What does equal concern mean as part of the principle of equal concern and respect? Equal concern for each individual means that each person has interests that ought to be considered equally. Thus, individual human beings have interests that matter to them and that they want to protect. Benn (1971) defines interests as conditions judged to be worthwhile that are necessary for a person's life, activities, or for making oneself worthy of respect. Examples of common human interests are as follows. Most people want to protect and sustain their own lives, have adequate shelter, undergo education, or engage in a career. An equal consideration of such interests implies that
each person’s case must be heard and considered, and where relevant differences occur between cases, different treatment is justified, while in the absence of relevant differences the same treatment is required.

However, it is not always clear whether such approaches are feasible. It is true that

Where people’s interests conflict, individuals must ground their claims to specialised treatment or their demands for privileged access according to criteria appropriate to the issue at hand. Arguments supporting claims and demands in one area of public life, such as job promotion, are not necessarily valid in another area of public life, such as access to medical care (cf. Benn 1971).

An alternative formulation of the core values underlying modern constitutional democracies can be found in the influential theory of justice formulated by John Rawls (1971). Rawls interprets his theory as an embodiment of the three core values that motivated the French Revolution, i.e., liberty, equality, and solidarity (fraternity) (cf. Rawls 1971: 106). Liberty is expressed in his first principle of justice that assigns typical liberal-democratic freedoms to citizens. Equality manifests in the same principle, as each citizen is assigned a set of basic liberties that are compatible with other citizens having a similar set. The second Rawlsian principle of justice also contains equality embodied in Rawls’s version of fair equality of opportunity. Equality also manifests in the second principle, which intends to divide resources equally, unless an unequal division is to the benefit of the least advantaged. Rawls judges that the emphasis on the least advantaged in the difference principle expresses the fundamental meaning of solidarity, as citizens commit themselves through the difference principle to share one another’s fate (Rawls 1971: 102). The basis on which they share one another’s fate is that those advantaged by nature or social factors will only benefit "on terms that improve the situation of those who have lost out" (Rawls 1971: 101).
Rawls's formulation of the core values underlying modern constitutional democracies has a more restrictive content than the more open, process-oriented formulation of the principle of equal concern and respect. Dworkin, however, believes that the above two approaches are compatible. He has persuasively argued that the principle of equal concern and respect is the deep theory underlying the Rawlsian theory of justice (cf. Dworkin 1978: 180). Rawls (1975: 539, 548) himself uses a similar principle to justify his own theory. When he indicates the intended fairness of the original position between individuals he conceives them to be "moral persons with a right to equal respect and consideration in the design of their common institutions."

Elsewhere he says that members of a well-ordered society view themselves as having "a right to equal respect and consideration in determining the principles by which the basic arrangements of their society are to be regulated" (Rawls 1985: 202).

Perhaps the most sophisticated understanding of the normative foundations of modern constitutional democracies can be found in Michael Walzer's book Spheres of justice (1983). Walzer interprets the function of a conception of justice in a modern constitutional democracy to create enabling conditions where mutual respect between citizens and self-respect by citizens become possible. His conception of justice for this goal is called justice as complex equality. He interprets the requirements of equality differently depending on the sphere of life under discussion. To treat citizens equally in the political sphere is something different from treating them equally in spheres of education, work, or the economy, for example.

Walzer's discussion of the provision of security and welfare as measures to eradicate poverty in a society sheds further light on his understanding of the requirements of equality. Walzer reinterprets the social contract as an agreement between citizens to decide collectively about the goods neces-
sary for their common life and how to provide them (Walzer, 1983, p. 65). There is no general formula applicable to all societies about this matter; citizens must argue about mutual provision of security and welfare to reach a common understanding on what to provide. The social contract is a moral bond connecting the strong and the weak. Citizens contract to redistribute their resources "in accordance with some shared understanding of their needs, subject to ongoing political determination in detail" (Walzer 1983: 82).

The crucial feature of the provision of security and welfare, so Walzer argues, is the interaction between provision and the political community (Walzer 1983: 64). A political community exists for members to provide one another with those goods for which they separated themselves from the rest of humanity and formed a community. But the process works the other way as well. Mutual provision exists in a political community for the sake of full membership in the community itself. Mutual provision must strengthen members to become full participants in communal life. Walzer argues that in states where citizens have any say about mutual provision, they will work out a pattern of "general and particular provisions designed to sustain and enhance a common culture" (Walzer 1983: 74). The function of the distribution of security and welfare is the recognition and sustenance of equality of membership (Walzer 1983: 84).

If participation in society as concrete realisation of equal citizenship is the goal, then the kind of aid provided to members of a society becomes important. Walzer points out that aid can be used to wound people, to keep them dependent, and to show them they are not considered to be full members of the society. Aid aiming to restore full membership must promote self-reliance and independence (Walzer 1983: 92–94). Help to poor people should aim to set them up on their own, which might require rehabilitation and retraining.
Walzer shows the conflict between foundational values of modern constitutional democracies and the existence of poverty. His theory demonstrates why the ideal of equality between citizens of modern constitutional democracies demands the eradication of poverty.

Whatever the exact formulation of the normative foundations of modern constitutional democracies – whether it be liberty, equality, and solidarity or the deeper principle of equal concern and respect – conflict will occur between the different values embodied in these formulations. Isaiah Berlin (1969) believes that ultimate values are sometimes irreconcilable and equally ultimate ends often collide as they are in perpetual rivalry with one another. Therefore we must make difficult choices in which some values or ends are sacrificed for the sake of others. We cannot eliminate the possibility of such conflict, for such conflict is a permanent characteristic of human life. Conflict between ultimate values cannot be solved by clear-cut solutions, Berlin (1969) argues, but rather by different choices involving hard sacrifices. This is particularly true of the sometimes conflicting demands of liberty, equality, and solidarity, as well as the often contrary claims based on equal respect or the equal consideration of interests.

The validity of my claim that the foundational values of modern constitutional democracies can be summarised in the principle of equal concern and respect finds support in the striking emphasis on equality in current moral theory. Amartya Sen (1992) argues that the major ethical theories concerned with public affairs are egalitarian in that they endorse equality in terms of one or more focal variables. Sen thinks ethical theories will not be plausible if they do not give equal consideration to everyone in at least some important part of a theory. Sen’s explanation for the dominance of egalitarianism in the important spaces of contemporary ethical theories is that ethical reasoning requires to be credible from the viewpoint of other people. If poten-
tially all other people will be affected by a theory of public morality, they will not accept a theory that does not consider their interests equally with those of others in their society (Sen 1992). When moral theorists interpret the differences between people as inequalities, this means that those differences concern things that people value and thus compete for (Benn 1971). Sen's point shows the pervasiveness of ideas of equality and the equal consideration of everyone's interests in modern democracies.

Despite the strong emphasis on equality in modern constitutional democracies, full implementation of equal treatment for all citizens remains an elusive ideal. One reason is differences of opinion on where and how to treat citizens equally. The question, "Equality of what?" leads to strongly divergent answers, especially if limited resources cannot ensure all desirable kinds of equalities.

The second reason inhibiting full equality of citizens in modern constitutional democracies is the slow democratic process of consistently actualising equal individual rights (cf. Habermas 1994). Habermas points to the dialectic between *de jure* equality (equality under law and as embodied in the constitution) and *de facto* equality (equal treatment and equality in life circumstances). What the law and the constitution promise does not necessarily exist in practice. The actualisation of equality must be driven by social movements and political struggles where those affected by inequalities articulate their dissatisfaction and justify alternatives though public discussions (Habermas 1994).

Despite the difficulties involved in full implementation of the principle of equal concern and respect – judged to be the core of the normative foundations of modern constitutional democracies – it continues to function as normative ideal. How does poverty threaten this strong normative ideal that has
driven so many diverse developments in modern constitutional democracies? This is the topic of the next section.

Poverty threatens the normative foundations of modern constitutional democracies in several ways. In what follows, I will present different ways in which the prevalence of poverty in modern constitutional democracies can threaten their normative foundations.

2.2 Poverty violates the equal consideration of everyone's interest

People suffering from poverty have inadequate resources to provide for their basic needs of food, clothing, shelter, and self-development. To ignore their interest in securing sufficient food, clothing, shelter, and opportunities for self-development to enable their physical survival as human beings, while others in society have an abundance of such means violates the principle of the equal consideration of each citizen's interests. To ignore these interests of poor people implies treating them as beings who do not possess human characteristics.

Someone might argue that such people are treated with equal respect as they do still possess equal political rights and are protected from state intervention in their private lives. Isaiah Berlin (1969) rightly argues that such a statement is to "mock their condition," as these poor people need medical help, food, or shelter before they can "understand or make use of an increase in their freedom" (Berlin 1969: 124). Berlin states that sophisticated forms of individual liberty, such as freedom of the press and freedom of contract do not concern those people who live in squalor and oppression—how could they, Berlin asks (1969), if they do not have enough food, adequate shelter, sufficient warmth, or a minimum degree of security?
Clearly, for anyone to watch people suffer – and even die – as a result of poverty while they are able to ameliorate the situation without harming themselves in any morally significant way is indeed the "end of all notions of human equality and respect for human life," as Singer (1981: 176) has put it so succinctly.

2.3 Poverty diminishes the value of democratic liberties

In modern constitutional democracies all citizens have equal liberties. These liberties are expressed in rights to freedom of association, expression, religion, conscience, and so on. Poor people's lack of means and the burdens that result limit their capacity to advance their goals within the framework provided by a modern constitutional democracy (cf. Rawls 1971: 202; Berlin 1969). The value (or worth) of liberties possessed by non-poor people is far greater as a result of their greater wealth, means, and resulting authority available for achieving their aims (cf. Rawls 1971: 204).

In a democratic society with strong policies of redistribution – such as Rawls proposes – the value of liberty for poor people will be maximised. Whether the comfort of such redistributive policies suffices, depends on the causes of the inequalities of the value of liberties. Some inequalities of wealth result from the misery caused to some citizens by unjust social institutions and policies (cf. Berlin 1969). In such cases the lack of value of liberties experienced by poor people translates into a lack of liberty as a result of the incapacitating effect of unjust social arrangements (Berlin 1969).

When citizens are unable to make similar use of political liberties as a result of the unequal value those liberties have for them, there is a danger that economic inequalities can be translated into political inequalities. Drastically unequal distribution of economic resources easily manifests in the political arena where poor people cannot compete on equal terms with non-poor
people. The result of this unequal competition is that poor people's "needs are often overlooked, neglected, or very insufficiently provided for" (Gewirth 1984: 564). Poor people lack economic resources to use the print and electronic media, while their organisational infrastructure and skills are also severely hampered. As a result they lose their ability to speak for themselves so as to bring their needs and grievances to the attention of their governing bodies. They become unable to influence political decisions to favour their interests and views.

This powerless to use political processes convinces poor people that politics offer them no hopeful solutions for their problems (cf. Walzer 1983). This knowledge -- gained from experience and passed on from one generation to the next -- might lead poor people to "passivity, deference, and resentment" (Walzer 1983). Attitudes of fatalism and resignation can lead poor people to accept their situation as inevitable and to avoid or resist mobilisation to protest and change their living conditions.

2.4 Poverty leads to powerlessness and exploitation

That poverty can lead to political powerlessness became clear in the previous section. Another form of powerlessness comes from poor people's lack of ownership of property and shares in business. Ownership in property implies a kind of power that people have over property or business (cf. Walzer 1983). When you own something, you can give it away, keep it, exchange it, use it, or abuse it. Walzer shows that the power of ownership include power over other people as well, as an owner can often control parts of other people's lives through medium of property or business. Through lack of ownership of property or business poor people rarely exercise this kind of power, but rather experience power being exercised over their lives.
Poor people are furthermore often in weak bargaining positions when negotiating employment contracts. People in desperate situations often qualify only for dirty, dangerous, or gruelling work. Walzer points to the link between dirty work and disrespect for the people who do it. Walzer argues that hard work in a society will become more expensive if (i) the people hired to do it were treated as if they were fellow citizens with equal rights (Walzer 1983) and (ii) if communal provision for needs were adequate to prevent poor people from accepting work based on desperate exchanges as they have no other options.

Unemployed poor people who are so desperate to do any job that they will accept doing hard, dirty, or dangerous work for a mere pittance are clearly being exploited by employers. Taking advantage of people's desperate situation to increase profits and decrease costs can never be in accordance with the principle of equal respect and concern for every citizen. Again poverty leads to the violation of the fundamental values of modern constitutional democracies.

2.5 Poverty erodes loyalty and causes alienation

If poor people experience a modern constitutional democracy as a place where their interests are neglected, their protest ignored, and their claims to equal citizenship insufficiently fulfilled, they can easily withdraw their loyalty from the normative foundations on which public institutions are grounded.

To sustain democratic political institutions over the longer term, citizens need to be loyal to their state. This loyalty to the normative foundations of a modern constitutional democracy — called constitutional patriotism by Habermas (1994) — comes from being politically integrated, but cannot be legally enforced. Ethical values and political rights that enable reliable and durable mutual co-operation that benefits everyone will motivate citizens to
use such values and rights as driving force for realising the goal of a society of free and equal citizens (Habermas 1994).

Walzer makes a similar argument. He points out that a political community exists for the sake of mutually providing for socially defined needs. Such mutual provision in turn strengthens membership of a political community (cf. Walzer 1983). Poverty breaks the cycle of mutual reinforcement between community and provision. Lack of provision for basic needs thus undermines the loyalty of citizens to their political community. For this reason Walzer describes poverty and prolonged unemployment as a kind of economic exile or punishment from which citizens must be saved, as their membership becomes ineffective.

The threat that poverty thus poses to the normative foundations of modern constitutional democracies in this case is to undermine the legitimacy of these values through causing alienation. Alienation in this case (cf. Taylor 1979:90) means that some poor citizens experience the institutions of modern constitutional democracies as being foreign to themselves. They cannot identify with the values underlying these institutions and they do not define their identities with reference to the dominant values and goals expressed in their societal institutions. As a result poor people lose faith in the efficacy of the entrenched public values of their society and become an outsider group who don’t care for democracy anymore. Their support for democratic values gradually withers away. In this way the normative foundations of modern constitutional democracies are eroded.

2.6 Poverty can destabilise modern constitutional democracies

Among the group of not so desperately poor people, feelings of relative deprivation might result from the lack of integration into society and the accompanying feelings of alienation. Whereas desperately poor people often re-
sign themselves to their miserable situation of poverty and fail to see any possibility of improvement, more moderately poor people often feel cheated of a more comfortable lifestyle. Sociologists describe these feelings in terms of relative deprivation.

Relative deprivation consists of cognitive and affective aspects (cf. Uys 1990: 57–70). The cognitive aspect refers to poor people’s belief that they are being treated unfairly by society. They compare their personal situation with those of others in society and judge that the others have an unfair advantage. These people become convinced that their unequal socio-economic position results from injustice. In societies with strong universal norms – such as modern constitutional democracies – these beliefs are intensified, as poor people insist on sharing more equally in the benefits promised by universal norms. The affective aspects of relative deprivation refers to poor people feeling dissatisfied and aggrieved because of societal injustices against them.

A strong degree of relative deprivation amongst poor people does not necessarily translate into social unrest or political protest action, but the possibility is always there. Skilful politicians, trade unionists, or community leaders can capitalise on feelings of deprivation and convert them into a political campaign that might become destabilising. Resentment about unjust treatment by the social and political elite of society can easily spill over into a violent campaign in which destruction of property becomes commonplace, as property symbolises the injustice of wide gaps between rich and poor. Moreover, such resentment can spill over into widespread acceptance, legitimising, sanctioning, and condoning of crime as unlawful means of redress and redistribution. Although many citizens will not necessarily commit crimes themselves, their passive acceptance of crime and unwillingness to co-operate with law enforcement agencies can create Robin Hood "heroes" who steal from the rich to benefit the poor.
Despite the dangers of destabilisation, poor people's resistance and their political mobilisation to change their relative economic position can also be judged positively. To engage in such a struggle is a "denial of powerlessness, an acting out of citizenly virtue" (Walzer 1983). Why does Walzer describe poor people's protest thus? Walzer interprets the parties and movements responsible for such protest action as "breeding grounds of self-respecting citizens" (Walzer 1983). For Walzer citizens are self-respecting when they resist the violation of their rights. Citizens who deliberate with their fellow citizens, take responsibility for their views, and protest the violation of their rights are exercising political power in defence of their rights. Such citizens respect themselves through using some of their rights to oppose actions and policies that violate their other rights. They respect themselves by not allowing others to violate any of their rights through acts of commission or omission.

2.7 Poverty is justified by ideological distortions of normative foundations

The existence and degree of poverty in violation of the normative foundations of modern constitutional democracies are justified by various ideologies. These ideologies are perversions and distortions of the normative foundations, as they select aspects of those foundations that suit the interests of a select group and ignore the rest. Economic inequalities are justified by using only some of the values generally accepted by citizens and embodied in the constitutions of modern constitutional democracies. Such justifications pretend to be in the interests of all citizens, but only serve to mask the interests of a privileged group. These ideological justifications of sectional interests present distorted versions of the normative foundations. They represent incomplete versions of these foundations, subtle disguises of the self-interest of a privileged group that masquerade as universal norms to benefit every citizen.
The process of selective appropriation of moral values with the aim of promoting the interests of a select group can be further explained by a modified version of a set of distinctions made by Ronald Dworkin (1986a: 181–191). The normative foundations embodied in the constitutions of modern democracies can be called a coherent political program that each generation interprets and actualises. Such a coherent political program consists of constitutive political positions, such as liberty or equality, that are valued for their own sake. Constitutive political positions do not necessarily cohere and might have contrary implications. As a result difficult choices must be made that will involve compromises and sacrifices. Strategies used as means to achieve constitutive political positions are called derivative positions.

Ideological distortions of the normative foundations of modern constitutional democracies occur at the level of both constitutive political positions and derivative positions. People identify stronger with some constitutive political positions and then design derivative positions to implement their one-sided choice. In a vibrant society with vigorous political debate and activity, one-sided choices made by one group can be off-set by similar one-sided choices made by other groups. However, in some societies the members of a dominant, powerful group are entrenched in influential positions where they can spread their ideas through the media to gain acceptance from those who are advantaged by them. When poor people are a powerless minority without the means to use channels of communication effectively, they might become trapped by the legitimising functions of such ideologies.

Peter Singer (1993: 32) uses America as an example of a society where an ideology of individualism "that simply encourages people to maximise personal advantage" reigns supreme. Individuals are in continual competition in pursuit of their self-interest. In such a society there is mutual hostility between individuals that undermines co-operation for collective goals. Singer
(1993:37) fails to see how a society that has elevated "acquisitive selfishness into its chief virtue" can be classified as having an ethical lifestyle. His judgement suggests that this ideology of individualism is difficult to reconcile with the normative foundations embedded in the American constitution.

2.8 Poverty violates the integrity of modern constitutional democracies

Should citizens of modern constitutional democracies be worried about the harm that poverty does to the normative foundations of their societies? If so, why? I want to argue that citizens of modern constitutional democracies ought to be seriously concerned with the damage poverty does to the moral values underlying their public institutions. The reasons in support of my claim are as follows. Injustice harms not only its victims, but also those responsible for it. The harm to perpetrators of injustice that result from the injustice of poverty is the loss of integrity. The significance of this loss of integrity becomes clear in an uncomfortable analogy with criminal behaviour.

Plato argued that unjust people do not only injure their victims, but also their own souls (cf. Shklar 1990: 28–31). Through doing injustice, people destroy the parts of themselves constituted by moral values. Moral values form a defining element of any person's life, as morality forms an inescapable part of being human. A person's moral choices, concerned with what we ought to do or refrain from doing to other people and their interests, play a constitutive role in the definition of a personal identity. By acting against one's own moral values, a person erodes the legitimacy of those values and undermines one's own credibility. A similar argument applies to the way citizens of modern constitutional democracies deal with their moral values underlying the public institutions of their society.

Committing injustice causes loss of legitimacy to moral values and a lack of credibility for individuals and societies. Harm to legitimacy and credibility
can further be explained by the concept of a loss of moral integrity. Moral integrity has two meanings. One refers to the sense of wholeness or integration of a set of moral values. Do a set of moral values cohere and combine into a reasonable, coherent whole? If a person or society acts according to values contrary to some of those publicly professed by the person's or society's set of values, then the integrity of the set of values are undermined or violated. Moral integrity can also refer to the degree of correspondence between the values a person or society professes and the values expressed in the actual lives lived by that person or society. A high degree of correspondence between values professed and values lived is indicative of strong moral integrity, which is an admirable quality. Lack of correspondence between values and life leads to a loss of moral integrity, a condition frowned upon.

By consciously or unconsciously failing to act on those moral values by not making the eradication of poverty a moral imperative, citizens, organisations, and governments of modern constitutional democracies lose moral integrity which delegitimizes their moral values and makes them lose credibility as trustworthy associates. What makes the loss of moral integrity more serious is the uncomfortable analogy between citizens with a serious lack of moral integrity and ordinary criminals. Both groups violate some of the normative foundations of modern constitutional democracies, though criminals do it deliberately through acts of commission, while law abiding citizens may do it unwittingly through acts of omission. The uncomfortable similarity lies in the fact that both groups selectively obey only those moral values that protect their own interests, whereas they ignore those contrary to their own immediate selfish interests.

The harms that poverty does to the normative foundations of modern constitutional democracies are serious enough to threaten the short and long term interests of their citizens. Poverty harms a society through the negative
conditions that arise as a result of dissatisfaction leading to political conflict or civil unrest, the loss of the value and power of core moral values through a lack of legitimacy and the loss of personal moral integrity by a large group of citizens who act selfishly through justifying their interests ideologically at the expense of the most vulnerable in society.

The harms that poverty does to the normative foundations of modern constitutional democracies are serious enough to threaten the short and long term interests of their citizens.

3. Conclusion

There are good reasons why poverty is a serious moral issue that needs the serious attention of all people. In the first part of this chapter I show that poverty damages the lives of individuals. Poverty makes physical survival a serious issue, as poor people do not have the resources to satisfy their basic needs. Their bodies suffer through inadequate diets, lack of proper health care, alcohol abuse, and interpersonal violence. These harms and injuries to their bodies influence their mental well-being negatively. Some both suffer and engage in forms of emotional, criminal, and violent abuse. Poor people have added stress to the normal stresses of everyday life. Interpersonal, family, and communal relationships often suffer as a result. The moral values of poor people are often eroded as their circumstances make it difficult to keep to strict interpretations of moral values. School and job performances are often negatively influenced by all the factors mentioned above. Through lack of resources and the negative effects discussed above, poor people become vulnerable to life's gradual or sudden changes.

Poor people often suffer injustice and exploitation by governments, businesses, and employers. They thus often have negative self-images, experiencing themselves as inferior and powerless, unable to act as agents and
determine their own lives. These feelings are reinforced by the way non-poor people often treat them with contempt. The moral values of poor people are often eroded as their circumstances make it difficult to keep to the strict interpretations of such values.

In the second part of this chapter I argue that poverty can seriously threaten the norms of modern constitutional democracies. This argument proceeds in the following way. I specify equal concern and respect as the contents of the normative foundations of modern constitutional democracies. These values commit citizens to eradicate poverty. Failure to do so often let poor people die as a result of acts of omission, i.e., poor people die because their fellow citizens omit doing the morally right things. I then proceed to show various kinds of harm that poverty can do to these values. I argue that poverty violates the important value of the equal consideration of every person's interest. Poverty also diminishes the value of civil and political liberties for poor people, as they often don't have the time, energy, or resources to participate in politics. As a result poverty disempowers poor people and leaves them vulnerable to exploitation by the powerful people in society.

Poor people become alienated from society and lose their loyalty as [1] they do not feel that their interests are sufficiently protected, [2] their protest are being ignored, and [3] their claims to equal citizenship are insufficiently fulfilled. A loss of loyalty as a result of alienation means that poor people lose faith in the efficacy of liberal-democratic values and their support for these values withers away. More moderately poor people feel unfairly treated as they judge themselves to be relatively deprived from a more comfortable lifestyle. Their feelings of injustice and anger can turn into various forms of protest. As a result their society can become destabilised through social conflict.
The justification of the vast inequalities behind poverty is done through the selective use made of liberal democratic values, that often become ideological distortions of those values. The worst thing poverty does to modern constitutional democracies is to violate their integrity, as they do not simultaneously implement all their important values, but only those privileging the well-off group in society. The result of these harms to society is that citizens and the state lose their moral integrity. The moral values underlying modern constitutional democracies lose legitimacy and the citizens and government lose credibility.

The moral urgency of the devastating consequences of poverty on individuals and societies lies in the fact that poverty is something entirely remediable by human beings. Matters of public interest, like the suffering of poor citizens, that are remediable by human beings, are typically issues treated as matters of justice. Is poverty a matter of justice as well? This is the topic of the next chapter.
CHAPTER FIVE

POVERTY AS A MATTER OF JUSTICE

When John Rawls published his book, *A Theory of Justice*, in 1971, he restored the concept of justice as a primary moral concept for dealing with social issues. The restoration of the concept of justice in moral evaluation was confirmed by the subsequent debates and discussions generated by Rawls's work. Christian ethics cannot ignore the significance of debates on justice for its own work on social issues. Taking philosophical debates on justice into account, can deepen understanding of the moral issues of poverty and help articulate the unique contribution that Christian ethics can make.

What is justice all about? What is the scope of the concept of justice? What are the issues that can legitimately be discussed and evaluated in terms of justice? In this chapter I will first explain why the concept of justice has primary significance as moral category dealing with social issues. Thereafter I will show how a moral evaluation in terms of justice illuminates the moral issues involved in poverty. If theological ethics wants to be taken seriously, it will have to address some of these issues.

1. The Primacy of Justice

John Rawls affirms the important role of justice in society. The powerful opening statement in Rawls's book states that justice is "the first virtue of social institutions, as truth is of systems of thought" (Rawls 1971: 3). Through this strong statement Rawls stresses the conviction that justice is primary in the moral evaluation of a society. Rawls (1971: 9) sees justice as providing the moral standard for assessing a society. Iris Marion Young (1990: 24) concurs with Rawls about justice as primary normative concept for judging social insti-

1.1 Justice Deals with Conflict in a Society

Stuart Hampshire (1989: 90) argues that all moral judgements and arguments presuppose that the great evils experienced by human beings must be avoided. Although background to all moral theorising, Hampshire says the concept of justice in particular can only be fully understood when the “forces of destruction” that justice intends to avert, are taken into account (Hampshire 1989: 68). For this reason Hampshire thinks that justice, in one sense, is a negative virtue, as it aims to prevent negative and harmful acts and experiences. In agreement with Michael J. Sandel (1982: 30–35), Hampshire argues that justice comes into play to resolve conflict peacefully where friendship, kinship, or shared communal values break down (Hampshire 1989: 55). Justice is thus necessary to human associations for preventing minor conflicts escalating into major disasters.

Rawls agrees that justice comes into play when people’s claims to the division of the advantages of social life conflict (Rawls 1971: 128). Young also argues that justice plays the role of resolving conflict that result from the claims, calls, and pleas for justice that people make to their fellow beings (Young 1990:5).

Although the role of justice in conflict resolution is important, the significance thereof heightens when the general aims of conflicting claims for justice are understood. Claimants for justice conflict, because they have the intention [1] to secure for themselves treatment that recognises them as human beings or [2] to gain access to conditions under which they can live the best lives they
are capable of (Frankena 1962: 21; Rossouw 1995: 7). So while the impetus for a conception of justice is the goal of avoiding the great evils of human experience through resolving conflict, the sustaining power of the quest for justice is the endeavour for a society where each claimant of justice can enjoy the fullest life possible for, and worthy of, human beings (Frankena 1962: 26). In this sense, justice becomes a positive virtue. For this reason, ideals of justice stimulate people to imaginatively conceptualise their society as more “liberating and enabling” and to evaluate current injustices in the light of such imaginary visions (Young 1990: 35). Ideals of justice are continuously reformulated and given new content throughout history, enabling citizens to revise their evaluations of the capacity of their society to provide them adequate space to live worthy lives, appropriately reflecting their human dignity.

1.2 Justice as Public Decisions about Matters of Shared Interest

People use the concept of justice in a society both to prevent harm to themselves (and others), to claim treatment that respect their humanity, and to establish the conditions to live lives worthy of human beings. This quest for justice must be qualified. Issues of justice are public concerns, i.e. problems and conditions that human beings can decide on collectively through normative means. This can be explained as follows.

Social conditions and problems only come onto agendas as matters of justice when they are widely perceived as problematic and judged to be remediable through public action (Pitkin 1981: 329). Debates on justice do not focus on issues that cannot be changed by collective (or individual) human action. Stuart Hampshire explains blindness to injustice with reference to the fallacy of false fixity (Hampshire 1989: 59). What this fallacy does is to represent particular social arrangements in a specific society as being unalterable or unavoidable features of human life, as they are part of a natural, divine, or societal order
that cannot be changed or made otherwise through deliberate, conscious human action (Hampshire 1989: 59).

Hampshire gives a good example of the continual shifting judgement in societies concerning what is avoidable or alterable and what not. He imagines the current generation’s grandchildren will “no doubt” ask the following question about their grandparents:

“How can they have failed to see the injustice of allowing billionaires to multiply while the very same economy allowed abject poverty to persist uncorrected next-door to preposterous luxury?” (Hampshire 1989: 59).

Hampshire argues that this question does not present itself to the current generation as an intelligent one to ask, because the maldistribution it refers to is understood as an “uncontrollable natural phenomenon.” (Hampshire 1989: 59). For this reason the question is too abstract with no meaningful link to current practice. The question will only become a real issue once poor people mobilise themselves to exert strong influence and to advance convincing arguments to strengthen their claims to become part of the main agenda of justice (Hampshire 1989: 59). Then only serious public debate on the justice of the issue will commence. It seems as if Hampshire reckons that normative debates about wealth and poverty in political philosophy have not yet penetrated public consciousness sufficiently to make any difference in practice.

In Hanna Pitkin’s terms justice becomes possible when people realise that they must take charge of, and responsibility for, the social forces which they produce, sometimes as by-products of private, individual decisions and sometimes as result of inadequate or wrong collective decisions (Pitkin 1981: 344). If these forces are left unattended, they can “dominate our lives and limit our options” (Pitkin 1981: 345).
If poor people, for example, want their claims for justice accepted as legitimate, they must be able to establish a common point of view from which their claims may be adjudicated (Rawls 1971: 5). Judging the justice of a particular case requires people to choose concepts and language that express a point of view common to themselves and their fellow beings in society (Frankena 1962: 26). More than that, they must try to convince others that their proposed common point of view deserves support from all who are free and equal citizens committed to the already embodied principles of justice in their society (cf. Frankena 1962: 29).

The process of arriving at a common point of view requires that citizens become aware of the mutuality needed to sustain any society. Citizens must also become skilled in designing norms, rules, and policies with others who have different views, values, and interests (Pitkin 1981: 345). The ongoing process of determining aspects of the comprehensive conception of justice guiding societal life is an important part of the collective self-definition of a society, through which members of a society establish “who we shall be, for what shall we stand” (Pitkin 1981: 346).

The common point of view that establishes a conception of justice to guide a society in its public decisions can be embodied in a constitution, laws, rules, and norms. But exactly how far does the scope of the common point of view reach? What properly falls under the scope of justice? Furthermore, where is the conception of justice embodied and how does it function?

In a sense, the answer to the scope of justice has already been given. Matters of justice are issues that can be judged in terms of public morality, are remediable by human action, and are of public interest. Public interest does not only mean matters relevant to a broader public. The well-being of individuals, negatively affected by acts like violence against women, sexual abuse of children,
or marital rape, can become public concerns, regardless of the privacy of family life where they take place. Societies have an important stake in the well-being and dignity of their citizens and protection against harms might make aspects of private life open to public inspection and control.

In a sense, then, the scope of justice concerns any aspect of human life where people’s lives can be harmed, their dignity be violated, or their development be constrained. Rawls and Young broadly concur on the scope of justice, though they use different terms to depict this scope and both focus only on certain aspects of the scope of justice in their theories. Young argues that the scope of justice is co-extensive with that of politics, including “all aspects of institutional organisation, public action, social practices and habits, and cultural meanings, insofar as they are potentially subject to collective evaluation and decision making” (Young 1990: 9).

Although Rawls focuses his theory of justice on the important issue that he calls the “basic structure of society”, he adds the following to Young’s already mentioned list of the scope of justice: laws, and particular actions, such as “decisions, judgments, and imputations” (Rawls 1971: 7). Rawls also acknowledges that the attitudes and dispositions of persons can be unjust, as well as persons themselves. People like judges can be unjust when they do not adhere to the appropriate rules, or interpretations thereof, when they decide cases. Rawls would label such a person unjust because “from character and inclination he is disposed to such actions” (Rawls 1971: 59). Rawls has an intuitive feeling that the justice of institutions might differ from the justice applicable to individuals and must be discussed separately. Nevertheless, he judges that the justice applicable to persons might be derived from the justice of social institutions and the legitimate expectations they elicit (Rawls 1971: 10).

Although most aspects of human life can fall under the public moral evaluation of a conception of justice, not all principles or rules of justice have a wide ap-
plication across all aspects of society. Some, like treating people according to merit, apply to certain practices, sectors or spheres only; others, like respecting people’s human dignity, apply everywhere (Heller 1987: 51). People are treated equally if they are defined to belong to a societal cluster, such as people in a certain category of income or of a certain age, and specific norms and rules apply consistently to every member (Heller 1987: 51).

Societal clusters are usually determined by one or more characteristics that make those belonging to the cluster similar, whilst outsiders are dissimilar because of the absence of those characteristics. Gender and sex are good examples. Frankena points out that not every similarity calls for similar treatment, nor every dissimilarity for dissimilar treatment. Throughout history, Frankena points out, political actors like feminists, aimed to convince their fellow beings that they are using the wrong differences and similarities in their public conceptions of justice (Frankena 1962: 10). To establish a more just society, the similarities used for similar treatment had to be removed and the dissimilarities used for different treatment needed to be abolished (Frankena 1962: 10).

Just as the scope of application of different principles of justice may vary, so the complexity of the cases of injustice may vary. The injustice of denying a class of people the right to vote in elections for a new government on arbitrary grounds such as eye or skin colour is easy to pinpoint. However, the injustice of the oppression of a group, such as women in contemporary constitutional democracies, might require sophisticated analyses of different dimensions of oppression, such as Young’s “five faces of oppression” (Young 1990: 39–65). Each of these faces, such as cultural imperialism, needs further analysis to determine all factors involved and actors responsible (see Young 1990: 58–61). In the end, a multiple of detailed principles of justice might be needed for judging the various facets of injustice concentrated in the phenomenon of women’s oppression. In this complex case, the injustice of oppression consists of a conglomerate of smaller issues combining to constrain people’s self-de-
velopment. To understand, evaluate, and ameliorate oppression, these issues must be disentangled and scrutinised in terms of appropriately applicable principles of justice.

Not only are all principles of justice not equally applicable to every aspect of society, but all matters of justice do not belong to one category either. Young’s critique of the dominance of metaphors drawn from distributive justice rightly points to the fact that different categories of justice exist. For this reason appropriate metaphors must be found for the different categories that will not distort the issues involved, nor allow anyone to treat one category in a way appropriate to another kind of justice.

Roughly six categories of justice can be distinguished. The first category deals with justice as recognition. The main issue involved is to find ways of appropriately recognising the humanity of fellow beings. The second category is the oft discussed one of justice as distribution. In this case justice deals with the equitable distribution of goods that can be distributed like and analogously to material possessions. The third category is justice as reciprocity. In this category issues arise that deal with the nature, scope, and contents of fair terms of co-operation at interpersonal, social, and institutional levels. The terms of co-operation can be raised knowingly and voluntarily as expectations by us through our own conduct, presupposed in social conventions, embodied in promises, agreements, and contracts, or specified in responsibilities and obligations (cf. Mill 1962: 299–300).

A fourth category of justice can be called, following Young, justice as enablement. In this category, institutions and behaviour are judged according to the degree which people’s self-development and self-determination are enabled or constrained. The fifth category comprises justice as transformation. Here problems of changing existing institutions, practices, and behaviour are explored. Matters such as rectifying past injustices, compensating victims of seri-
ous injustices, and dealing with the legacy of physical, social, and emotional harm inflicted by past injustice are discussed. The last category is justice as retribution. Retribution has its focus on appropriate sanctions, penalties, or punishment for those persons who violate society’s accepted principles of justice.

1.3 Justice Regulates a Well-Ordered Society

The most fundamental aspects of a conception of justice in a modern constitutional democracy are embodied in the constitution. Authoritative interpretations of the constitution by the highest court signifies another important embodiment of justice, as do the laws and policies of successive governments. What is important to note is that these are not the only embodiments of a conception of justice in a society. Institutions in the economy and civil society, like schools, universities, companies, cultural organisations, and trade unions ought to embody the already mentioned aspects of a public conception of justice. Just persons too need to embody the public conception of justice in their everyday lives, as issues of justice also surface in interpersonal relationships.

The embodiment of a public conception of justice refers to the currently accepted conception of justice. Rawls points out that aspects of such a conception are always in dispute. Part of such disputes are attempts to apply currently accepted norms and rules of justice to new groups of people or new areas of human interaction. Racial discrimination by institutions, whether political, cultural, economic, or educational, was first judged to be unjust. The reason was that racial discrimination was seen as a violation of the equal respect owed to the human dignity of every citizen. Afterwards individual citizens imaginatively applied similar standards of justice to interpersonal relationships. Then individual acts of racial discrimination of one person towards another became something to be resisted.

Another aspect of the ever-present disputes about justice in a society are claims for the imaginative discovery and creative development of new ideas of
justice that intend to make citizens aware of injustices previously not noticed. To qualify as new ideas of justice, these ideas must gain general acceptance in society and be reasonably coherent with existing, well-established ideas of justice.

1.3 Justice Regulates a Well-Ordered Society

The third reason why justice is the primary normative concept for evaluating a society is the enormous impact of a legitimate conception of justice on the stability and peace of a society. This can be explained best by John Rawls's definition of a well-ordered society and the stabilising role of a conception of justice (Rawls 1971: 4, 5, 453–455).

A conception of justice dealing with public matters and reached through legitimate decision making procedures specifies the terms of co-operation for members of a society. Fundamental guiding rules for social interaction and peaceful co-existence create mutual expectations of the patterns of relationships and actions allowed by a conception of justice (Rossouw 1995: 3). These fundamental guiding rules not only establish what is right to do and wrong not to do; they also give individual citizens a moral right to make claims on other citizens to be treated according to these rules. The duties imposed on citizens by these rules are thus strong enough to generate a correlative right in fellow citizens enabling them to legitimately claim to be treated justly (Mill 1962: 305).

Despite historical variations and conflicting contemporary interpretations of what a just society is, there are four constant elements belonging to the concept of justice that are found as part of any conception of justice. These elements are necessary for any conception of public morality to qualify as just. Although these elements have a formal rather than a substantive character, they do establish stable patterns of interaction that create legitimate expectations of the kinds of action, behaviour, and attitudes to expect from other mem-
bers of the society. These four elements will be discussed next.

The first element is formal justice that requires that the same norms and rules should be applied consistently and equally to every member of a defined class (Rossouw 1995: 4; Rawls 1971: 58). Similar cases must be handled similarly (Frankena 1962: 8). Formal justice eliminates arbitrariness and thus creates security as people know what to expect from those applying the rules (Rossouw 1995: 3).

The second constant element of the concept of justice is that justice means that every person ought to get that which is due to them (Rossouw 1995: 4; Rawls 1971: 10; Frankena 1962: 3). John Stuart Mill (1962: 299) thought this element is one of the clearest and most definite ways in which people understand the idea of justice. Ordinary people, he says, consider as just that every person should get what they deserve and as unjust that persons should get something good or undergo something evil which they do not deserve (Mill 1962: 299).

The formula that every person ought to get that which is due to them sounds empty, as it must still be determined what exactly every person is due in different societal spheres and what justifications can be provided. Nevertheless, giving people what is due to them presuppose detailed arguments to convince others of what people ought to have a right to. Hanna Pitkin (1972: 303) is quite correct when she says, the "real problems and subtleties of justice only begin, and therefore its real nature can only be studied or displayed, where we find unequal, different people, with different needs and abilities, different claims and deserts, so that the problem is assigning different, but precisely appropriate, things to each." What are due to persons can often be derived from the principles and rules underlying public political, economic, educational, and family institutions (Rawls 1971: 10). As the quote from Pitkin suggests, the interpretation and application of these principles might be difficult and lead to
conflicting opinions and results. Nevertheless, the need for convincing public arguments and the public nature of the principles provide secure knowledge and settled expectations.

The third constant element of the concept of justice specifies that differences and inequalities may be recognised in some cases. The condition for unequal treatment is that any differentiation between people must have publicly known criteria that can be justified to all concerned (Rossouw 1995: 5). A common set of rules and norms – appropriate to the issue in question – must be presented for equally measuring differences in merit or excellence, for example. The final constant element is that any concept of justice has as aim to recognise people’s humanity and to improve the conditions in which people can live a life worthy of human beings (Rossouw 1995: 9).

A conception of justice with these constant elements aims to protect the fundamental interests of all members of society and therefore serves as a pact of reconciliation between persons from diverse groups, such as ethnic, religious, cultural, racial, or other groups (Rawls 1971: 221; Rawls 1985: 207). Through protection of everyone’s interests, reconciling opposing groups, and creating expectations of stable behaviour and actions, a public conception of justice creates a well-ordered and peaceful society where members are generally inclined to act justly. A well-ordered society is one that advances the good of its members by protecting their interests and is effectively regulated by a conception of justice (Rawls 1971: 5). Effectively regulated means that everyone accepts the principles of justice and knows that the other members of society do the same. Furthermore, institutions generally satisfy the principles of justice (Rawls 1971: 5). As a result, members of the society develop a strong desire to act justly.

The effect of a well-ordered society is stability (Rawls 1971: 454–455). Stability flows from the general tendency of members to acquire a sense of
justice and to live accordingly. Rawls points out that a well-ordered society offers protection against three dangers in any society. One danger is disruptive inclinations to act unjustly (Rawls 1971: 454). In a well-ordered society these inclinations are overridden by the strong sense of justice that develops in citizens. Another danger is the excessive demands that citizens place on one another that might lead to conflict if not satisfactorily dealt with. The publicly accepted conception of justice followed by all in a well-ordered society provides a common point of view from which to adjudicate even excessive demands (Rawls 1971: 5). As all members of society acquire a sense of justice, including a desire to uphold their conception of justice, they will abide by the outcome of the adjudication of their claims.

A further danger is the perennial inclination to self-interest present in all societies which requires members to be vigilant to the destructive behaviour of their fellow beings. By averting these dangers, reducing conflict, and stabilising societal interaction, a public conception secures lasting peace. Lasting peace results from peaceful resolution of conflict in the context of a just society where people’s fundamental interests are safeguarded. A strong sense of justice thus enables people to establish a secure association that can create bonds of civic friendship (Rawls 1971: 5).

1.4 Justice: Intrastate and Interstate?

Most of the influential contributions to the contemporary debates on justice discuss intrastate issues of justice, i.e., issues of justice internal to a sovereign state. It is citizens of a sovereign state who owe duties and obligations of justice toward one another, but not toward people outside their borders. The tacit assumption seems to be that states are not subject to moral evaluation from the international community of states, as individual states represent “separate, discrete political orders with no common authority among them” (Beitz 1979: 25).
Two examples show the limited attention given to issues of interstate justice by theorists dealing in detail with issues of intrastate justice. Problems of interstate, or international, justice are discussed by Michael Walzer (1983: 31–63) in the context of membership of political communities, refugees, and immigrants – the issue of whom should be accepted to a particular state and how many of them. Iris Marion Young (1990: 257–260) makes a few references to global issues of justice in a short chapter devoted to the applicability of her theory to the context of international relations. She acknowledges the importance of distributive issues in a global context where gross distributive injustices abound (1990: 257–258). She reiterates her criticism that the focus should not only be on distributive issues of justice in the international context.

Young then argues for the need to evaluate the justice of decision-making power in the international world, the division of labour between countries, and the role of cultural imperialism in global context, but does not do so herself.

In general though, participants in the contemporary debates on justice confine the debate within national boundaries. This exclusion of international justice is done differently by theorists of different persuasion, as described by Onora O'Neill (1992: 61). She says liberals confine their debates to national issues "self-consciously and provisionally, communitarians on principle and apologetically, others tacitly and without discussion."

The exclusion of the issue of justice between states is understandable, as its inclusion severely complicates discussions of intrastate justice. For this reason, a few political philosophers have designed moral theories designed for exclusive application to issues of interstate justice. Mervyn Frost (1996), for example, argues for an inescapable normative dimension to international politics that are currently ignored by political scientists to the great detriment of the study of international politics. Charles Beitz argues for the necessity of an international theory of justice due to the wide-ranging influence that
international interactions have on human well-being across the world today (Beitz 1979). The assumption might be correct that our moral relationships towards those with whom we live together in one political community differ from those towards people living in other countries. Nevertheless, the exclusion and separation of issues of interstate justice from debates on intrastate justice is wrong.

In our contemporary global village the members of one political community are in continual interaction with people from other states, be it for trade, recreation, education, tourism, war, aid, or whatever other reason. The exclusion of the issues regarding international justice denies this interaction, as well as the complex ways in which issues of domestic justice intersect with those of international justice. In many cases, for example, issues of domestic justice have become internationalised, such as South Africa's apartheid policies, and frequently the resolution of issues of international justice has major impacts on domestic justice in the countries concerned, such as the nature of development aid agreed upon between donor and recipient countries.

In this section I want to argue that interstate, or international, justice is a special case of intrastate justice and that the two kinds of justice ought to become inextricably linked. My argument will proceed as follows. I will first make an empirical argument that says the increased contact in the global village between citizens from different states calls forth reflection on the issues of justice involved. The second argument states that the function and scope of the concept of justice, as worked out earlier for intrastate justice, also apply to the issues of interstate justice. The next argument is similar. I argue that the six categories for classifying issues of intrastate justice also apply to interstate justice. The argument that then follows presents normative justifications for interstate justice. I conclude the section by pointing to the complicating factors that disallow an easy transference of modes of thinking about intrastate justice to matters of interstate justice.
The large, unknown, threatening world of a few centuries ago has become the global village of today, connected through communication media aided by satellites, telephone networks, and radio transmitters, as well as through transport networks of global air routes, intercontinental railway lines, and border-crossing highways. The new instant communication possibilities, and opportunities for human movement across boundaries, facilitate human interaction of all kinds between people from different countries all over the world.

The far more limited contact between people from different countries in earlier centuries resulted especially in trade, tourism (exploration), and war. The extent of current trade and tourism between countries far apart geographically, has grown exponentially during the past century or so. Unfortunately the same is true of wars. Not only wars, but colonisation of sovereign countries and military intervention in independent states have proliferated during the past two centuries, leaving legacies many people are still trying to get to grips with.

Besides the intensification of perennial issues of interstate justice, several new forms of interaction have arisen. Beitz (1979: 179) refers to the increasingly “complex pattern of social interaction characteristic of international relations.” Some of the moral issues raised by these interactions flow forth from the perennial issues sketched above. Trade between nations has had major effects on the environment. The effects of new modes of production inaugurated by the industrial revolution and reinforced by the resource requirements of modern societies have led to a depletion of natural resources and have caused severe environmental pollution and degradation across national boundaries. Contemporary wars have similarly had disastrous effects, leading to millions of refugees flooding neighbouring countries. Some wars have called forth military interventions by foreign countries who try to minimise the harm done to innocent citizens threatened with murder by their own governments, sometimes with the
extermination of their group through ethnic cleansing. Wars often result from conflicts about valuable, scarce resources, as even states have conflicting claims against other states for larger shares of resources than they currently have.

Diverse kinds of international organisations have been set up to deal with cooperation on matters of shared interest and the injustices of trade, war, and environmental damage that affect many countries minding their own business and not directly involved with the causes of these negative effects. The kinds of international organisations established in the past few decades include the following. International political organisations like the United Nations, international non-governmental environmental organisations like Greenpeace, specialist agencies like the World Health Organisation, and regional trade and development organisations like the European Union and the Organisation for African Unity. These organisations have all been established [1] to facilitate cooperation and [2] to prevent or rectify the injustices that some states commit, or allow their citizens to commit, that negatively affect citizens in other countries. These organisations and other peace brokers craft peace treaties, accords, and agreements in attempts to stop injustice, unfair trade, and violence as method of problem-solving. They aim to promote co-operation for mutual benefit, negotiation, diplomacy, and dialogue instead.

States share interests in peace, a peace that enables co-operation leading to well-being and prosperity, while minimising the loss of lives, disruptions, and the expenses required by destructive conflicts. The interests of states conflict when they lay claim to greater benefits of international trade or more land rich in natural resources or human capital. For these reasons the Rawlsian circumstances of justice do indeed apply to interstate justice as well (Nielsen 1992: 28). Thus, an empirical argument about the high degree of interaction between states today can emphasise the need for an effective conception of justice to lay down ground rules for fair interaction between states that enable the best
possible life for all involved.

Another argument for interstate justice goes as follows. The functions and scope of intrastate justice are similarly applicable to interstate justice. As within sovereign states, so a conception of justice between states aims to resolve conflict peacefully and to create conditions within which human beings can enjoy the fullest life possible for them. To do this, such a conception of justice must be limited to those public issues that could be decided through public means and are remediable through public action. A successful conception of justice aims to establish a common point of view with which to judge whether claims to justice are legitimate or not. This common point of view gets embodied in fundamental guiding rules for social interaction and peaceful co-existence. These rules do not necessarily have wide application to all social practices, but can nevertheless have an enormous impact on stability and peace.

There is no doubt that the above scope and functions of the concept of justice apply to virtually all aspects of interstate justice. Peaceful conflict resolution rather than devastating wars with loss of life and property is a high priority in international relations. To create conditions – through international co-operation – to enable citizens to flourish motivate many bilateral and multilateral agreements on trade relations, cultural exchange, and scientific co-operation between states. Regional organisations, like the European Union and the Organisation of African Unity, and global organisations, like the United Nations, all have charters that establish shared points of view used for dealing with conflict and regulating social interaction. Thus, the scope and functions of the concept of justice applies to international justice as much as they do to intrastate justice.

The similarity of matters of intrastate and interstate justice is also found in the categories of justice they can be divided into. All six categories of intrastate justice are also found in interstate or international justice. Some examples will
illustrate the point. The justice of recognition has to do with the way that one state recognises the humanity and rights of people from another state. At this point intrastate and interstate justice intersect, as many states make it their business to somehow intervene in the internal affairs of another state when the government of that state seriously violates the humanity and rights of its own citizens. The justice of distribution comes into play concerning land, resources, and wealth. Many bitter wars are still being fought about land or other natural resources. Many conflicts are about multi-national companies exploiting the natural resources of developing countries, without giving adequate returns to host nations. Again intrastate and interstate justice intersect. Many countries make it their business to somehow intervene in the domestic affairs of another country if the government of that country distribute goods so unequally as to impoverish or neglect sections of its population to such an extent that their basic human needs are not met.

The justice of reciprocity surfaces in the requirements that governments keep the myriad international treaties, agreements, and charters on various issues that they have committed themselves and their countries to. The justice of enablement refers to ways in which one country's government can constrain the development of people in another country, for example, through colonial oppression or punitive economic and cultural sanctions. The justice of transformation comes into play when injustices of the past, such as war damage or colonial plundering, have to be rectified. It also features in demands for changing existing international institutions, like the Security Council of the United Nations, to be more representative and fair to all countries involved. The justice of retribution has to do with sanctions, penalties, or punishment for violations of agreed upon principles of justice.

Thus far I have established that the multiple interactions between states necessitate a shared point of view for regulating their interaction to benefit all to co-operate harmoniously and live in peaceful co-existence. This shared point
of view embodies the aims and function of the concept of justice on intrastate level and manifest in the same six categories as identified earlier in intrastate justice. Several moral arguments can be advanced to strengthen the argument for the need for interstate justice already established. They will be critically examined to determine their worth.

Belsey (1992) shows one way of deriving principles of interstate justice. He argues that the demand for global justice flows from the ideals of care and concern for others which are deeply embedded in the religious and secular ethical traditions of Northern First World countries (Belsey 1992: 46). His point is demonstrated by the principles of justice presented by himself, Kai Nielsen, and Onora O'Neill.

Belsey presents two alternative principles of justice both based on reciprocity and an acknowledgement of our common humanity. The principle of reciprocity focuses our attention on the human ability to recognise the full extent of other people's suffering as being similar to your own. Once that is done, it follows that people in the Northern First World countries will demand that such suffering be treated similarly to how they would want their suffering treated. His second principle for global justice is to focus on another aspect of our common humanity, viz. the acknowledgement that people everywhere have similar needs in order to be able to live a worthwhile life. If human beings are equal, having similar needs imply having them met equally at a basic level (Belsey 1992: 47). Global justice thus demands that the needs of people in poor countries must be met in such a way that they can live worthwhile lives.

Nielsen also focuses on moral equality and reciprocity, which he finds best expressed in one of Immanuel Kant's ethical principles. Thus, for Nielsen (1992: 27) global justice must rest on the idea that we should treat all people as persons, and thus treat them as we ourselves would reasonably want to be treated. This implies that we must support universal principles of justice appli-
cable to all people in the world and we must be willing to engage in role reversal, i.e. we must ask ourselves whether we would accept the desperate living conditions in many Third World countries. If we cannot accept such conditions for ourselves, neither can we be satisfied that other people live in them. Thus, we must be prepared to accept global principles and obligations of justice, and their full implications, as plain extensions of domestic justice.

Onora O'Neill also draws on the ethical tradition of care and concern for other people in her proposed principle for global justice, although she gives a significant role for vulnerable and weak people in the design of her principles of interstate justice. O'Neill (1992:67–72) avoids idealised theory which ascribes certain capacities and opportunities to people as though everyone everywhere has the same. She correctly notes that many poor women lack such ascribed capacities, as they are weakened by their vulnerable positions as care-takers of children, sick and aged people, as well as their economic dependence on men. Therefore she is aware that such people can rarely dissent to political and social arrangements, as such dissent would only further endanger their existing vulnerable position. In order to do justice to such people, emphasis must be on acting according to principles that everyone can share. A practical way of determining whether a principle can be shared, is not to bypass people in weak and vulnerable positions, who have no loud protesting voices. Rather, one should ask of any principle of justice whether those constrained by them can or would refuse, or re-negotiate, them if they were in a strong enough position to stand up for themselves without disastrous consequences. In this way O'Neill gives voice to frail and dependent people to protest the social policies and institutional arrangements on whose receiving end they are.

The proposed principles for global justice by Belsey, Nielsen, and O'Neill are too utopian and simplified for dealing with the complexity of relations between different states. In all three cases principles appropriate for interpersonal relationships are extrapolated to the intricacies of relations between states, without
adequate adaptation. As an alternative to theories focusing on intrastate issues of justice, these attempts at tackling interstate issues of justice assume that intrastate and interstate issues of justice can be treated simultaneously as one set of issues. Adequate analyses of the intricate relationships between states that result from their shared history, current trade, ideological similarities and differences, and their geographical proximity are absent. The role of multinational corporations, global and regional organisations, and the effects of bilateral and multilateral treaties are not mentioned either. Similarly, no interrogation of the often recurring prejudice against immigrants takes place that could shed light on the strong presumption that obligations of justice are a home affair. Only when matters like these are analysed and discussed in full, will we be able to begin addressing the tensions between the moral obligations imposed by our conceptions of justice on intrastate and interstate issues of justice. Nevertheless, the proposals by Belsey, O'Neill, and Nielsen are attempts to create philosophical debates about global concerns and to utilise the conceptual instruments, such as theories and principles, yielded by the philosophical debates on intrastate justice, for addressing pressing global issues.

More satisfactory approaches to issues concerning interstate justice come from Peter Singer, Janna Thompson, and John Rawls.

One way of justifying the moral obligation of non-poor people or countries to alleviate or eradicate poverty is given by the Australian philosopher, Peter Singer. He gives a clear answer by articulating moral values he believes are implicit in democratic societies, although he does not articulate his views explicitly in terms of justice. In his argument he appeals to moral intuitions shared by most democrats. Singer (1972, 1981, 1993) formulates ethical principles designed to motivate individuals, organisations, and governments to be involved in dealing with poverty close by and far away. His argument runs as follows.
Suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad. If we are able to prevent something bad from happening, without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we have a moral obligation to do so. Our distance (geographically near or far) from suffering and death makes no difference to our moral responsibility. The number of other people with a similar moral responsibility does not lessen or increase our moral responsibility to do something about suffering and death. Therefore, all non-poor people of the world have a moral obligation to help poor people wherever they are in the world.

Singer compares non-poor people's lack of response to media exposure of people desperately suffering from poverty with the public values these non-poor people's societies are committed to. He believes that watching people die from poverty is incompatible with "taking rights to life seriously" (Singer 1981: 166). Doing nothing while watching millions of people die on television Singer judges to be the end of "all notions of human equality and respect for human life" (Singer 1981: 176). Singer is convinced that non-poor people with a moral obligation to address poverty are allowing desperately poor people to die through acts of omission. Allowing people to die while being able to prevent that without serious risk or harm to oneself violates the important democratic value of equal respect for individual persons.

In her book *Justice and World Order: A Philosophical Inquiry* Janna Thompson's insight in international relations far surpasses those displayed by Belsey, O'Neill, and Nielsen. Thompson (1992) engages important views on ethics and international relations and explores the history of philosophy for views applicable to interstate relations. Discussions of Hobbes, Kant, Rousseau, Hegel, Marx, Mill, Fichte, and Rawls are evaluated in terms of their explanatory value and applicability to the difficulties and developments of politics within and between states in the last 200 years (see Thompson 1992: 58). The use of appropriate background knowledge for evaluation of proposals for interstate jus-
tice leads to far more appropriate sophisticated arguments and proposals.

Thompson's (1992: 189) moral objectives for interstate relations are as follows. Individual liberty must be promoted, communities which individuals value must be respected, peaceful relations between states based on procedures on which all can agree, and resources distributed so that the individual liberty and group involvement can be maintained. Thompson (1992: 191) acknowledges the difficulties of reconciling these moral objectives. Reconciling individual freedom, communal self-determination, and the relief of poverty are indeed "one of the most difficult challenges facing a theory of international justice" (Thompson 1992: 191). Thompson discusses this issue only in two paragraphs and ends up with an unsatisfactory solution that is too abstract and general.

Thompson relies on existing communities and the formation of new communities to solve the above conflict. New communities with members from rich and poor countries will be formed over national boundaries. Within these communities goods and services will be distributed "according to principles which members collectively endorse" (Thompson 1992: 191). This vague idea is not explained, no evidence is forthcoming to substantiate this abstract notion, nor is any examples given. Thompson further relies on relations between existing states to prohibit poverty and exploitation. Again a superficial comment unworthy of a book filled with detailed and sophisticated arguments addressing issues of interstate justice in depth. Thompson eventually sacrifices inequalities within and between states for a conception of interstate justice that gives more value to the autonomy and diversity of communities than to addressing poverty (see also Thompson 1992: 186–187). Despite considerable merit in developing a global theory of justice, Thompson's book is disappointingly weak when discussing the complex issues of global poverty.

John Rawls (1993) formulates a variety of principles of justice for interstate relations that he derives in a different manner than those formulated by Belsey,
O'Neill, Nielsen, Singer, and Thompson. Rawls wants to construct principles of interstate justice through a reasonable procedure that he calls the original position. The original position is a device of representation that models what Rawls regards as fair conditions for states to be placed in to decide on principles of interstate justice that will govern their relations with one another. Through this device he can create an imaginary decision-making situation where free and equal states are reasonably situated and appropriate restrictions are placed on reasons that they may advance to support a conception of justice for interstate relations. Representatives of states deliberate with one another, subject to a veil of ignorance. This veil of ignorance implies that their deliberations are conducted as if they do not know the size of their territories or populations, do not know the strength of their people, the extent of their natural resources, nor their level of economic development. This amnesia about their society is necessary so that they will not choose and support principles tailored to their unique circumstances. They are rather forced to imagine themselves to be in the position of any one of the possible states present. In this way Rawls hopes that his imaginary representatives will be fair to all the kinds of states present. For this reason he calls his conception of justice “justice as fairness” and argues for its acceptability as a view that can be accepted by citizens on due reflection as a view that ties together our political convictions and moral judgements into a coherent view.

Rawls's principles of justice for interstate relations flowing from his original position of states belong to two categories. One category is minimal moral requirements for the treatment of the state's own citizens. The other category deals with relations between states. The link between the two consists in the good standing gained or lost within the society of states depending on the way a state treats its own citizens.

There are two minimal moral requirements for the treatment of citizens that will secure a state's good standing in the world community of states. One require-
ment is that the state must have a legal system that is legitimate in the eyes of its citizens. The second requirement is that the state must uphold and enforce basic human rights. Rawls distinguishes basic human rights from what he calls constitutional rights or the rights of democratic citizenship. The idea of basic human rights is not an exclusively Western notion, as they can be universally applied and is not controversial in what they intend to establish. Such basic rights must secure the following things for all persons: "certain minimum rights to means of subsistence and security (right to life), to liberty (freedom from slavery, servitude and forced occupations) and (personal) property, as well as to formal equality ...(e.g. that similar cases must be treated similarly)" (Rawls 1993).

To be a well-ordered society in good standing in the world community of states, a state must also follow moral rules in its conduct towards other states. These rules form the charter of the association of states. Rawls lists a number of rules, while acknowledging that they are incomplete and in need of much explanation and interpretation. These rules are as follows. States must recognise and respect the freedom and independence of other states. Such recognition implies that other states will not intervene in the internal affairs of another country, unless that state subjugates some of its citizens or seriously violates their rights. A state whose independence is recognised has a right to self-defence when any other state wants to take that independence – or part of it – away. The right to self-defence is limited by specified restrictions on conduct while engaging in war. States must be peaceful in their conduct towards others in the absence of any external threat to their independence or security. Reciprocal obligations between states defining their relationships include that states must observe treaties and undertakings that they are party to.

The value of Rawls's approach to interstate justice is that he starts to show how interstate justice is linked to intrastate justice. The standing of a state in the international arena is determined by the degree to which its government
Protects the rights of the citizens. This notion that conceptions of interstate and intrastate justice are intertwined needs considerable expansion to be more in line with our current notions of interstate fairness.

Although none of the moral arguments presented above is entirely satisfying to serve as comprehensive guide for interstate justice, they do serve to add a strong moral impetus to the other arguments for the inescapable need to develop a conception of interstate justice that needs to function in conjunction with a conception of intrastate justice. Despite their shortcomings, these theories show that dominant moral values current in liberal democracies support the idea that justice is not only an internal affair of sovereign states.

Despite the arguments that can be made in favour of the strong need for intersecting intrastate and interstate theories of justice, the difficulties involved in designing an interstate theory of justice must be acknowledged and not be underestimated. What makes the development of an interstate theory of justice more complex and more difficult are the following factors. The actors involved in matters of interstate justice are not individuals, but the governments of modern states representing their citizens who differ in numbers, wealth, values, and culture. Not all governments are equally representative of their citizens, while some are at war with sections of their own citizens.

Another complicating factor for interstate justice is that nothing similar to the overarching institution of the state exists at global level. As a result institutions and practices at international level are less efficient, perform less tasks, and are less capable of co-ordinating those tasks (Beitz 1979: 50). These consequences follow from international institutions that are far weaker in terms of making and enforcing decisions than their counterparts in sovereign states (Beitz 1979: 154). For example, there is no world government that can lay down a shared conception of justice to regulate the interaction between states. The United Nations tries to fulfil this kind of role, but its effectiveness is hin-
dered by the limited scope of its activities, the unwillingness of many states to abide by decisions, and the difficulties of enforcing its decisions on states refusing to comply. These problems are faced by many international organisations dealing with issues like sport, science, trade, health, tourism, and human rights. Beitz (1979: 46–48) argues that various devices are available to the international community for enforcing compliance with established norms. He concedes that these procedures are not as effective as those available within the hierarchical ordering of authority in sovereign states. Nevertheless, the horizontal ordering of authority between states in the international community still provide “substantial expectations of reciprocal compliance with rules of cooperation” (Beitz 1979: 48).

The difficulties of constructing a theory of justice for both intrastate and inter-state justice and the problems involved in implementation is no reason to abandon the quest. Rather, the difficulties and problems present a challenge to explore ways of making normative reflection relevant to the details of complex situations and to find the means of putting normative ideals to work (cf. Beitz 1979: 158).

2. Understanding Poverty as a Conglomerate of Injustices

Using the concept of justice as analytical tool to highlight the issues of public morality involved in the phenomenon of poverty is justified by the primacy of justice as normative concept for evaluating society. Understanding poverty in terms of the normative requirements of justice operative in many contemporary constitutional democracies, illuminates many of the moral issues raised by the phenomenon of poverty.

The concept of justice is useful for analysing poverty for three reasons, established in the previous section. One reason is the role of justice as one of the primary means available to citizens of contemporary constitutional democra-
cies for dealing fairly and peacefully with conflict. Part of the reason for its ability to resolve conflict is the fact that a societ...come decisions on matters of shared interest. Through such decisions a society establishes shared values that regulate and stabilise interaction and create legitimate expectations from one another and society as a whole.

Two additional reasons for the use of the concept of justice as analytical tool can be provided. One concerns the functions of the concept in everyday language and the other the access to information the application of the concept provides. The use of the concept of justice in everyday language often consists of demands that justice must be done. Such demands are usually made in "the face of wrong," when it is "cried out for ... with passion and intensity" (Wolgast 1987: 128–129). To demand justice means to protest against wrongdoing and ask for action and rectification in situations where people are being wronged by other people. If no action is taken against identified injustices, it amounts to accepting and condoning such wrongs.


In the next six sections, I will analyse the moral dimensions of poverty in terms of the six categories of justice specified earlier.
2.1 Poverty and the Justice of Recognition

The main issue involved in justice as recognition is to find ways of appropriately recognising the humanity of fellow beings. In contemporary constitutional democracies, the humanity of fellow beings is recognised by treating all citizens with equal respect. Equal respect implies that citizens must be viewed as fellow human beings and be awarded equal political rights for meaningful participation in the democratic political system. It can be explained as follows.

Equal respect was discussed more fully in Chapter Four as part of the normative foundations of contemporary constitutional democracies. There it was said that equal respect is universally applicable to all citizens of a country. We call this recognition respect, which means that kind of respect which we owe all persons simply because they are human beings, regardless whether they are rich or poor (Darwall, 1977: 38, 39, 45). To have equal recognition respect for every human being means that some things are due to them because they are human, regardless of wealth, desert, merit, race, moral or religious views, and lifestyle.

The basic thing due to citizens accorded equal respect is to be recognised as human beings of equal moral worth. In contemporary constitutional democracies this recognition implies equal political rights. The first principle of John Rawls' theory of justice spells out basic liberties for each individual. This is accepted as standard practice in most contemporary constitutional democracies. Rawls explains equal basic liberties as follows in his first principle of justice. Equal basic liberties include the right to vote and to be eligible for public office, together with freedom of speech and assembly, "liberty of conscience and freedom of thought; freedom of the person along with the right to hold personal property; and freedom from arbitrary arrest and seizure as defined by the concept of the rule of law" (Rawls 1971: 61).
Despite assigning equal basic liberties to all citizens, black people and women have had major political struggles in contemporary constitutional democracies to secure their equal treatment as citizens. Racism and sexism are often causes of poverty or reinforces and exacerbates the harmful effects of poverty.

Rawls draws two implications from his first principle of equal rights and duties that are worth emphasising. When the first principle is applied to the political procedures defined by the constitution, it leads to the idea of equal participation. According to Rawls, this implies that each vote of a citizen should have "approximately the same weight in determining the outcome of elections." (Rawls 1971: 221–223). This means that political representatives should each represent the same amount of voters in at least one of the chambers of a national assembly (good reasons might exist for suggesting a different form of representation in the other).

Equal political representation can have great significance for poor people as it will enable them to "express their interests and experience in public, on an equal basis with other groups," thus avoiding group domination (Young 1990:95). According to Young (1990:185), democratic institutions should facilitate such public expression of needs and interests of people who are socially marginalised or silenced, as such expression is a major instrument for countering social oppression. However, effective representation in the major political institutions of society is not enough. Young encourages the involvement of all persons in collective discussion and decision-making in all the "settings that depend on their commitment, action and obedience to rules," such as schools and workplaces (Young 1990:191).

If poor people had effective representation and were assured that their voices were heard by those in power, they might not feel, as they often do, that they are being deprived, that their interests are neglected, their protests ignored, and their claims to equal citizenship insufficiently fulfilled.
It is not often that poor people are denied formal opportunities for political participation in contemporary constitutional democracies. In apartheid South Africa, though, poor black people were not recognised as equals and thus had no voting rights, were denied political liberties to mobilise themselves to improve their lot, and had their freedom of movement to move around in search of better economic opportunities restricted.

Michael Walzer (1983) illustrates the importance of a moral bond between citizens - recognised as humans of equal moral dignity - which allows all to participate in determining the extent to which a society must provide for its members' needs. Throughout his text, scattered remarks reflect Walzer's grasp of the influence of poverty on people's lives. He is aware of poor people's inadequate access to health care, different treatment in the courts due to a lack of legal counsel, being isolated, stigmatised, blamed and punished for their own misfortune, and that relief does not necessarily break patterns of behaviour consisting of dependence, deference, passivity and humility.

Walzer's awareness of the conditions of poverty provides the background for his view of the moral bond between citizens, expressed in his interpretation of the social contract. For him the social contract is an agreement to make collective decisions about the goods necessary to the common life of people in a society and to implement those decisions (Walzer 1983: 65). All citizens must be able to participate in debates about the meaning and implications of the social contract, otherwise their interests would be neglected and excluded. For this reason Walzer describes the social contract as a moral bond between weak and strong citizens, which commits them to continually re-negotiate the terms of the contract to accord with their shared understandings of needs.

Walzer's social contract has enormous positive value for poor people. It offers
a view of citizens having moral ties with one another, committed to engage in dialogue about the nature and extent of communal provision for needs they regard as important. Poor people are thus equally respected, as they have a voice to promote their interests, and to negotiate the terms of any relief or aid provided to them. Walzer’s idea of the social contract furthermore implies that the contents thereof will depend on the values, convictions, and beliefs of citizens in a sovereign state, which can change over time. It also affirms his strong emphasis on the value of political community, which in this case implies that citizens have stronger obligations to poor people within their own community than to those outside.

The requirement of equal respect rules out looking down on poor people with contempt because of their poverty. Blaming poor people for their own poverty through one-sided explanations attributing poverty to their biological, genetic or moral inferiority, or lack of favour with the gods seems also like actions intended to humiliate poor people as human beings of far lesser worth. Stereotyping poor people as though they all are the same and their poverty have the same explanation similarly amounts to behaviour violating their shared humanity.

Equal respect further implies that simply because another human being exists, we are wrong to treat that person in some ways and right to treat the person in other ways. For example, no person may inflict bodily injury on any person without having sufficient reasons, acceptable in a court of law, for doing so. Poor people’s bodies are at greater risk of dangers than those of other citizens. Women collecting firewood or water are at risk of sexual harassment and assault. Poor women are at particular risk of domestic violence. All poor people are at risk of interpersonal violence and crime – phenomena that are far more prevalent in poor areas than elsewhere. Having to rely on cheap energy resources such as wood and paraffin exposes poor people’s bodies to pollution and high risks of fires. Fires easily burn down their houses, often made of
highly flammable material like wood or plastic. Fires also spread rapidly in their densely, often overpopulated areas. The risk of premature, preventable death increases with the choice of energy, such as wood and paraffin, and the lack of adequate food to ensure a healthy body resistant to disease.

Equal respect requires that people must be respected in their own terms. Adults must be treated as adults, children as children. Poor children sometimes suffer massive injustices. Some frustrated, tired, and highly stressed poor parents inflict cruel punishment on their children’s bodies. Some parents or supervising adults push or sell children into prostitution to earn extra income, leaving major psychological scars. The need for extra income often forces children to work when they should still have played. The adult responsibility of full time or part time labour robs children of their special childhood opportunities for psychological growth and intellectual development.

2.2 Poverty and the Justice of Distribution

In justice as distribution the main issues are linked with the equitable distribution of goods. These goods include all things that can be distributed like and analogously to material possessions. How can contemporary theories of justice illuminate the issues of distributive justice?

Most participants in the debates on justice assume that a major part of the concept of justice refers to the distribution of goods. Working on this assumption, John Rawls defines the concept of justice as referring to the principles used to guide the adjudication of conflicting claims to more of the benefits and less of the burdens that result from the life that a group of individuals share together in a specific society (Rawls 1971: 9–10).

From this skeleton definition we can already see that justice as distribution has at its centre the notion of an allotment of things (goods) to (specific) persons –
whether the allotment of benefits such as income, wealth, goods, offices, and privileges, or the allotment of burdens such as hard work and lack of adequate income (Frankena 1962: 9). To secure distributive justice in a specific society the adjudication of conflicting claims should be done according to principles of justice that lead to a division of benefits and burdens that create a proper balance between such claims. The application of such principles of justice must prohibit the making of arbitrary distinctions between persons in the process of the adjudication of conflicting claims to society’s distributable goods (Rawls 1958: 165).

A good indicator whether distributive justice prevails in a society is to note what different people have in terms of income and wealth. What people have depends on how the resources and opportunities available in a society have been divided. For example, wealth is one of the benefits of a society. Who are the wealthy people in a society and how did they acquire their wealth? Distributive injustice exists when the benefits and burdens available in a society are unfairly divided between different individuals and groups in a society. Benefits are wealth, income, property, opportunities to education, and good employment. Burdens are hard or dirty work, and taxes.

Poor people suffer many distributive injustices. Classifying people as “poor” means that they have very little income and practically no wealth compared to the abundance others in society have. The degree of inequality in some societies is staggering. If the gap between rich and poor become so pronounced that the rich live in luxury while the poor can hardly afford enough food, live in houses that fail to protect them against the elements, have to make do with dangerous fuels that endanger their health and life, and have to walk long distances to collect water of questionable quality, then their position relative to others in society seems to be unjust.

However, an unequal division of benefits and burdens is not necessarily unjust.
There may be good reasons why the president of a country gets a bigger salary than a teacher. What should be looked for is whether there are patterns in the division of benefits and burdens. For example, do women teachers generally get lower salaries than their male colleagues? If the answer to the question is yes, there is good reason to investigate whether some kind of injustice is responsible for these patterns of people worse off than others.

John Rawls provides an interesting defence of an unequal division of the benefits of society that nevertheless is in the interests of the poor. He justifies unequal distribution of income and wealth in his second principle of justice. The principle goes as follows: "Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both (a) to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged and (b) attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity" (Rawls 1971:83). In terms of this principle, inequalities in a society should benefit the least advantaged persons, otherwise they are unjust. Thus, high incomes for professionals such as doctors and engineers can only be justified if they lead to an improvement in the lot of the least advantaged people. This aspect of Rawls' difference principle expresses care for poor people, as their interests must dominate when deciding which unequal divisions of income and wealth are justified. His difference principle provides an articulation of the democratic ideal of solidarity (fraternity) which could significantly improve at least the relative income and wealth of poor people.

In the area of the household gender distinctions have a profound influence on distributive issues of justice. These distinctions are currently strongly contested, as they are believed to be unjust. Nevertheless, they continue to dominate and negatively influence the lives of many women. Stereotypes about the role of women within the household make their lives particularly difficult in situations of poverty. The distribution of resources within a household can become a matter of intense conflict, often resolved through violence or the threat thereof. As a result of male dominance, many poor women have most of the
responsibility for household management and duties. Some poor women take hours to fetch water, collect firewood, or to do washing and cleaning. These domestic services are mostly unpaid labour that deprives women of free time for self-improvement or productive activities. The unequal division of household duties on gender lines often severely disadvantages women to the benefit of men.

Investigating suspected distributive injustice, like the unjust treatment of women in many households, requires answers to several questions. Let’s say there is a pattern of one group of people being far more wealthy than another. Two questions must be asked. One question deals with the origin and history of the wealth or poverty of these people. We must establish how the rich people acquired their wealth. They might have had a better education. If this is true, then the reasons for them having better educational opportunities must be investigated. Rich people may have acquired their wealth from their ancestors. If this is so, then the way their ancestors acquired their wealth needs to be looked at. Did they perhaps illegitimately acquire their wealth?

Next, the investigation must focus on how wealth was transferred through generations to determine whether these transfers were fair. If rich people legitimately acquired and transferred their wealth to current generations, then their riches might be justly possessed (see Nozick, 1974: 150–153). However, if their wealth was based on unfair access to better opportunities for self-development or economic advantage than those available to other people, then their wealth is based on injustice that needs to be rectified.

Justice as distribution deals not only with the distribution of benefits, but also burdens. Doing hard work, such as cleaning up dirt, is one of the burdens of a society. Who does this work and did they have other choices? The distribution of work opportunities – especially the more negative ones that have inadequate pay – is a difficult problem. How should these jobs be distributed? They
must be done, are difficult and hard to do, but nevertheless leave those doing them poor as a result of low pay. Michael Walzer presents specific proposals which can help to alleviate the plight of these poor people in his discussion of hard work (Walzer 1983:165–183).

Walzer defines hard work as harsh, unpleasant and difficult to endure. People usually do not choose such work if they have any alternative, as it has a negative status in society and often leads to poverty, ill health, dishonour, and degradation. Whereas the risks and dangers of military service can be equally divided amongst citizens, the risks and dangers of coal mining do not come from a public enemy. This difference, as well as the strong bond between miners and the fact that their work is best done with experience, does not necessitate an equal sharing of this work amongst citizens.

Nevertheless, the work of miners does serve the interest of the political community, which could ease their burden in various ways, such as supporting research into mine safety, making health care available for their specific needs, enabling early retirement and decent salaries and pensions (Walzer 1983: 170). Instead of exposing mine workers to hard, gruelling work, degrading poverty, and many risks to their health and well-being, they are regarded as fellow citizens of equal moral standing, who are treated as such in their dangerous work. Through trade union membership they gain a voice in determining the contents of the communal social contract.

2.3 Poverty and the Justice of Reciprocity

The third category is justice as reciprocity. In this category issues arise that deal with the nature, scope, and contents of fair terms of co-operation at interpersonal, social, and institutional levels.

It is not without reason that the idea of a contract has been – and still is – so
influential in modern political philosophy. Many aspects of the public lives of citizens, of their social lives as members of communities and associations, and of their personal lives as individuals in interpersonal relationships can be characterised in terms of contractual agreements where two or more parties make an agreement that define their relationship, specify duties and responsibilities, and outline benefits and advantages. How to determine fair terms of co-operation at different levels in society and what qualifies as being fair co-operation between different people are important issues of justice.

The procedure for determining fair terms of co-operation must itself be evaluated in terms of justice, as an unfair procedure cannot lead to a just outcome. Thus, all procedures for determining outcomes that affect any aspect of justice need moral evaluation to determine whether they allow justice to prevail. For example, the procedures of criminal courts need evaluation to determine whether they are fair toward the victims, the accused, the prosecutors, the defenders, and the judge so that retributive justice will be satisfied. Similarly, the procedures for selecting national sports teams must be judged whether they are just toward all serious contenders for such coveted positions.

Poor people can be vulnerable to injustice when unfair procedures are used to determine fair terms of co-operation. Their powerless political position might have excluded them from participation in designing the procedures. As a result such procedures might be discriminatory to their interests. More likely, perhaps, is the possibility that the procedures are applied to their detriment, as they are too powerless to resist the pressure and manipulation exerted by powerful members of their society on weak or immoral implementers of procedures, like corrupt judges in courts of law.

Government policies and economic strategies are justified concerning poverty are
their side of agreements, or they do not have the power or self-confidence to resist unilaterally broken promises.

Many of the problems associated with justice as reciprocity start when individuals decide to become free-riders. A free-rider is an individual who judges that not doing one's share through reneging on agreements or promises will not have a large impact on society, as millions of other citizens will probably do their duty in any case (cf. Rawls 1971: 267–270). When other individuals become aware of free-riders, they could either decide to become like that themselves, or insist on collective arrangements that ensure that everyone does their part. Most people will keep to agreements only when they are sure that fellow citizens will do so too. In contemporary states with large populations people do not trust their fellow citizens to have sufficient moral integrity to make the enforcement of civic responsibilities superfluous (cf. Rawls 1971: 267–270).

The terms of co-operation mutually agreed upon can be presupposed in social conventions, embodied in promises, agreements, and contracts, or specified in responsibilities and obligations. In modern constitutional democracies many strong agreements are written in the constitution or laws of a state. The terms of co-operation can be found in many other places else as well. They can be raised knowingly and voluntarily as expectations by us through our own conduct, as when charitable donations over time raise expectations of continued or improved aid. Promises by aid agencies or agreements with local governments or business can also lead to informal assumptions of terms of co-operation between aid-givers and the needy.

Government policies outlining strategies and plans for eradicating poverty are promises to poor members of the electorate that a vote for the party will change their lives. Similarly, when rights accorded to poor people to have their basic needs fulfilled are included as part of a bill of rights in a state’s constitu-
tion they raise expectations. Poor people can legitimately expect that government and non-poor citizens will fulfil their correlative duties and take up their responsibilities. The rights of poor people do indeed make government and non-poor people respondents of those rights, which imply the latter have duties to fulfil those rights and responsibilities to provide poor people with the goods the rights assign to them.

Poor people themselves might find it difficult to keep to social agreements or to stick to promises. They too, must keep to financial agreements to repay loans, live up to agreements specifying job descriptions, and honour marriage vows to their partners.

Furthermore, their bodies have pain and scars that result from interpersonal violence, they have more diseases, and lose resistance to them than other people. When the terms of social co-operation are determined by fair procedures, their contents are just to everyone concerned, and when citizens keep to their agreements, contracts, and promises, a society benefits enormously. People adhering to fair terms of social co-operation create order and stability in a society, as people know what to expect from one another. As fellow citizens comply with social rules and implement mutually agreed upon principles and policies, they learn to trust one another. Order, stability, and trust in a context of fair and just social rules make for lasting peace.

2.4 Poverty and the Justice of Enablement

Justice as enablement concern the extent to which institutions and human behaviour enable or constrain the self-development and self-determination of people in society. When people are constrained to develop and use their capacities, they are being oppressed. When people are hindered to participate in determining the course of their lives, they are being dominated (Young 1990: 22, 37). Oppression and domination are thus the modes of the injustice of disablement. Oppression and domination need not necessarily be the result of individual actions or the consequence of identifiable social actors, such as gov-
ernments or businesses. They could result from many actions by individuals and institutional actors that combine into conditions, circumstances, and institutions that constrain the lives, opportunities, skills, and talents of groups of people. Poverty is an example of a condition consisting of many possible elements that can constrain people’s lives significantly and disable them into lives far below their capacity.

It is striking to note to what extent aspects of the phenomenon of poverty disable poor people to develop themselves and constrain their scope to determine their own lives. Poor people’s bodies suffer from an inadequate diet, leading to stunted growth, more diseases, and less resistance to them than other people. Furthermore, their bodies have pain and scars that result from interpersonal violence and the damage and dependence caused by substance abuse, like alcohol, for example. These effects on the bodies of poor people constrain children’s physical development and diminish the health and fitness of adults needed for motivated work. Hungry and painful bodies have diminished abilities for concentration on work that needs to be done, thus decreasing poor people’s performance in their daily work.

Poor people more often use interpersonal violence for resolving conflict. Violence leaves not only physical signs of abuse, but mental scars as well. Fear and distrust become part of life, with destructive effects on interpersonal relationships and the social fabric of poor communities. Sometimes moral decay follows when people become desperately poor and struggle to survive. Crime often follows as consequence of moral decay, creating further pressure on vulnerable people who sometimes have fragile social networks of support. Crime increases fear and frustration, thus disabling individuals through creating anxiety and destroying social bonds.

The social bond of family life is at great risk for many poor people. Fractured family relations can severely constrain healthy psychological development and
consume vast amounts of whatever precious little energy poor people have left after other struggles to survive. Domestic violence over the distribution of household resources and the division of household duties place further constraints on family members, usually women and children, who suffer from male violence. Their freedom of speech and personal autonomy are restricted through violent domination. In many cases, poor parents are too tired or stressed to take proper care of their children. In other cases, children grow up apart from their parents with other family members, thus deprived of the valuable resource of parental guidance and nurturing love that parents can give. Poor children’s psychological and emotional development can thus often be constrained through these factors.

Poor people are sometimes not capable of maintaining social relationships through lack of funds to invite people over, or because they cannot afford to participate in the lifestyles dominant in their communities. They might not have enough money available for the food, clothes, and proper interior decorations needed to sustain certain kinds of social relationships. Money for membership, the right clothing or gear, and lack of time might disqualify poor people from social activities such as cultural organisations, clubs, or sports events. They do not have the money to develop those aspects of their lives. As a result of the social isolation poor people often find themselves in, they are sometimes stereotyped or stigmatised by non-poor people. This might mean that non-poor people look down on poor people, refuse to associate with them, and treat them like dirt in social interactions. This becomes another constraining factor in the lives of poor people, making it difficult to present themselves with self-confidence in social situations other than those with their closest family or friends.

The negative effects of social constraints are strengthened by some poor people's dependence on aid. Some desperately poor people experience themselves as powerless to change their situation. They often have a negative self-image and feelings of inferiority. As a result they resign themselves to their
desperate condition. Experiencing poverty over a long period can strengthen these feelings and create a so-called “culture of poverty” in a community. Even aid can deepen these feelings through making people dependent and thus disable poor people to develop their own initiative and take care of themselves. Poverty can thus constrain people’s ability to function as mutually interdependent and relatively self-sufficient citizens.

Why is interdependence important to human beings? Interdependence characterises healthy relationships where adult people experience both dependence on, and independence from, other people. Why is it judged negative for poor people to be dependent on other people? The significance of interdependence can be explained by reference to the function of independence in the lives of disabled people (cf. Zola 1983). The effect of a disability is often to take away a part of a person's independence, leaving people more or less fully dependent on others. Obviously this must be a specific kind of dependence on other people, as all people are to some degree dependent on others – whether it be to buy clothes or for emotional support.

All humans are mutually interdependent – they are dependent on others for certain things, others depend on them for other things, and all of them are independent with respect to part of their own range of needs and interests. The dependence relevant here has to do with the basic components of daily living. Most adults are not entirely dependent on others for moving around their own bodies, for washing and dressing themselves, for supplying their own basic means of life, and so on. This means that there are certain things that human beings normally do for themselves and mostly want to do for themselves, without always needing others or being dependent on the assistance of someone else. Different kinds of disabilities rule out various kinds of activities that would have made this kind of personal independence possible. Disabilities affecting movement, for example, make it impossible for some people to move from one place to another – sometimes they cannot even get out of bed by themselves.
Other disabilities, for example those that severely affect intellectual and emotional capabilities, make the people suffering from them dependent on others for even some of the most basic decisions about their personal lives.

In the case of disabled people the severity of a disability is often regarded as being proportional to the degree of personal dependence that it causes (Garrad 1974:142). The degree of personal independence that a disabled person can maintain must not be measured by the quantity of (especially physical) tasks that such persons can do, but rather by the quality of life that they can attain – albeit with help (Zola 1983b:347; Stopford 1986:6). The most important aspect of personal independence is the ability to make many of one's own decisions, whether it be alone or in partnership with others. This aspect is more important than the quantity of activities that a person can perform. To make one's own decisions enables persons to take responsibility for a substantial part of what happens in their lives. To be able to do so, Stopford (1986:6) argues, is "crucial to achieving independence and self-respect."

The value of independence has direct consequences for the nature of aid. Stopford (1986:5) rejects the idea that those caring for disabled people should try to do as much as possible for them. Rather – it is correctly argued – independence should be encouraged by "intervening to assist only when required." This kind of care for disabled people would assist their progress in rehabilitation, as this progress is largely dependent on their self-concept. Garrad (1974:145) argues that disabled people who consider themselves capable of fulfilling an independent and definite, "although altered role" in society, respond better to treatment than those who see themselves as limited, dependent, and disabled people.

How can the role of dependence in the lives of disabled people be applied to poor people? In a sense, poor people are economically disabled people. More accurate would be to refer to poor people as people disabled in various ways
and to different degrees through lack of resources. The independence of people can suffer in different ways as a result of poverty. Poor people's independence is restricted by the way that poverty curtails their ability to make decisions about their own lives for lack of resources they command and opportunities they are able to utilise.

Some very poor people can be dependent on others for food, clothes, income, housing, transport, and for raising their children. These are things most people want to do or provide for themselves or pay others to do or provide them. Being dependent on others for those things, means having to rely on the goodwill of generous benefactors, which can be degrading. If a very poor person does not want to be dependent on others for these things, the only alternatives available might be to go without them or to steal to have them. Both alternatives can add further harm to very poor people. Furthermore, dependent people can not easily engage in mutually interdependent relationships, as their ability to give something of themselves to others is often severely restricted.

Dependency and feelings of resignation on a personal level easily turn into political powerlessness. On the other hand, political powerlessness and inequality suffered by poor people can reinforce personal dependency and resignation. Poverty leads to inequalities in the democratic process as poor people do not have the means available to compete with the more affluent groups. Poor people often experience that their democratic rights are of lesser worth as a result of their meagre means to utilise such rights. If poor people's further lack of command of resources is added to their lack of political influence, their experience of being socially disabled are strengthened. Adding political powerlessness to poor people's lack of social and economic power increases their dependence on the decisions of others to determine the course of their lives.

One important result of social and political powerlessness is that poor people's bargaining power with political authorities is limited. Consequently their ability
to secure adequate public services are limited. Often poor areas are neglected in the provision of public services like education, electricity, roads, water provision, recreation facilities, and health services. This often contributes to environmental degradation, adding to the pressure placed on the environment by aspects of poor lifestyles, such as desperate needs for firewood, inadequate space for animal grazing, overcrowded housing conditions, lack of public amenities, and services aiming to beautify urban surroundings. An environment without adequate services and amenities that lacks opportunities for self-development, recreation, and aesthetic enjoyment further constrains poor people’s self-development.

By now poverty can be described as a disabling condition that places many restrictions on people’s ability to determine their own lives and develop themselves. Lack of self-respect, reinforced by public stereotyping, undermines poor people’s confidence to change their situation. Lack of basic skills as a result of inadequate access to educational and self-improvement opportunities makes it difficult to design creative solutions to the problems of poverty. Lack of time and money place further constraints on people’s ability to change their lives, as does the inability to tap into social and political resources that can help to address problems of poverty collectively. On the whole, then, poverty is a major disabling condition. The question now is to rectify the injustice of poverty and to determine who is responsible.

2.5 Poverty and the Justice of Transformation

In justice as transformation issues of changing existing institutions, practices, and behaviour are explored. Matters such as rectifying past injustices, compensating victims of serious injustices, and dealing with the legacy of physical, social, and emotional harm inflicted by past injustices are discussed. Past injustices can be dealt with in different ways (cf. Gordon 1996). One way is to put retribution in the spotlight and thus to look for villainous agents who can be
blamed. Another way puts retribution aside and tries to find explanations for what went wrong. Some people prefer to rather remedy past injustices through transforming public institutions so that it becomes extremely difficult to repeat past injustices. The way people in a society respond to past injustices constitutes their redefinition of their public values and shared identity (Gordon 1996: 37).

In the case of poverty the issues would be how to transform the condition of poor people to one of self-sufficient, mutually interdependent citizens with self-respect. If this is the end goal, the question must be how poor people can take the initiative to drive this transformation for themselves while enlisting the needed help from others. Despite the importance of allowing poor people to take the initiative in their own transformation, listening to victims of poverty and speaking on their behalf might be appropriate in cases of desperate poverty where people may have been so affected by poverty as to need others to help them to help themselves.

How can citizens of contemporary constitutional democracies deal with victims of poverty? Judith Shklar (1990) judges a modern constitutional democracy to be the best available response to the sense of injustice, for the reason that it does not "simply silence every expression of the sense of injustice" (Shklar 1990: 117). Furthermore, people committed to a constitutional democracy accept "expressions of felt injustice as a mandate for change," instead of resorting to repression as most other regimes would do (Shklar 1990: 85). Listening to poor people would be important to determine their needs and their sense of society's injustice against them.

The awareness of victims in Western democracies in recent times has been politically significant, as the sense of injustice created thereby has "not merely festered, but has led to new institutions" (Shklar 1990: 37). The openness to accusations of injustice made by citizens functions as a "protection against op-
pression" for them (Shklar 1990: 55) and as an invaluable asset for all citizens who have an interest in "maintaining high standards of public service and rectitude" (Shklar 1990: 5). Openness to demands that injustice be rectified thus fulfills a vital function in protecting the moral and social health of a constitutional democracy.

Knowing that fellow citizens take them seriously as fellow-citizens-who-are-victims, poor people might explore opportunities for political protest. Transforming any social condition through public means will require political mobilisation, that is dependent on adequate public space for political protest. For this reason one must note the extent of civil liberties available in society and the degree to which dissatisfied citizens are tolerated to act on them.

Civil liberties are not only important as means for reaching the goal of transforming social injustices, but also for the transforming effect it has on the protesters. Poor people publicly protesting their condition are rising up to deny their powerlessness, making a start to assert their rights to develop themselves and determine their lives, and regaining their self-respect as people who refuse to be treated in humiliating ways. Michael Walzer calls mobilisation for collective protest action against the violation of their humanity through protest movements action by virtuous citizens and refers to protest movements as the "breeding grounds of self-respecting citizens" (Walzer 1983). When poor citizens demand to deliberate with their fellow citizens, start to take responsibility for their views on economic and social change, and publicly protest the violation of their rights, they are exercising political power in defence of their rights. Such citizens respect themselves by not allowing fellow citizens or governmental authorities to violate any of their rights through either acts of commission or omission.

If poor people can assert their rights and demand social change to rectify their situation, part of the change must be to determine who had any responsibility
for causing poverty and thus needs to compensate poor people in an effort to restore them to mutually interdependent, self-sustaining, equally respected, fellow citizens.

2.6 Poverty and the Justice of Retribution

Justice as retribution has its focus on appropriate sanctions, penalties, or punishment for those persons who violate society’s accepted principles of justice. Retribution presupposes a clear vision of what injustice is and clarity on the concept of responsibility, so as to be able to accurately determine who must be held responsible for specific injustices and to what degree.

What does responsibility mean? Responsibility has different meanings, but the one relevant here is the following. Responsibility means that some persons or groups could hold other persons or groups to account for their actions over which they have control or ought to have control. To hold people responsible for their actions is an integral part of a democratic society. People must demand that politicians, bureaucrats, and ordinary citizens explain or justify any kind of conduct that they regard as violating precepts, principles, and norms of justice.

Injustice has to do with actions or events that harm, injure, or constrain people. Injustice might occur when people are denied their rights or refused their valid claims to society’s benefits. Injustices are brought about by human agents and thus socially controllable or politically avoidable. To accurately identify injustice and hold people responsible, a distinction between injustice and misfortune is necessary (see Shklar 1990). Misfortune is unavoidable and cannot be altered through human intervention. Injustice, by contrast, is brought about by human beings and can thus be socially controlled or avoided.

The distinction between misfortune and injustice can become blurred in some
cases. Nevertheless, this distinction matters. Misfortune must be accepted, while injustice has to be rectified and compensated. If poverty, for example, is the result of inevitable and unalterable events, it has to be accepted. If poverty results from events that are alterable and avoidable, it becomes an injustice to be rectified and paid for. Poverty caused by natural forces, such as drought or floods, could be considered a misfortune, though only if there are no people who have the responsibility to prepare for such disasters, issue warnings of imminent disasters, repair the damage done, and prevent similar catastrophes from recurring.

The difficulties of distinguishing between misfortune and injustice can be explained as follows. Earthquakes and famines are usually explained as misfortune. This might not be true. Although they are natural and unavoidable, people today expect that governments will warn and protect them from natural disasters. Furthermore, people can make the impact of natural disasters worse. For example, buildings collapse during earthquakes because “contractors have violated construction codes and bribed inspectors,” people die because they were not warned of the dangers, or public authorities fail to make “serious preparations for the eventuality” (Shklar 1990: 2).

Once we have determined injustice and the people responsible, we must still decide on the degree of responsibility people have for injustice. The degree of responsibility for injustice is strongly affected by the distinction between active and passive injustice (Shklar 1990). Active injustice occurs when perpetrators of injustice deprive or harm other people’s life and dignity. Passive injustice results from persons who are indifferent to injustice happening. Passively unjust persons are people who tolerate injustice and ignore the claims of victims of injustice. Shklar depicts citizens who are passively unjust as any of us: when we do not report crimes, when we look the other way when we see cheating and minor thefts, when we tolerate political corruption, and when we silently accept laws that we regard as unjust, unwise or
Issues associated with poverty that bring the need for justice as retribution into play are the following. In the strong sense of active injustice many poor people are themselves subjects of possible retribution. Many poor people use violence against others, particularly to dominate women and to discipline children. Bodily injuries – sometimes severe – often result, as well as fear and distrust. The sorrow and unhappiness caused by the use of violence make the already difficult situation of poverty far worse. Sometimes moral decay is associated with poverty, that in some cases result in criminal conduct. Again, poor people slipping into criminal activities become targets for retributive justice.

Business people taking advantage of poor people through exploitative selling practices also expose themselves to retributive justice. Some of the causes of poverty, such as unjust political policies and practices places whole governments, and sometimes societies as well, under the judgement of retributive justice. Governments and societies can also be in trouble if they have started a war that has devastated the economy and thus the life prospects of other countries.

Passive injustice is highly relevant when discussing the link between poverty and justice as retribution. The idea of passive injustice helps us point out the responsibility of non-poor people for allowing people to continue living in conditions of poverty. In many societies non-poor people often allow poor people to die from ill health, fail to protect them from injustice and exploitation, do nothing to alleviate their lack of food, clothing, and shelter, and fail to enhance their opportunities for self-development and growth. Although non-poor people do nothing to visibly exacerbate the lot of poor people, they also do nothing to change or improve their situation, while the non-poor presumably have the ability and means to do so. Standing by while some people suffer from so much difficulties inflicted by a social disease like poverty, makes non-poor
people guilty of acting unjustly through violation of the positive intent of principles and norms of justice.

2.7 Poverty as a Conglomerate of Injustices

Why would one describe poverty as a conglomerate of injustices? A conglomerate consists of many different parts gathered, combined, or cemented together. Poverty seems like many unjust parts fitted together to combine into a greater whole unified under the rubric of poverty. We have seen in Chapter Three how it is possible to construct a profile of the poverty of individuals, families, communities, regions, or continents. This profile of poverty can be judged in terms of justice to deepen the profile so as to include a moral evaluation of the specific case of poverty.

Each individual case of poverty will be a unique configuration that consists of its own set of injustices, depending on the circumstances and people involved. Nevertheless, in each case of poverty more than one kind of injustice usually work together to create a conglomerate of injustices plaguing poor people. The injustices of poverty might lie in the causes and effects thereof, while some injustices of poverty consist of the failure of others to act to relieve poverty. The many sites where injustice can be done to cause, prolong, or exacerbate poverty, as well as the numerous effects of poverty on its sufferers, explain the multiple opportunities for injustices to be identified in each case of poverty.

3. Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown the value of analysing poverty as a matter of justice. I have first analysed the contents of the concept of justice to determine its scope and functions. The concept of justice concerns the public morality of a society, formed through collective decisions. A conception of justice aims to give content to the concept of justice by establishing a common point of view from which to adjudicate certain conflicts. These conflicts are about problems,
conditions, ideals, and values that are remediable through moral intervention and decision-making.

General requirements for the contents of this public morality to qualify as matters of justice are the following. The principles prescribed by a conception of justice must be consistently applied to all people subject to those rules. Differences and inequalities between people may be recognised, but only if they can be justified to everyone in terms of publicly acceptable reasons. The principles of justice must ensure that every person gets their due, provided “their due” is worked out and justified in terms of reasons and values appropriate to the matter concerned and acceptable to fellow citizens. Principles of justice do not necessarily have to apply to all spheres of a society, as some are legitimate only within one sphere, like the economy or within the context of education, for example. Other principles of justice, such as the importance of truth-telling are important in all spheres.

The fundamental aims of a conception of justice ought to be to recognise the humanity of human beings and to facilitate their opportunities to live their lives as worthy of human beings. When a conception of justice functions in this way for all citizens in a particular society, it plays the role of a pact of reconciliation that protects the interests and advances the good of all involved.

A conception of justice for relations between different states can no longer be judged to be impossible or too difficult to realise. The changing relations between states during the past century have brought the ideal of a global conception of justice much closer. Several good reasons to justify a strong commitment to articulate, justify, and implement a conception of global justice were discussed.

Using the concept of justice – the primary normative concept operative in contemporary societies – for understanding and evaluating poverty, illuminates
many of the moral issues concerning poverty in terms of the dominant public morality. The upshot of the chapter is that a conglomerate of injustices cluster together in the phenomenon of poverty, making it a social disease complex to understand and difficult to deal with other than a case-by-case basis, viewed in wider social and global context.

I use the concept of justice as an analytical tool for understanding the moral issues involved in poverty. I show that the concept of justice raises moral issues that can be divided into six categories. Justice as recognition deals with matters affecting human dignity, such as respect for persons and the ways they may be treated or not. Justice as distribution has to do with the way income, wealth, possessions, and goods are divided between individuals and for what reasons. Justice as enablement concerns ways and means of enabling people’s self-development and self-determination, while lessening constraints on the development of their capacities and skills, as well as eliminating stumbling blocks on their path to self-determination.

Justice as reciprocity deals with ways to determine fair terms of social co-operation in various contexts, as well as how to ensure compliance with those terms. Justice as transformation focuses on the legacies of past injustice and how best to compensate victims and change institutions or policies so as to avoid similar injustices in future. Justice as retribution looks at violations of principles of justice embodied in constitutions, laws, and policies. This category also tries to determine degrees of responsibility for both violations of principles of justice, as well as for failures to positively fulfil duties required by a conception of justice.

Many moral issues raised by poverty fall into these six categories of justice. In the light of this analysis poverty is a major disabling condition that causes many harms to the lives of poor people. Poverty is a dehumanising human condition that deprives its sufferers of many aspects that contribute to people
having a good quality of life.

The question now arises what light a Biblical perspective can throw on the moral issues involved in poverty and whether that light adds any unique contribution to what we already know. In the next two chapters I explore the ethics on poverty and riches contained in the Old and New Testaments.

In Part Three of the thesis I try to unlock the answers the Bible can give to the moral problems associated with poverty as we understand it today.

In the first two chapters of Part Three, I analyse the ethics on poverty and riches contained in the Biblical texts themselves. In Chapter Six I analyse texts from the Old Testament that are relevant to poverty and riches. In Chapter Seven I look at texts in the New Testament that are relevant to the moral issues of poverty and riches.

In the last of these, Chapter Eight, I consider the ethical dimension to the socio-economic impact of poverty and riches today, and the way in which these Biblical texts could inform the Commission on Poverty. I also explore the ways the Biblical texts teach us about the moral acceptability of wealth and the ways in which wealth is used. The basis for this exploration is the idea that poverty is not only a consequence of want but also a cause of want, and the way in which wealth is used is of paramount importance.
PART 3

THE BIBLE AND POVERTY TODAY

In Part Three of the thesis I try to unlock the answers the Bible can give to the moral problems associated with poverty as we understand it today.

In the first two chapters of Part Three, I analyse the ethics on poverty and riches contained in the Biblical texts themselves. In Chapter Six I analyse texts from the Old Testament that are relevant to poverty and riches. In Chapter Seven I look at texts in the New Testament that are relevant to the moral issues of poverty and riches.

In the last chapter, Chapter Eight, I combine the results from Chapters Six and Seven into a Biblical ethics of poverty and wealth. I then proceed to link this Biblical ethics of poverty and riches with the analyses done in Part Two. I look at the extent to which the Biblical texts deal with the complexities of poverty and explore the ways the Biblical texts deal with the six categories of justice concerning poverty and riches. I conclude the thesis first by creating a Christian ethics of poverty and riches. Then I finally explore the role a Christian ethics of poverty and riches can play in the public sphere of politics.
CHAPTER SIX

POVERTY, RICHES, AND THE OLD TESTAMENT

In the narrative of the rich man and Lazarus in the New Testament (Lk. 16: 19–31), the rich man asks Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers to avoid ending up in Hades as he – the rich man – did. Abraham gives an intriguing answer. His brothers have access to the Old Testament (Moses and the prophets) and that is sufficient to warn them to live the right life that will avoid his fate. If they do not listen to the Old Testament, they would also ignore someone risen from death. Abraham’s answer implies that the Old Testament is God’s clear and definitive message on how to treat poor people for the people living in the time of Jesus. Nothing more is needed. What is this message of Moses and the prophets? In this chapter I want to discuss the awareness of the circumstances of poverty and the values for dealing with poverty and riches that the Old Testament expresses. I will first look at the Pentateuch, then the prophetic writings, after which the wisdom literature will be analysed. The chapter closes with a section on expressions of poverty and wealth in the Psalms and the historical writings.

1. Poverty in the Pentateuch

The foundation of the Old Testament’s values concerning poverty is in the Pentateuch. All other Old Testament writings on poverty derive from the values formulated in the books of the Pentateuch. The other books of the Old Testament are at most applying these values in new social contexts. The fundamental role of Pentateuchal values on poverty necessitates a detailed close reading of these texts.
The emphasis on God as first priority for Israel is striking. The references to God's covenant with Israel scattered throughout the Pentateuch makes this point clearly. God's choice of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to be the ancestors of the nation Israel and God's liberation of His chosen nation (people) from bondage in Egypt are fundamental for understanding the values concerning poverty in the Pentateuch. God's election of these people to have a covenantal relationship with Him is accompanied by His loving care through which He guides their lives and saves them from oppression. In return He expects their obedience to a life-style based on His laws. These laws reflect something of His nature and are given to establish a relationship between Him and them that will enable them to acknowledge Him as their God, the one and only God. The laws also aim to lay the foundations for a communal life where every person treats the other humanely, thus leading to a peaceful and prosperous life for the nation.

1.1 God as First Priority

In the Pentateuch God claims to be the first priority of Israel and wants to command the total allegiance of this group of people. What does this mean? What does it imply for values on poverty and riches? In the Pentateuch God introduces Himself as the one who elected Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to be his followers. Their descendants would form a nation (people) that would be God's special people. He promised Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that they would have many descendants for whom God would be a God and to whom He would give their own land. In return they must worship Him as the only God in the universe. He alone is God (Dt. 6: 4) and Israel must love Him with all their hearts, souls, and strengths (Dt. 6: 5). This command is fundamental. God has to be first priority who commands the ethical orientation and lifestyle of every Israelite in all parts of their lives (Miller 1990: 98, 105). How to love and worship God are not only specified in the fundamental laws of God's covenant, i.e. the ten commandments (Dt. 5: 5b–21 and Ex. 20: 2–17). The other rules and values specified in the Pentateuch for individuals
and the community all aim to be detailed applications of the ten commandments. For this reason they too express the scope of genuine love for God as the only God.

God’s claim to be the only God and thus to legitimately demand the total allegiance of Israel rests on what He promised their ancestors and what He did to liberate Israel from Egyptian bondage. Both narratives of the origin of the ten commandments includes God’s introductory remark that He is the God of Israel who rescued them from slavery in Israel. God’s liberation of Israel from Egyptian oppression is frequently used in Deuteronomy to justify normative values. Two examples will suffice. The commandment to individuals, their households, strangers, and slaves to observe the Sabbath in Deuteronomy (5: 12–15) is justified by reminding the Israelites that they were saved by God from being slaves in Egypt. Similarly, the command not to gather all the corn, grapes, or olives, but to leave some for the foreigners, widows, and orphans is given to Israel because they once were slaves in Egypt (Dt. 24: 19–22) (Hamlin 1995: 101). Their own experience of oppression and being foreigners must sensitise them not to treat any person like they were treated (Miller 1990: 127).

This justification of God’s laws to Israel must also be used for all the laws collectively. Israel is advised to answer their children’s questions about God’s laws in the following way (cf. Dt. 6: 20–25). If children ask their parents why God commanded their parents to obey these laws, they must answer them by telling the story of how God rescued them from Egyptian slavery. They must tell the children how God brought them to the land promised to their ancestors. Having elected their ancestors, liberated the Israelite slaves from Egyptian oppression, and given them the promised land, God then demanded their total allegiance to live obediently according to His laws. Keeping the remembrance of God’s deliverance from slavery alive would ensure [1] that the Israelites stay aware that they must depend on
God and his words to sustain them, not on food and water alone (cf. 8: 3) and [2] that they have compassion with vulnerable people who are marginalised and oppressed in their society. Keeping the memory of deliverance alive, means to think of God’s reaction to the Israelites in Egyptian bondage and to develop a similar compassion towards people in need. God saw their slavery, heard their groaning, remembered His covenant with their ancestors, and became concerned enough to rescue them from Egyptian oppression (Ex. 2: 23).

Whatever else the Pentateuch has to say about poverty, this perspective may not be lost. All values dealing with poverty flow from the demand that Israel must love the only God, the One who has saved them from oppression, with their whole person and life. Part of loving God is acquiring aspects of His nature. A good example is the depiction of God as an impartial judge who does not accept bribes and as compassionate carer for widows, orphans, and foreigners. These values are consistently recommended to Israel as required by God.

1.2 God’s Promises to Israel

God often promises Israel the blessings of a good life in the promised land if they obey His commandments. These promised blessings are highly significant for an understanding of the values concerning poverty. Not only do most of the blessings concern successful food production and creation of wealth, but one promise explicitly states that no member of Israel will be poor if they are obedient to God’s commands. The conditions attached to these promises that the Israelites must fulfil are all variations of obedience. If they listen to God’s commands, obey them, live according to His laws, faithfully keep His commandments, love Him, and turn back from worshipping other gods, then the specified blessings will follow.
These blessings fall into four categories of which two are directly relevant to issues of poverty. The promise of blessings of material prosperity in an agrarian context dominates. If the Israelites are obedient they will have abundant crops from the fertile land with enough water. The detail of the kinds of crops are listed, such as corn, wine, olive-oil, etc. Their barns will be filled with food and they will have more than enough to eat. Blessings of a more personal nature refer to personal well-being, blessings on their work, being prosperous, and having many children. As a nation obedience will bring them riches, greatness, and God’s help in defeating their enemies. He will make them His own people, which refers to the religious blessings of obedience to God’s commands. Obedience will lead to God keeping His covenant, showing love and mercy, giving them obedient hearts, and bringing them back from where they are scattered among the nations because of disobedience.

These promises are made in the unique context of Israel entering the promised land as God’s chosen people (nation). These promises could be understood in two ways. One could argue that God willingly intervenes in nature to control natural forces like the weather to produce rain if the Israelites are obedient to His commandments. This argument can be supported by God’s promise to give rain at appropriate times and His threat that disobedience would lead to a curse, such as drought. If this is correct, then the promised blessings are powerful incentives for obedience to God’s laws. The curses, on the other hand, are strong threats of impending disaster that ought to instill fear in many people’s hearts.

Another understanding of these promises depends on the argument that God’s commands contain values that enables a kind of living that is best suited to a good life for human beings. The promise that obedience to God’s commandments will guarantee that no Israelite is poor, presupposes a community where no oppression or exploitation takes place, where people
do not steal one another’s property, where poor people are appropriately taken care of, where honesty in economic life means paying just wages on time, and where dealers do not cheat with their scales measuring the weight of their products. Both these interpretations seem valid, thus blessings follow both from divine intervention in natural and human affairs and from ethical human conduct.

God’s promises to Israel play an important role as incentives for Israel to obey His commands. The curses that are to follow disobedience to His commands are sanctions or threats with a similar intention of reinforcing the correct moral behaviour. Incentives and sanctions are not the only measures in the Pentateuch in support of the preferred normative values. An explicit commitment to God is perhaps the most important motivating factor. The Israelites are constantly called on to make a commitment to love and worship Yahweh only. People committed to love God would want to serve Him through obedience to His commands. These calls are made on various grounds. One is that Yahweh is the only God. Another is that He elected their ancestors as His people and promised them many descendants in a land of their own. A further ground for a strong commitment to God and a life lived according to His commandments is His role in the liberation of the Israelites from Egyptian oppression.

1.3 Provisions for the Poor: Commandments Concerning the Poor

What kind of ethical conduct towards the poor does the Pentateuch prescribe? A general theme is to help fellow-Israelites in need generously and to give to them freely and unselfishly from what one has available (Dt. 15: 7–11). The section stresses that there will always be poor and needy people and for that reason God commands the Israelites to be generous.
Another general theme is the protection of vulnerable people in the ancient Israelite society. The Israelites are told not to deprive foreigners, orphans and widows of their rights, nor to ill-treat or oppress them (Dt. 24: 17; Ex. 22: 21–24). Foreigners were vulnerable as they were alone between strangers, without the protection of members of their family, clan, or tribe. Widows in a patriarchal society were vulnerable without a husband’s income, possession of land, and protection (Childs 1974: 478; Clements 1972: 146). Orphans without parents are vulnerable in practically any society, unless given special care (Clements 1972: 146). Besides general instructions not to violate their rights or exploit them, three categories of measures are mentioned to protect the poor in ancient Israelite society. These measures include sharing resources with poor people, refusal to exploit poor people’s powerless position but to treat them with honesty, and special accommodations for poor people.

Non-poor Israelites had to share their resources with poor people in several ways. When harvesting grapes, olives, or corn, they were not gather every part of the crops yielded. After they have picked olives once, they were to leave the rest for the orphans, widows, and foreigners to collect (Dt. 24: 19–22; Lv. 19: 9–10). The Israelites were not to cut the corn at the edges of the fields and the corn left on the field were for poor people to collect. They were similarly instructed not to go back over their vines for a second time to harvest grapes. What is left, is for the poor people to collect. This provision for poor people is significant as benefits were only available to poor people capable of, and willing to, collect whatever bits of the harvest were left.

Besides sharing the abundance of agricultural crops with poor people, the Israelites also had to share their money with poor people. The Israelites were commanded to be generous to poor people and in this context it meant lending them as much as they needed (Dt. 15: 7–11). Loans played a different role in ancient Israel and were regarded as a means to help poor people
to recover from poverty (Miller 1990: 173). For this reason God forbade the Israelites to charge interest on loans (Ex. 22: 25; Lv. 25: 36, 37), as interest could only prolong the poor person’s struggle against poverty (Miller 1990: 173). In any case, no non-poor person ought to benefit from the suffering of a poor person, but must rather help them in their need (Hamlin 1995: 138; Cole 1973: 125). What could be done was to take some personal possession of the poor person as a pledge or security that the money will be repaid. This practice could also be abused. The Israelites were not allowed to take anything linked to the provision of basic necessities for sustaining life. The millstone of a poor person was off limits, as it was used to grind corn for staying alive (Dt. 24: 6). Similarly, the coats of poor people could not be kept overnight, depriving them of protection against the cold (Dt. 24: 10–13; Ex. 22: 25). A widow’s garment could never be taken (Dt. 24: 17). Restrictions were not only placed on what could be taken as pledge or security, but also how it should not be done. In the case of a neighbour, the lender should not collect the pledge or security. Most possibly to avoid embarrassing or humiliating poor persons, the lender had to wait outside to let the poor persons bring the pledge or security outside by themselves (Dt. 24: 10–13).

Another way of sharing resources with the poor was through tithing. Two out of three years tithing meant that the Israelites had to set aside a tenth of the produce of their fields which they had to eat at the place where God had chosen to be worshipped. Through this meal the Israelites had to honour God and enjoy themselves (Dt. 14: 22–29). Every third year the tithe of their produce had to be stored in the towns for the use of the Levites, who had no property, as well as for the use of the orphans, widows, and foreigners (Dt. 26: 12). These groups were allowed to come and get all they needed, so that they could have enough food to eat, and thus survive. Through the practice of tithing the Israelite community took responsibility for provision of food for the basic needs of poor groups in society. The goods of God’s blessing in
Israel are made available and shared by all members of Israelite society (Miller 1990: 184).

Closely linked to the idea of tithing are the annual festivals, especially the Harvest Festival and the Festival of Shelters, that make explicit provision for poor people. These two festivals have important similarities (Dt. 16: 9–12, 13–17). Both are linked to the time of harvest in an agrarian society. In both cases each person ought to bring a voluntary gift in proportion to the blessings that God has given them. The aim of both festivals are to honour God and to be joyful. The festivals are to reinforce the idea that all good things come from God and to avert the danger that prosperous people will attribute their success to themselves and forget the Giver of their blessings (Miller 1990: 117). The list of participants are identical in both cases. Significantly these festivals must be enjoyed with not only family members, but also servants, Levites, orphans, widows, and foreigners. No member of the community should be left out of the festivities (Miller 1990: 132).

A second series of commands dealing with poor people exhorts the Israelites not to exploit the powerless position of poor people, but rather to treat them with honesty. In a sense, these commands concretise two of the ten commandments, i.e. not to steal and not to give false witness. The latter becomes relevant in the task description of judges. Judges – to be appointed in all towns – are implored to always give impartial judgments that are fair, honest and just (Dt. 16: 18–20; Lv. 19: 15). They are urged not to accept bribes, as gifts to judges can blind the eyes of honest and wise men, leading them to make the wrong decisions. Bribes simply ruin the cause of those who are innocent. Analogous to the acceptance of bribes are signs of favouritism to poor persons in court, denial of justice to persons because they are poor, or fear of the rich leading to biased judgements. All these practices are wrong. The truth should be heard and be decisive, regardless of the socio-economic status of the persons involved.
Another aspect of truthfulness and honesty concerns the use of appropriate weights and measures. Anyone selling products that needs to be weighed, counted, or measured in any way are commanded not to cheat their customers (Dt. 25: 13–14; Lv. 19: 35). Their instruments for the measurement of weight, length, quantity, and volume must be true and honest. If not, they are more than dishonest and false. They are also stealing from their customers. Using false weights and measures thus violates two of the ten commandments.

A further refinement of the commandment not to steal states that in several cases people will sin against God if they illegitimately acquire something belonging to a fellow-Israelite. Stealing is the obvious example, but three other refined forms of stealing are discussed. People can steal things belonging to others by cheating, by refusing to return something left as a deposit, or by lying about something that the person lost and swearing that it was not found (Lv. 6: 2–3) (Gorman 1997: 43). Whatever is stolen in this way by getting things through dishonest means, must be repaid in full, plus an added twenty percent, if the person is found guilty of using dishonest means.

A person can keep something belonging to somebody else by not paying them on time. The Israelites are commanded in general terms not to hold back even for a day the wages of someone they have hired (Lv. 19: 13). However, this general rule is specifically applied to poor and needy hired servants, whether Israeliite or not (Dt. 24: 14–15). They must be paid for their work every day before sunset, because they need it and have counted on getting it. To withhold their wages would be to take away their ability to provide for the basic needs of themselves and their families. It is also a form of stealing (Hamlin 1995: 137).
Several other measures in the Pentateuch aims to safeguard the ability of poor people to provide basic necessities for themselves. So, for example, in the prescribed animal offerings for different kinds of sin, provision is made for people too poor to be able to afford a sheep or a goat. If they cannot afford that, they can offer two doves or two pigeons. If these birds are still too expensive, one kilogram of flour would do (Lv. 5: 7–11). Similar provision is made for poor women who cannot offer a lamb to offer two doves or two pigeons instead. Poverty should not stand in the way of persons’ restoration of their relationships with God through prescribed offerings (Lv. 14: 21) (Gispen 1950: 90, 91; Gorman 1997: 80).

Although women have a precarious position in the patriarchal society of ancient Israel, at least two commands are directed at protecting vulnerable women besides those aimed at widows. In one case (slave) women in polygamous marriages are protected. When the man takes an extra wife, he must still treat the other wife, or wives, as before. The other wife, or wives, must get the same amount of food and clothing as before and retain the same rights (Ex. 21: 10) (Childs 1974: 469). If a man is unable to treat his wives in this way, he must set them free without receiving any payment. This command ensures that women in polygamous marriages do not impoverish as a result of not being the current favourite of the husband.

Another command to protect women against impoverishment came about through Zelophehad’s five daughters negotiating with Moses (Nu. 27: 1–11; 36: 1–12). The five daughters challenged this command at the entrance to the tent of God’s presence, with Moses, Eleazar the priest, the leaders, and the whole community present (Sakenfeld 1995: 149–150). A quite daring thing for young women to do in a patriarchal society! In this case the commands of the Pentateuch disadvantage them as they are not allowed to inherit their father’s property. Dying without a son in ancient Israel meant that the closest male relative inherited the dead man’s land. Their argument for
the right of daughters to inherit their father’s land rests on the importance of
the continuation or disappearance of the male’s name. Moses takes their re-
quest to inherit their father’s land so as to preserve his name to God. God
grants their request and modifies the rules of inheritance so that daughters
are second in line to inherit their father’s land after their brothers (Noth 1968:
211). If there are no daughters then the land will go to the closest male rela-
tives of the dead man. Whether the main concern of the daughters was to
preserve their father’s name or to secure a means of making a living does
not really matter. They inherited their father’s land and got a means to avoid
desperate poverty.

In an interesting twist they lose part of their freedom, without losing any as-
pect of the newly won right to inherit (Noth 1968: 212). As a result of the al-
location of land to the twelve tribes of Israel and the command that the land
of each tribe should stay their own, the five daughters would only be allowed
to marry members of their own tribe. If they were to marry outside their tribe,
the tribe would lose that land to the husband’s tribe (cf. Sakenfeld 1995:
185). This was unacceptable, as it is explicitly stated that the property of
each Israeliite must stay attached to their tribe and that property may not
pass from one tribe to another. The restriction of their freedom of choice in
marriage partners makes sense in view of this conception of land holding
held by the Israelites (Nu. 36: 1–12). Despite this restriction, they won the
important right to have access to, and ownership of, their father’s land that
could ensure their safeguard against impoverishment.

Land holding was affected by the Sabbath year as well. The Year of Resto-
ration followed after seven cycles of Sabbath years and had important impli-
cations for land holding (Lv. 25: 23–34). The fact that land in Israel could not
be sold on a permanent basis, implied that a land owner immediately ac-
quired a right to buy back his land the moment he sold it. If a person was
forced to sell his land through poverty, he could get it back through three op-
tions. The quickest option would be to have wealthy relatives who could buy it back. If there are no such close relatives, the second option is that such a person must wait until he has earned enough money to buy back the land himself. The last option would be to wait until the next Year of Restoration, when the land would be returned to the original owner or his descendants. The last option determines the price that a person would have to pay if the land is bought back. The sum paid would have to make up the income the new owner would have had from the amount of harvests left until the next Year of Restoration, when the land would have been returned to the original owner in any case.

The Sabbath principle had implications not only for land holding, but also for the cultivation of the land (Ex. 23: 10–11). Land could be cultivated for six years successively, but during the seventh year it had to rest. The Israelites were not allowed to harvest anything that grew on the land during the Sabbath year. Whatever grew on the land could be eaten by the poor, whether it was corn, olives, or grapes.

Poor people benefited from the Sabbath year in another way. At the end of every Sabbath year all debts of Israelites who owed their fellow-Israelites money were cancelled (Dt. 15: 1–11). This command did not apply to the debt of foreigners. As loans were intended to enable poor people to get rid of their poverty, the Sabbath year accelerated that process by releasing poor people from burdens and obligations that often become oppressive and enslaving (Miller 1990: 134). The danger that people in a position to grant loans would refuse to do so close to a Sabbath year was real. For this reason the Israelites were admonished not to refuse to lend poor people money because of the approaching Sabbath year. To even consider such an idea is rejected outright.
2. Poverty and Prophecy

Many of the Old Testament prophets discuss various issues concerning poverty. In their dealings with poverty, the prophets imaginatively apply the values of Pentateuchal theology to concrete situations of Israel and Judah (Smith 1989: 68). Among the prophets, Amos stands out as the champion of the cause of poor people. This reputation of Amos, justified by his strong focus on issues of poverty and wealth, merits close attention to the network of themes running through prophecies. For this reason, I will first discuss the book of Amos and then compare the other books of Old Testament prophets with his message on poverty.

2.1 The Fame of Amos as Champion of the Poor

The prophet Amos certainly deserves his reputation as champion of the poor for the scathing attacks he makes on the wealthy Israelites who exploit their fellow-Israelites (Hasel 1991: 17). Amos sharply criticises wealthy Israelites for their humiliating and oppressive treatment of poor people. To understand why Amos has this strong message of social justice, we have to reflect on the full scope of his message. The different parts of his message fit together in a network of associated meanings. The network is based on the shared understanding Amos and his readers have concerning the law of Yahweh and the defining moments of Israel’s history, such as the election of Abraham, the exodus, wilderness, and conquest experiences (Smith 1989: 71; Hasel 1991: 72). This network has the following components and relationships.

I want to claim that the central theme of the book Amos is Israel’s failed relationship with God. God wants to have a special relationship with this nation that He has chosen to be His people, but Israel fails to respond appropriately as they do not live according to God’s commands. God’s commands require a life-style that integrates worship of God as the only God with demanding
ethical guidelines on how to treat other people (Smith 1989: 172; Hasel 1991: 120). Amos criticises Israel especially for their failure to follow God’s ethical values for dealing with poor people (König 1974: 79). Although they do worship God, their worship seems insincere. Their unethical behaviour towards the poor makes their worship unacceptable to God (Freeman 1968: 185; König 1974: 35). Can this claim be substantiated from the text of the book of Amos?

In the prophecy against Judah (Am. 2: 4–5), the link between worship and ethics is clear. God accuses Judah of being led astray by other gods, of despising His teachings, and of failing to keep His commands. God’s teachings and commands include both worship and ethics. However, the prophecies against Israel stress this theme much stronger. The reason for the prophet’s stringent criticism of Israel lies in God’s history with this nation. As in Pentateuchal theology, Amos refers to the exodus from Egypt and the conquest of Canaan (Am. 2: 9–10; 3: 1–2). God delivered them from Egyptian slavery, led them through the desert, and gave them the land of the Amorites whom He destroyed as well. God’s election of Israel to be His people (Am. 3: 2) is the important reason why God judges Israel’s sins to be so awful and deserving of punishment. God chose them out of all the nations on earth and from God’s side His relationship with them was special. Israel was the only nation that he has intimately known and cared for. God’s choice of Israel for this special relationship and His interventions in history on their behalf now justifies punishment for their consistent refusal to live according to His demands (König 1974: 44). The privilege of being elected to be God’s people carries with it the responsibility to live as a holy nation (Smith 1989: 97). Failure meant punishment.

Israel got a fair chance from God to change their attitude to God’s commands and to return to Him and obey His commands. Their refusal to obey God is summarised by the expression that they have sinned again and again
(Am. 2: 6). God inflicted many of the curses, mentioned in the Pentateuch, on Israel, but despite these curses they did not return to God. They did not respond to God’s attempts to lead them to repentance and rededication (Soggin 1987: 76). The accusation that they failed to go back to God is repeated five times in the section mentioning the curses (Am. 4: 4–12). Israel’s inability to do God’s will is emphasised by their failure to admit the seriousness of their situation. They refuse to admit that God’s judgement on their sins is bringing a day of disaster and therefore they do not mourn over the pending ruin of their nation (Am. 6: 1–14). Their insight into the state of their religious life is poor. As a result they cannot respond to God’s invitation to get life from Him. The promise “you will live” is repeated three times, if only they would come back to God and do what is right (Am. 5: 1–27). Again, worship and ethics are linked.

What made it so difficult for Israel to establish the right relationship with God and to obey all His commands? The main problem seems to be that a section of the Israelites lived a wealthy, luxurious life-style that depended on the exploitation and impoverishment of their fellow-Israelites. This life-style involved the violation of several values concerning the treatment of poor people found in the Pentateuch. God’s network of moral rules designed to protect the poor and vulnerable people in society were all violated so that the guilty parties could live luxuriously. These violations are also a rejection of God and the values He commanded them to follow (Smith 1989: 86).

The luxurious life-style of the rich is described as follows. The rich Israelites have large houses, sometimes called mansions (Am. 6: 8), decorated with ivory, and built from fine stone, a material previously only available to kings (Smith 1989: 168). Some people had more than one house, as winter and summer houses are mentioned (Am. 3: 15). They have beautiful interiors in their houses, as they lie on luxurious couches (3: 12; 6: 4). They eat the best foods, such as veal and lamb (Am. 6: 4), and demand wine, that they drink
by the bowlful (Am. 6: 6). They enjoy feasts and banquets (Am. 6: 7) and like entertainment, as they compose songs and play them on harps (Am. 6: 5). They beautify themselves by using the finest perfumes (Am. 6: 6).

The life-style of the rich in ancient Israel in the time of Amos was based on a general attitude towards poor people that allowed rich people to violate God’s commands about poor people and thus to exploit and oppress them. Their general attitude towards vulnerable people in society, such as the weak, the needy, and the poor is as follows. The rich people will oppress, ill-treat, trample on, and try to destroy these categories of vulnerable people. They will do these things through cheating people out of their rights, twisting justice and turning it into poison, and turning right into wrong. Their honesty in dealing with other people is practically non-existent. The rich people criticised by Amos disregarded the network of moral values found in the Pentateuch that prescribes acceptable behaviour towards the poor and other vulnerable people in Israelite society.

Amos spells out the details of their violation of the moral values found in the Pentateuch. The rich Israelis violated the commands about loans given to poor people to help them recover from poverty. They took the clothing given by the poor as pledge or security for their loans and used it to sleep on at places of worship (Am. 2: 8). Clothing could not be kept overnight, as the poor needed it to keep them warm (Dt. 24: 10–13; Ex. 22: 25). To require clothing as a pledge was legitimate. To keep the clothing to enrich themselves was an abuse of God’s commands (Smith 1989: 86). Similarly, they drank wine taken from the poor unable to pay their debts and drank it in the temple of God. Both these deeds shows disrespect for God as well, as they violate God’s commands whilst at places where God ought to be worshipped.
The rich people who granted loans to the poor did not allow them enough time to pay off their debt. Rather, they demanded immediate repayment and as a result many poor people had to sell themselves as slaves (Smith 1989: 82). There is no indication that Israelites who failed to pay their debts could for this reason be sold into slavery. Although it was possible for Israelites to become slaves, a fellow-Israelite was not to be the initiator making the other into a slave. At most Israelites may have been sold to, or sell themselves to, a fellow-Israelite, but nothing more than that (Dt. 15: 12–18). In Deuteronomy the Israelite slave must be released after six years and be given generous help to start a new life. According to Leviticus, the Israelites should not make Israelites who sold themselves as slaves, do the work of slaves. Rather, they should treat them as hired servants and release them and their families at the next year of Restoration (Lv. 25: 39–55). Even before the required time of release, an Israelite slave has the right to be bought back by family or through his own earnings.

Amos criticises the rich people for their attitude towards slaves in the light of the context of this cautious allowance that Israelites might become slaves and the specification of rules to safeguard a fixed time for slavery and the human dignity of such slaves. Amos says the rich sell honest people into slavery who cannot repay even a minuscule debt like the price of a pair of sandals (Am. 2: 6). The impression that the rich people were actively trying to find fellow-Israelites as slaves is strengthened when he says the rich try to find poor people who cannot pay their debts, although the debts again might be very small (Am. 8: 6). Instead of helping poor people to stay out of slavery, they deliberately try to get them as slaves for their own benefit. In the context of the experience of slavery in Egypt this behaviour is insensitive and unacceptable. God explicitly declares that Israelites may not become permanent slaves because they are His slaves (Lv. 25: 55). To actively look for poor people unable to pay their debts – even very small ones – with the
intent of enslaving them runs against the spirit of several moral values in the Pentateuch concerning the poor.

The rich Israelites not only tried to acquire human beings illegitimately, they also acquired property illegitimately. Amos accuses them of acquiring property through crime and violence, rather than legitimately buying property. This attitude of acquiring things that do not belong to them, also manifested in their business dealings. They robbed the poor of their grain (Am. 5: 11). Instead of using the appropriate weights and measures (Dt. 25: 13–14; Lv. 19: 35), they used false measures, tampered with the scales, and thus overcharged their customers. In this way they stole what belonged to their customers (Smith 1989: 254). Sometimes they defrauded their customers by selling them worthless wheat at a high price. No wonder that Amos thinks that they do not even know how to be honest! Their dishonesty also surfaced in the courts. The rich hated anybody who challenged injustice and spoke the truth in court (Am. 5: 11), they prevented the poor from getting justice in court (Am. 5: 12), they took bribes, judged unjustly, and thus turned justice into poison (Am. 6: 12). They used the judicial process to advance their own interests at the cost of the poor (Smith 1989: 167).

Their dishonesty towards God made Him say that He hated their religious festivals and their noisy songs. Despite appearances that they believed in God and were faithful in observing religious festivals, they made nazirites drink wine and ordered prophets not to speak. When they observed holy days, they did so with an attitude of not being able to wait to begin again with their dishonest and unjust business practices (Am. 8: 5–6). Instead of honouring and worshipping God, they seemingly endured the holy days to get back to their immoral behaviour as soon as possible.

Despite the harsh criticisms that the lifestyle of the rich invite, Amos keeps open the possibility that they might accept God’s offer to change their lives
and obey His law. Amos advises the rich people to go back to God and do what is right, so that they will live (Am. 5: 1–27). Instead of performing religious festivals that God hate, bringing offerings that He will not accept, and making music that He won’t listen to (Am. 5: 21–23), Israel should hate evil, love what is right (Am. 5: 15), and in beautiful metaphors, “let justice flow like a stream and righteousness like a river that never goes dry” (Am. 5: 24). An everyday life lived in justice is part of worship and must accompany other forms of worship (Smith 1989: 187; Hasel 1991: 13). The book closes with the promise that despite Israel’s destruction as punishment for their continued refusal to live as God’s people, God will restore Israel in future (Am. 9: 11–15).

The book Amos teaches that the right relationship with God is interdependent with obedience to His commands on how to treat other people, especially the poor (König 1974: 84). To neglect either is unacceptable to God. To serve the God of Israel is a multidimensional and comprehensive matter: all aspects of religion must receive attention simultaneously – conversion from wrong ways, faith in the God of Israel, presenting offerings to God, singing songs of praise to God, respect for the Law and obedience to its commands, caring for the poor in society, and protecting the vulnerable people living with you. Nothing can be neglected, although truly worshipping God and ethical behaviour towards fellow human beings are the main priorities that depend on each other (Harrison 1969: 887).

2.2 Amos, the Poor, and the Other Prophets

The dominant concern of Amos with the interdependence of religious worship and social justice does not necessarily have the same emphasis in the other prophetic books. Nevertheless, similar issues are raised throughout many of the other prophetic books. To get a fuller picture of the prophets’ concern with poverty in ancient Israel, links between Amos and the other
prophets will be established. Not only links, but sometimes the other prophets add to the range of issues of poverty that Amos discusses.

Isaiah clearly spells out the link between worship and ethics, as Amos does. In one case Isaiah calls all religious practices meaningless if the believers do not live a life of justice as well (Is. 1: 10–20) (Freeman 1968: 193). Isaiah sketches God’s disgust and aversion to all kinds of religious practices. God’s irritation becomes clear when Isaiah writes in the first person singular how God feels. God had more than enough of their sacrifices, He is tired of the blood of animals, and thinks it useless for them to bring offerings. He is disgusted with the smell of incense, is tired of and cannot even stand their religious festivals and holy days any more, and will not look at them whilst praying, nor listen to them as well.

Perhaps the most important reason Isaiah does not notice their fasting is God’s advice through Isaiah for rectifying their failed religious life consists in them being willing to settle the matter with God and to let Him cleanse them from sin. God promises them that regardless how deep red they are stained, He will cleanse them to become as white as snow again. This religious settlement is only part of the remedy for a failed religious life. The other part is an ethical life where they stop doing evil, learn to do what is right, and practice justice. What it means to see that justice is done, is specified by a variation on the familiar command from the Pentateuch. They must help the oppressed people, defend the widows, and give the orphans their rights. The Israelites must exhibit God’s concern for vulnerable and marginalised people every day of their lives (Motyer 1993: 63). They must not openly or tacitly tolerate any injustice against these groups (Kaiser 1973: 49). In this section Isaiah integrates worship and ethics. He thus emphasises their interdependence.

The book of Isaiah returns to this theme much later (Is. 58: 1–12). In this section an apparently sincere group of believers question the meaningful-
ness of their fasting because of God’s lack of attention to them. They are portrayed as people who take pleasure in worshipping God every day, are eager to know God’s ways, and want God to give them just laws which they are willing to obey. Why then do they experience God as failing to react to their fasting? One reason is that they fast while doing wrong things. To be truly religious and indifferent to social justice is unacceptable to God (Motyer 1993: 478). They pursue their own interests while fasting and oppress their workers. They do not exhibit God’s compassion for oppressed people (Hanson 1995: 204). Furthermore, their fasting has negative effects on them. They become violent, quarrel, and fight with other people. They furthermore make themselves suffer by bowing their heads low and lying on sackcloth and ashes.

Perhaps the more important reason why God does not notice their fasting is that they are practising the wrong kind of fasting. The kind of fasting that is important to God is social justice and care for vulnerable people. Social justice includes eliminating gestures of contempt and evil words, putting an end to oppression, and getting rid of injustice. Care for vulnerable people means providing clothes to the naked, food to the hungry, shelter to the homeless, and in general satisfying those in need.

Fasting with this ethical content that is alive with the spirit of the values of the Pentateuch leads to God’s blessings. Blessings listed by Isaiah include God’s favour, presence, protection, response to prayer, guidance, and strength. Believers fasting correctly will indeed be like a garden with sufficient water and the original readers would have been empowered to rebuild Israel after returning from exile.

Isaiah has a third section where he discusses the intimate relation between worship and ethics (Is. 59: 13–16). When the people confess their sins, they not only confess that they refused to follow God, rebelled against Him, and
rejected Him. They also confess that they have not honoured the ethical values of justice, honesty, truth, and right. Their turning away from God is linked directly to their oppression of other people. God’s reaction to their confession is to note with displeasure and astonishment that there is no justice and that no one helps the oppressed. Again the link between relationship with God and relationship with fellow human beings are shown to be interdependent.

A similar link between worship and ethics is found in Zechariah (Zc. 7: 9–14). Zecharaiah points out that the exile occurred as a result of disobedience. Disobedience to which commands is the interesting point here. Zecharaiah lists the demands of social justice, such as the injunctions not to oppress widows, orphans, or foreigners, or any one else in need. Added to that is the command to see that justice is done and to show kindness and mercy to one another. To these commands God’s followers refused to listen and to them they closed their minds and hardened their hearts. Stubborn disobedience to these commands made God angry enough to send them into exile. This suggests that Zecharaiah judges these commands to be close to the heart of the religion of Israel (cf. Baldwin 1972: 146–147). Obedience to God means pursuing social justice. The prophet Micah echoes these sentiments and he states it simply. What God thinks is good and what He requires of His followers is to do justice, to show constant love, and to live in fellowship with God. To worship God requires to simultaneously do justice to your fellow human beings. Jeremiah echoes these sentiments by advising Israel not to boast of their wisdom, strength, or wealth, but rather to boast that they have intimate knowledge of Yahwe’s constant love, justice, and righteousness (Brueggemann 1998: 100).

Believers in God are thus supposed to have the right priorities through having right relationships with God and their fellow human beings. They might be able to resist the negative influence of wealth that could make them boast
of their achievements. Jeremiah (9: 23–24) explicitly advises wealthy people not to boast of their riches, but rather to boast that they know and understand God. Ezekiel's prophecy against the king of Tyre has a message of destruction (Ezk. 28: 4–7). The king of Tyre collected many treasures through wisdom and skill, but became proud and judged himself to be as wise as a god. These attitudes are cause of his coming destruction. Habakkuk adds to these warnings about the negative effects of wealth (Hab. 2: 5) (Kruger 1987: 52). He says that wealth can make people greedy, so that they - like death - are never satisfied with what they have.

The Old Testament prophets reiterate many of the Pentateuchal values for dealing with poverty. The prophets also stress the general protection that Israelites should give to widows, orphans, and foreigners. These vulnerable people should be given their rights, defended when necessary, and be listened to and judged fairly in court (Is. 1: 16, 23; 11: 4). They should not be ill-treated, oppressed, or taken advantage of (Je. 7: 6; 22: 3; Ezk. 7: 10). Similar values apply concerning loans to poor people. Money-lenders should not cheat, oppress, or rob poor people by forcing them to pay up their loans or by keeping whatever the poor gave them as security (Is. 3: 12; Ezk. 18: 12; Hab. 2: 6). Ordinary Israelites are reprimanded not to cheat God by withholding their full tithes. They are encouraged to bring the full amount so that there will be plenty of food available for the Levites who have no land and the poor and vulnerable people without means (Mal. 3: 6–12).

The ethical values of honesty and truth are reaffirmed in the prophets as in the Pentateuch. Cheating customers with false scales and measures are strongly rejected, as is getting rich through any dishonest means. No easy exploitation of poor and vulnerable people were to be allowed (Clements 1996: 197). The emphasis is on the use of honest scales and measures (Ezk. 45: 10; Ho. 12: 7, 8; Mi. 6: 10–12). Similarly, in courts people must speak the truth and give fair judgements that will give justice to the poor and
vulnerable people (Zc. 8: 16–17), as doing this gives expression to the person's intimate knowledge of God (Je. 22: 16). Making unjust laws to take property away from widows and orphans and thus denying them rights that justly belong to them, is rejected outright (Is. 10: 2).

The prophets often condemn leaders and ordinary Israelites for taking other people's belongings through illegitimate means. These people ignore all moral values. Leaders are accused of enriching themselves at the expense of the poor (Is. 3: 14, 15). Not only do they take advantage of the poor, they also murder people to get rich. Leaders take other people's property, inter alia by driving some off their land (Ezk. 45:9; 46: 18). Ordinary Israelites pursue similar criminal behaviour to enrich themselves. Some rich people metaphorically build their houses with injustice, enlarge them with dishonesty, and eventually live in houses filled with loot (Je 22: 13; 5: 26–28). Their wealth comes from cheating and robbing other people. Often such people take other people's houses, seize their fields, steal the coats off their backs, and do not pay wages to their workers (Mi. 2: 1, 2, 8; Je. 22: 13).

In such circumstances of injustice that flows into criminal behaviour, God is the only guarantee of justice and care for his people. Ezekiel depicts God as the good shepherd who takes care of his vulnerable people (Ezk. 34). In a wonderful chapter on God, Ezekiel explores the metaphor of the good shepherd in such a way that all other Biblical texts on the idea of a good shepherd resonate (Ps. 23; Jn. 10). Ezekiel contrasts the shepherds of Israel, their rulers, with God as the good shepherd. The shepherds of Israel only take care of themselves and cruelly exploit the sheep for that purpose. They do not tend the sheep by taking care of the weak ones, healing the sick, bandaging those that are hurt, bringing back those that have wandered off, or looking for those that are lost. Exactly these things God now undertakes to do as He assumes the position as the good shepherd of Israel. God shows His character by explicitly siding with the vulnerable sheep of Israel
whom He wants to care for and bless. Ezekiel echoes Isaiah’s sentiments that God is a shepherd to the poor of his people (Is. 14: 30) and the poor and helpless people flee to God in times of trouble for protection and comfort (Is. 25: 4). This vision of God as the Good Shepherd who cares deeply for His flock and wants to take special care of those who are vulnerable, underlies the moral values shared by the prophets and the Pentateuch concerning the treatment of poor people.

3. Wisdom and Poverty

The wisdom literature in the Old Testament, especially Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, provide rich contributions to the Biblical understanding and ethics of poverty. Besides normative values on poverty and wealth that are grounded in the Israelite faith in Yahweh, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes give descriptions and explanations of various aspects of poverty and wealth. Like the Pentateuchal and prophetic literature, statements containing promises (blessings and curses) are also found. Often these promises take the form of conditional statements, such as, “If you do x, then y will follow.” These three broad types of statements on poverty and wealth will be used as categories to organise and summarise what the book of Proverbs has to offer.

One should briefly note the nature of the literature contained in the book of Proverbs. Proverbs contains short, pithy teachings based on observations and experiences gleaned from everyday life – almost a kind of proto social science (Harrison 1969: 1010; Cox 1982: 84). Especially the descriptions and explanations deal with general tendencies or often recurring behaviour, without claiming to be universally applicable. This implies that no proverb needs to be universally true and applicable everywhere. They only need to be true sometimes – as most generalisations currently provided by the social sciences – to have validity.
The proverbs are offered as practical guides for successful living (cf. Harrison 1969: 1010). Their aim is to make readers think about life and stimulate them to assess their own situations so as to determine the applicability of the proverbs (Cox 1982: 86). As the proverbs are not meant to apply universally, readers must be sensitive to ascertain whether they do in fact apply in the concrete situation they are confronted with. Readers thus become active participants in learning from the collective human experience embodied in the wisdom of the proverbs (Cox 1982: 88). What I aim to provide in the following sections is extractions of the understanding of poverty and the moral values for dealing with poverty embodied in the book of Proverbs.

3.1 Descriptive–Explanatory Statements on Poverty and Wealth

The descriptive–explanatory statements about poverty and wealth in Proverbs do not present an idealised picture of poverty. The life conditions of poverty can be so serious as to destroy the people suffering them (Pr. 10: 15). The difficulty of those conditions makes the life of poor people a constant struggle (Pr. 15: 15). The misery experienced by poor people makes them susceptible to the use of alcohol to forget their misery, poverty, and unhappiness (Pr. 31: 6–7).

The already difficult life conditions of poverty are exacerbated by ruthless people in more powerful positions. Leaders who oppress poor people are compared with driving rain that destroys agricultural crops (Pr. 28: 3). Poor people are considered to be helpless against wicked rulers, who are judged to be as dangerous as a growling lion or a prowling bear (Pr. 28: 15). Wicked people – presumably people with no moral conscience – are said to have no understanding of the rights of poor people (Pr. 29: 7). As a result some people make their living by taking cruel advantage of poor people (Pr. 30: 14).
Not only do poor people have difficult life conditions, but their human relations are often strained. They often lose their friends and find it difficult to make new ones (Pr. 19: 4, 6–7) (Meinhold 1991b: 239). People do not like the poor, even their neighbours come to dislike them and their family find no use for them (Pr. 14: 20; 19: 6). When the poor engage in conversation with the rich, they have to be submissive and beg politely (Pr. 18: 23).

Not all aspects of the lives of poor people are judged so negatively. Whereas rich people’s lives are often threatened, the lives of poor people are threatened by no one (Pr. 13: 8). Poor people often experience the love and kindness of believers who are generous to them (Pr. 31: 20). Their lives sometimes have good qualities. Being poor is judged to be better than being a liar (Pr. 19: 22). Poor people sometimes have insight into character that surpasses the views of the rich who think themselves to be wise (Pr. 28:11).

Why are people poor? The book of Proverbs identifies several reasons, of which only two are not related to any kind of mistake or shortcoming on the part of the poor person. In some cases unjust people in control of unused fields do not allow poor people to farm them, despite the fact that those unused fields could yield more than enough food for their needs (Pr. 13: 24). In other cases people who are cautious not to spend money freely become poor, although others who freely spend money become rich (Pr. 11: 24). Despite their good attempts at wise spending of money, they nevertheless impoverish. In this case it might be luck or unfavourable circumstances that determine their impoverishment.

Laziness gets the most prominent place amongst the causes of poverty directly linked to the personal shortcomings of poor people. Lazy people sleep too much. As they sleep too much, their vineyards and fields are neglected (Pr. 24: 30–32). The detrimental effect of too much sleep is described by an
appropriate comparison that says poverty will attack them like an armed robber while they are asleep (Pr. 6: 9,11; 24: 33–34). As a result of laziness, such people never have money and are thus harming themselves (Pr. 11: 16b; 21: 25–26). Instead of being able to think about other people's needs and to give generously, lazy people only think about what they themselves would like to have (Pr. 21: 25–26).

Other personal shortcomings that cause poverty are as follows. Bad behaviour, like people who eat and drink too much (drunkards and gluttons), leads to poverty (Pr. 23: 20, 21). Negative attitudes can also lead to poverty. People unwilling to learn will become poor and disgraced (Pr. 13: 18). People who are stupid in spending their money as fast as they get it will become impoverished (Pr. 21: 20). Selfishness combined with an urgency to become rich can blind people to impending poverty striking them (Pr. 28: 22).

The book of Proverbs has a very sober view of wealth. Wealth can protect the rich and they must often use their money to save their lives (Pr. 10: 15; 13: 8). However, because these statements are true some of the time, rich people imagine that their wealth can protect them like high, strong walls round an ancient near Eastern city (Pr. 18: 10–11). The protection offered by a person's wealth cannot be that strong, as wealth is not as permanent as rich people think (Pr. 27: 23–24), as it could be lost in a flash (Pr. 23: 4–5). In any case, wealth has limited possibilities to mean something to a person. When facing death, wealth becomes meaningless as it can do their owners no good anymore (Pr. 11: 4).

Despite the limited work that wealth can do for rich people, it can attract them friends (Meinhold 1991b: 231). Rich people have many friends, as everyone tries to gain the friendship and favour of the rich and famous (Pr. 19: 6). Perhaps the status that wealth awards its holders causes many people to pretend that they are rich, while they actually have nothing. Some rich peo-
people, though, perhaps to avoid insincere friendships, pretend to be poor, while they actually possess fortunes (Pr. 13: 7). As a result of their influential position in society, rich people can afford to be rude towards poor people, who need to speak to them in a submissive tone (Pr. 18: 23). They can treat poor people thus, because poor people are often virtually their slaves, being in debt to the rich (Pr. 22: 7). Not only do rich people treat others with contempt, but they also judge themselves to be wise, when often they are not (Pr. 28: 11).

How important is the way in which rich people acquire their wealth? Very important, the contents of the book of Proverbs suggest. Wealth acquired through dishonesty will do their holders no good, but will soon disappear after it has lead its holders into the jaws of death (Pr. 10: 2; 21: 6). Wealth easily acquired won’t do the person any good and will in any case easily be lost (Pr. 13: 11; 20: 21). The harder it is for a person to acquire wealth, the longer it will last (Pr. 13: 11). A reason why a person never will become rich is a luxurious lifestyle with wine and rich food (Pr. 21: 17). A capable wife is a reason why a man will never become poor (Pr. 31: 11). Wisdom seems another good qualification for living in wealth and luxury, as wise people are rewarded with wealth (Pr. 14: 24; 21: 20). Closely associated with this link of wisdom and wealth is the view that hard work can make a person no richer, as it is God’s blessing that makes a person wealthy (Pr. 10: 22).

3.2 Promissory–Conditional Statements on Poverty and Wealth

Promissory–conditional statements on poverty and wealth can be analysed in two ways. One way is to analyse the themes in the conditions that must be fulfilled to get the promises (blessings or curses). A second kind of analysis looks at the categories of behaviour judged to be good and bad to do, as well as the categories of blessings and curses that are to follow. This analy-
sis will betray the values embodied in the book of Proverbs on poverty and wealth.

The themes in the conditions of the promissory–conditional statements are the importance of wisdom, ways of treating poor people, and the merits or not of laziness and hard work. The first theme, wisdom, is discussed as follows. To follow and acquire the teachings of wisdom will lead to a long, prosperous, and successful life that will also give honour (Pr. 3: 2, 16; 8: 18, 20). To have the foundation of wisdom, i.e. to obey and honour God, will also lead to wealth, honour and a long life (Pr. 3: 9, 10; 22: 4).

The second theme concerns the appropriate behaviour towards poor people. The wisdom of Proverbs recommends that Israelites should be kind and generous to poor people (Pr. 11: 25; 22: 9). Being kind will lead to one’s own happiness, whilst being generous will make you prosperous. They should be willing to give of their resources to poor people, share their food with them, and be prepared to help where help is needed (Pr. 11: 25; 22: 9; 19: 17). To give is like lending to the Lord who will surely pay you back, while you will be blessed for sharing your food. To give help has the promise that you too will be helped. The king of Israel must defend the rights of the poor (Pr. 29: 14). Such a king will rule for a long time.

However, to exploit poor people by taking advantage of them, charging them interest, or oppressing them, can lead to curses such as losing your own wealth or your life (Pr. 22: 16, 22–23; 28: 8). To have an attitude to poor people that makes you ignore their cry for help will be the cause that your own cry will not be heard (Pr. 21: 13). If your attitude is even worse so that you laugh at poor people and take pleasure in their misfortune – thus exacerbating their misery – you insult God and you will be punished (Pr. 17: 5) (Meinhold 1991b: 284).
The third theme deals with laziness and hard work. The message is simple. Laziness has negative consequences. Lazy people become poor (Pr. 10:4), whether they just sit around or spend their time sleeping (Pr. 14:23; 20:13). Laziness may make you a slave or reduce you to such poverty that you will wear rags (Pr. 12:24; 23:21). Hard work will make you rich (Pr. 10:4). Through hard work a person can earn a living, gain power, get a fortune, and have plenty to eat (Pr. 12:24, 27; 14:23; 20:13).

The alternative analysis of the promissory-conditional statements yields the following results. The good things recommended by these statements are obedience to God, the acceptance of the wisdom teachings, and being righteous and honest people. Generosity and kindness to poor people is important, as is sharing your food and giving some of your resources to the poor. Hard work and keeping busy are also recommended to avoid poverty yourself. Living lives filled with these good things will have the following good consequences. Wealth and a long life are promised in different wordings. Honour, success, and happiness will follow too. Blessings from God and help in need are the additional good things promised for living the appropriate moral life.

Bad behaviour that are to be avoided include oppressing the poor to be become rich, to take advantage of the poor, to charge interest, to exploit the helpless in court, to refuse to listen to the cry of the poor and to close your eyes to their needs, to laugh at poor people, and to take pleasure in their misfortune. These deeds often come from people eager to get rich, or those who depend on their wealth when they ought to have depended on God. Being lazy, expressed by spending your time sleeping or just sitting around talking, is also rejected. Bad consequences, or curses, that will follow the bad deeds include losing your wealth and becoming impoverished, angering God and fellow human beings, and having your own pleas for help ignored.
The values underlying the promissory-conditional statements are in line with the Pentateuchal and prophetic values concerning the treatment of poor people.

3.3 Normative Statements on Poverty and Wealth

The normative statements on poverty and wealth found in the book of Proverbs express moral values that individual Israelites ought to appropriate and implement in their lives. Three themes dominate. One theme concerns the supreme value of having wisdom. A second theme deals with cases when being poor is better than having wealth. The third theme consists of instructions how to treat poor people.

The book of Proverbs judge wisdom more valuable than anything else that any person could want (Pr. 3: 15; 8: 10). Wisdom is closely linked with having knowledge, understanding, insight, and sound judgement (Pr. 2: 3–4; 3: 13; 8: 11). Having wisdom implies that you know what you are talking about (Pr. 20: 15). Another important link is between wisdom, and justice and righteousness (Pr. 1:3; 8:20) (Meinhold 1991a: 142). To have wisdom teaches you to know what is just (Pr. 1: 3; 2:9). Wisdom is so important that people ought to search for it like they would search for silver or a hidden treasure (Pr. 2: 3–4). To acquire wisdom is judged to be of more value to a person than gold, silver, or jewels (Pr. 3: 14, 15; 8: 10). Wisdom's value is even more than anything a person could want (Pr. 3: 15; 8: 10).

Wisdom's value is seen in the beneficial effects it can have on a person's life. Wisdom brings psychological blessings, through making people's lives worthwhile, filling them with happiness, and making those lives pleasant (Pr. 3: 13, 17–18). Wisdom also gives blessings of a more material nature, such as wealth and a long life (Pr. 3: 16). King Solomon is a good example of a
person choosing wisdom as first priority and having many other blessings, especially wealth, added.

The value of wisdom shows itself in the second theme that expresses the view that poverty is sometimes better than being rich, despite the negative life conditions of poverty. The priority of living a moral life according to God’s commands surfaces again. A series of contrasts show that being rich without a life of moral and religious integrity is not acceptable. In such a case being poor with integrity is preferable. Some examples of the contrasts are the following. Poverty and fear of the Lord are better than being rich and in trouble (Pr. 15: 16). Poverty and being humble is judged to be better than to be one of the arrogant people who rob others and share the loot (Pr. 16: 19). The value of honesty is stressed by saying that being poor, but honest is better than being rich and dishonest (Pr. 28: 6). To be poor, but to live in a peaceful household, is judged to be better than having banquets in households full of trouble (17: 1). However, the even better alternative is to be neither rich nor poor. Rather, the ideal is to have just as much food as one needs. To have more has the risk that one can feel that God is not needed, whilst being poor has the risk of resorting to theft, that will disgrace the person’s God (Pr. 30: 7–9).

The third theme found in the normative statements about poverty and wealth is the appropriate treatment of poor people. In line with the spirit of the Pentateuchal theology individuals are urged to do good to people in need whenever they possibly can (Pr. 3; 27). Readers must not tell people in need to wait if they are able to help them now (Pr. 3: 28). The emphasis is on doing what is possible for poor people within the time a person has available. Part of helping poor people is to speak for them and to protect their rights if they are unable to do so themselves (Pr. 31: 8–9). To show kindness to poor people and to give of your resources to them are judged to be religious duties. To give is compared with lending to the Lord (Pr. 19: 17), whereas to
show kindness is judged to be an act of worship (Pr. 14: 31). This emphasis on religious duties ties in with the justification for help to the poor. Poor people share an important thing with their oppressors and with rich people. Poor people, their oppressors and rich people were all created by God – suggesting that they have an equal value as human beings before their Creator (Pr. 22: 2; 29: 13) (Cox 1982: 184).

There are ways of treating poor people that are explicitly forbidden. All of these are religiously motivated, showing the link between poor people and their Creator. To oppress poor people or to laugh at them are insults to God (Pr. 14: 31; 17: 5). God Himself will argue the case of poor people who are taken advantage of (Pr. 22: 22–23). To despise poor people is a sin and to take pleasure in other people’s misfortune deserves (divine) punishment (Pr. 14: 21; 17: 5). In this way God protects the dignity of every poor person He has created.

### 3.4 Ecclesiastes, Poverty, and Wealth

The author of the book of Ecclesiastes is generally known in theological circles as Koheleth. Although his personal identity is uncertain, he is thought to have been well-versed in the Wisdom tradition. His own contribution to the Wisdom literature is judged to be a critical questioning of the accepted beliefs and doctrines contained in the tradition (Fuerst 1975: 93). Whether Koheleth significantly modifies the views about poverty and wealth found in the book of Proverbs is questionable. Two themes emerge from Ecclesiastes, i.e., [1] the injustice, oppression, and marginalisation of poor people and [2] the uncertainty and burdens of wealth. Koheleth seems to expand on these issues, rather than modifying what the book of Proverbs has to say about it.

Koheleth provides descriptions of the injustice, oppression, and marginalisation of poor people without normative evaluations thereof. He points to the
phenomenon that oppression creates sorrow and grief in the poor suffering from it. Despite the tears of the oppressed, no one is prepared to help them, as the power of the oppressors serve as a deterrent (Ec. 4: 1) (Spangenberg 1993: 68). He becomes more specific when he discusses how government officials oppress the poor and deny them justice and their rights (Ec. 5: 8). The point Koheleth wants to make is that within an hierarchical governmental bureaucracy it is difficult to locate those responsible for the oppression and denial of injustice and rights. The reason is that government officials are protected by their superiors in the hierarchy (Spangenberg 1993: 87). No wonder that Koheleth urges his readers not to be surprised to see that government officials treat the poor unjustly, as they can easily hide behind other officials and thus escape being held responsible.

Koheleth depicts the marginalisation of poor people in a beautiful little story (Ec. 9: 13–16). In this story a small town is attacked by the army of a powerful king. Although the army already surrounded the town and was at the point of starting to break the walls, it was still possible to save the town and its inhabitants from destruction. However, the person who was clever enough to save the town was a poor man of whom no one thought as a possible hero. The lesson Koheleth draws from this story is that no person thinks of poor people as wise, nor do people pay any attention to what poor people have to say. A sad indictment of the way that poor people are marginalised and disregarded in society.

The other dominant theme concerning poverty and wealth in Koheleth deals with the uncertainty and burdens of wealth. One reason why people work to become rich is the inability to be satisfied with the wealth one has. Another reason that Koheleth has discovered is that people are envious of their neighbours and wants to be better than they are (Ec. 4: 4–6). A frantic lifestyle in pursuit of wealth to impress others does not impress Koheleth. For him having only a little, but also having peace of mind is preferable to a life—
style where a person is always busy with activities that seem like trying to catch the wind.

The desire for wealth can be a hard master. Koheleth tells the story of a man with no male relatives (son or brother) who lives alone, works very hard, denies himself any pleasure, but yet is never satisfied with the wealth he has (Ec. 4: 7–8). Koheleth describes this man’s life as miserable as there is no one with whom to share his hard work. He denies himself any pleasure from his hard work as well. His solitary quest for riches is empty (Fuerst 1975: 120). Koheleth is convinced that the desire for money can never be satisfied, as the wish for getting everything you want can never be fulfilled (Ec. 5: 10). In any case, those who become richer only gain more mouths to feed and worries that keep them awake at night. In contrast to them ordinary workers at least sleep much better each night (Ec. 5: 11–12).

Koheleth is strongly aware that wealth can be easily lost. People who wisely save money for a time of need can lose all their savings in some unlucky business deal (Ec. 5: 13–14). They might not recover from such a disaster and thus be unable to pass anything on to their children. Such events remind Koheleth of the fact that we can take nothing with us when we die. That we leave this world just as we came into it Koheleth judges as not right. All we really get from our hard work is to live our lives in darkness and grief, while we have to cope with worries, anger, and sickness (Ec. 5: 15–17). Some rich people are so unfortunate that they do not live long enough to even enjoy their own wealth. Then strangers get to enjoy the wealth that someone else worked so hard for (Ec. 6: 1–2). This, for Koheleth, is a serious injustice that is all wrong and it makes life useless.

Koheleth is not entirely negative about wealth. He has the interesting view that wealth is a gift from God that must be enjoyed (Ec. 5: 19). However, wealth and property as gifts from God for which a person must be grateful
are also described as things that the person has worked for. What exactly the relationship is between God’s gift and the rich person’s work, is unclear.

4. Expressing Experiences of Poverty and Wealth

Not all mention of wealth or poverty in the Old Testament have explicit normative intentions. Many texts articulate experiences that the Israelites have had in connection with wealth or poverty. Expressing these experiences gives readers an idea of the range of situations concerning wealth and poverty that the Bible takes note of.

4.1 Expressions of Poverty and Wealth in the Psalms

Although the Psalms are closely linked to the Wisdom literature, I want to discuss them under the category of expressions of poverty and wealth. The reason is that the Psalms are ways of communicating feelings and experiences to God. The Psalms tell us more about the kinds of experiences the Israelites had, as well as the religious framework they used to interpret those experiences. The variety of experiences interpreted in terms of a characteristic religious outlook makes the Psalms useful not only for prayer and worship, but for meditation and reflection as well.

Many of the themes concerning poverty and wealth that surface in the Psalms are already familiar from other parts of the Old Testament. One good example deals with wealth. The uncertainty of trusting in your wealth and the superior value of serving God rather than being rich are mentioned. Wealth and riches cannot go with you when you die (Ps. 49: 16), therefore no one needs to be upset when someone else gets rich. The usefulness of riches is limited to this side of the grave. The Psalmists express the view that believers should not depend on their wealth, but on God (52: 7; 62: 10). Evil people trust in themselves or their riches and would boast about their wealth (49: 5–6; 49: 13). Wealth is not the highest priority in life for the
Psalmist of Psalm 119. Better than getting rich, having great wealth, or even all the money in the world, is the delight of having God’s law, desiring to obey it and following His commands expressed in it (119: 14, 36, 72).

God’s concern for poor and needy people, such as widows, orphans, and strangers has been noted before. The Psalmists express their faith in God as One who cares and protects the poor, the needy, the oppressed, the widows, orphans, and strangers – all the weak, vulnerable, and marginalised people of society (Ps. 35: 10; 68: 5; 146: 7b–9). He defends their cause and their rights, and He judges in their favour (Ps. 103: 6; 109: 31; 123: 3). Sometimes the Psalmists formulate God’s relation to the poor in negative terms. The hope of the poor will not be crushed forever (Ps. 9: 18), nor does God neglect the poor, ignore their suffering, or turn away from them (Ps. 22: 24). How the poor can suffer is expressed by the psalmist who is poor and needy and hurt to the depths of his heart (Ps. 109: 22). He continues to refer to his knees that are weak from hunger and his body that consists of nothing more than skin and bones (Ps. 109: 24). The poor suffer contempt, are mocked by the rich, and scorned by their oppressors (Ps. 123: 3). For these reasons, God’s followers must also exhibit this special care for the poor. Those people who show similar concern for poor people are called happy and are promised all kinds of blessings from God in return (Ps. 41: 1–3).

The Psalms know very well that there are wicked people who persecute poor people and catch them in traps (Ps. 10: 2, 9). Wicked people never think of being kind to poor people (Ps. 109: 16); on the contrary, they would not hesitate to even kill poor people (Ps. 37: 14). Nevertheless, God judges that the little that a good person owns is worth far more than the wealth of all wicked people combined (Ps. 37: 16).
4.2 Expressions of Poverty and Wealth in the Historical Writings

The history of Israel presented in the Old Testament has several significant narratives about wealth and poverty. In the selection that I am going to present, I will focus on issues such as the implementation of Pentateuchal laws, the wealth of some Old Testament believers, negative aspects of kingship as governmental system, the prevention of poverty, impoverishment through exploitation, and impoverishment through violence.

The book of Ruth presents a narrative that demonstrates how Pentateuchal laws were implemented to protect women from poverty. Many interpretations are possible of the central themes of the book of Ruth. One plausible interpretation is that the book revolves around two poor widows who take the initiative to secure their rights in terms of Pentateuchal laws (cf. Morris 1968: 248). Women were very vulnerable in patriarchal ancient Israel without the protection, support, and care of a man. Men had all the decision-making power. The book of Ruth demonstrates how the Pentateuchal laws empowered poor widows to survive in a patriarchal society.

After the deaths of their husbands, Naomi and her Moabite daughter-in-law returns to Bethlehem. Naomi is in bad shape. She wants to be called Mara, as she feels God has made her life bitter and He has sent her all kinds of difficulties. However, Naomi and Ruth are knowledgeable about their rights in terms of Pentateuchal laws. They get enough food to eat because Ruth can gather corn in the fields of Boaz. She has a right to do so, as owners of fields were instructed not to cut the corn at the edges of the field, nor to return to cut the ears of corn that were left (Lv. 19: 9). They were to be left for poor people and foreigners (Lv. 19: 10). Fortunately Ruth ends up in the fields of Boaz, who shows himself as a faithful Israelite (Goslinga 1966: 138). Boaz not only allows Ruth to gather corn in his field, but makes it eas-
ier for her and supplies her with food, water, and his protection against unwanted male attention from his workers (Ru. 2: 8–23).

The chance meeting with Boaz, a close relative of Naomi, directs her attention to two other commands found in the Pentateuch. The one states that the closest male relative must buy back the land of an Israelite who had to sell his land because of poverty (Lv. 25: 25). The other command instructed brothers to marry the widows of their brothers who died without leaving a son (Dt. 25: 5–6). Although this command only applies to brothers in the Pentateuch, in the book of Ruth it is applied, as in the case of the former command, to all male relatives (Goslinga 1966: 144). Naomi makes Ruth aware of these commands and urges her to confront Boaz with his kinship responsibilities (Prinsloo 1982: 40; 57). The initial blessing Boaz gave to Ruth after he met her was that God reward her and protect her (Ru. 2: 12). When Ruth confronts him with a marriage proposal in terms of her rights, she holds him responsible for taking care of her (Ru. 3: 9) (Prinsloo 1982: 68). God’s commands to Israel enables Ruth to get protection and care in a patriarchal society for her and Naomi. Through demanding the implementation of these laws, they save themselves from desperate poverty.

Boaz demonstrates the power of God’s commands in the life of a faithful Israelite to ensure protection for the vulnerable members of society. He takes up the case of Naomi and Ruth with their closest male relative who has the first option to execute these kinship duties towards them. When this relative is not interested, Boaz takes the responsibility for Naomi and Ruth. He legitimates his commitment in front of the court of elders at the city gate (Goslinga 1966: 158; Morris 1968: 297–298). They presided over the negotiations between Boaz and the closest relative. Through the good deeds of a faithful Israelite, who acted according to God’s commands, the two widows are safeguarded against a life of desperate poverty.
Narratives about poverty are balanced by narratives about wealthy Israelites who were also faithful believers. Abraham and Jacob are listed among the heroes of faith in the New Testament (Hebrews 11). Less well known, perhaps, is that Abraham already had wealth when God called him (Gn. 12: 5). Later on in Genesis Abraham is twice described as a rich man, who owned many livestock (sheep, goats, cattle, camels, and donkeys), slaves, silver, and gold (Gn. 13: 2; 24: 34, 35). The same is true of Jacob. Jacob had enormous business and farming skills. This is clear from his work for Laban, whose little wealth had grown enormously since Jacob had started working for him (Gn. 30: 29). Jacob too became wealthy with a similar range of possessions as those of Abraham (Gn. 30: 43).

Solomon is the best example of a wealthy person in the Old Testament. God grants Solomon's request for wisdom to rule justly, but adds wealth and honour as well (1 Kings 3: 11). The descriptions of his wealth and the resources he employed to build a palace and the temple are overwhelming. The book of 1 Chronicles conveys impressions of the grandeur and exaltation of the temple (Japhet 1993: 400). Both Solomon's wisdom and his wealth are interpreted as blessings from God (Japhet 1993: 639). However, part of his wealth and impressive building projects came from the use of forced labour, though not of Israelite but Canaanite origin (1 Kings 9: 15). Another part seemingly came from heavy tax burdens placed on the Israelites, if one believes the well justified complaints of his subjects after his death (1 Kings 12: 4) (Japhet 1993: 652–653; Brueggemann 1978: 33).

The possibility that a monarchical system of government can be exploitative is pointed out by Samuel (1 Samuel 8: 10–16) (Hertzberg 1964: 73). Although his warnings did not deter the Israelites from opting for a monarchy, Samuel's warnings ring true throughout many of the Old Testament descriptions of kingship. Samuel's rather stern warnings include that a king will need soldiers, agricultural workers, weapons manufacturers, caterers for his
palace, and makers of beauty products. For these purposes he will use young Israelites in his service. A king might confiscate the property of the Israelites to hand over to his officials, demand heavy taxes, and even eventually enslave some of his subjects. Despite these warnings, the Israelites chose to have a king and eventually did experience how kings can oppress and exploit.

Samuel’s warnings had firm grounding in the narratives about the Israelites in Egypt. Joseph’s tenure as second in charge in Egypt after the pharaoh illustrates how wise preventative measures against impoverishment can spill over into oppression and exploitation. Joseph’s interpretation of the pharaoh’s dreams leads to large-scale preventative measures against the coming drought to avoid a famine (Gn. 41: 34–35, 54). The Egyptians were the only nation in that area who had the wisdom and foresight to prevent a catastrophe and thus had the ability to sell food during the severe drought to other nations as well. However, the wisdom and value of these preventative measures are blemished by the way the story concluded (Gn. 47: 13–26). The Egyptians had to buy the food stored for use during the drought. When they had no money left, Joseph accepted their livestock as payment. Once that was gone, their fields were traded for food. When all their land belonged to the pharaoh, the Egyptians sold themselves into slavery to the pharaoh. The pharaoh exploited the desperate situation of his subjects as a result of a natural disaster to totally impoverish and enslave them. The subjects are so grateful when Joseph gives them seed to sow on their fields – now the pharaoh’s property – on condition that they pay one-fifth of their harvests to the pharaoh.

Another example of exploitative leadership is found among the returned exiles. Nehemiah stringently criticises Israelite leaders and officials who exploit the bad economic conditions suffered by poor Israelites after the Babylonian exile (Ne. 5: 1–19). The poor Israelites had many complaints. Some did not
have enough food, others had to mortgage their fields, vineyards, and houses to get money for food, while some had to borrow money to pay taxes. Some Israelites were desperate and felt helpless, as their fields and vineyards have been taken away from them. These people had to sell their children into slavery. Nehemiah’s anger lets him accuse the leaders and officials of oppressing their fellow-Israelites. Nehemiah commands them to stop forcing their fellow-Israelites to sell themselves into slavery. This practice runs counter to Nehemiah’s attempts to buy back Israelites who had to sell themselves into slavery to foreigners. The leaders and officials must obey God and do what is right. In this case Nehemiah understands that to be that they must cancel all the debts of the poor Israelites and return their property to them. These two things will enable the poor to get started again and to rid themselves of poverty. Nehemiah as governor realised that in difficult economic circumstances extraordinary measures are called for. The poor people carried heavy financial burdens, therefore Nehemiah never claimed the allowance that he as governor was entitled to. Adapting one’s behaviour in the light of an understanding of people’s desperate economic circumstances is what Nehemiah expects from the leaders and officials as well.

The narrative about Nehemiah and the returning exiles refers implicitly to the colonial conquest of Israel by Babylonia. King Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem and carried away not only the wealth from the temple and the palace, but also the elite members of society. The royal princes, leaders, and skilled workers were taken away as prisoners. Jerusalem was destroyed. The Babylonian soldiers tore down the protective city walls and burnt down the temple, the palace, and the houses of all the important people. Surprisingly, the poor people who were left behind seem to have suffered the least. Apparently their houses were not burnt down and they were to tend the vineyards and the fields.
The book of Lamentations vividly depicts the devastation and horrific consequences caused by the Babylonian conquest. The book is a direct reaction to events of great suffering and addressed to God. The author pours out his heart to God about the suffering in Jerusalem that has become so severe that it is incomprehensible (Westermann 1994: 86, 91). The severity and incomprehensibility show especially in the suffering of children (Westermann 1994: 153). The author of Lamentations does not have the words to express his feelings about the scope of suffering going on in Jerusalem (La. 2: 13). The author also does not know how to comfort Jerusalem, as the disaster brought about by the violent conquest is experienced as boundless as the ocean, stripping away all hope (La. 2: 13). Happiness has been replaced by grief and God is urgently requested to look and see their disgrace (La. 5: 1, 15). The immediate effects of the conquest are hunger and a shortage of basic necessities. The effects of hunger are especially severe on children. They cry to their mothers, fall in the streets as though they were wounded, beg for food, and die slowly in their mothers’ arms (La. 2: 11, 12, 4: 3). The effects on adults are as severe. They burn with fever from hunger until their skins are hot as an oven (La. 5: 10). People who ate the best foods die from starvation in the streets, while people who grew up in luxury paw through refuse for food (La. 4: 3). Parents are cruel to their young whom they are allowing to die from hunger and thirst, presumably because no food is available (La. 4: 3). The worst is that mothers eat the bodies of the children they once loved (La. 2: 20). Worse horrors than that is hardly imaginable.

Basic necessities like water and wood for fuel must be bought (La. 5: 4), while their properties are occupied by strangers and foreigners (La. 5: 2). They are treated with disrespect in their own country by foreign soldiers. Many men were killed, but the women were raped – even at holy places like Mount Zion (La. 5: 11). Elders are shown no respect, while the young men are forced to grind corn like slaves (La. 5: 12, 13). They are treated like animals, driven hard but allowed no rest, despite being tired (La. 5: 5). It is no
surprise that grief would have taken the place of their dances (La. 5: 15). The calamities that struck Jerusalem as part of a foreign conquest – of which I mentioned only a few related to poverty – would surely remove happiness out of anyone’s life (La. 5: 15).

Israel has also impoverished people through violence. Jacob’s family revenged the rape of family member Dinah by killing all the men and taking all the women and children captive (Gn. 34: 27–29). Their next step was to loot their village. The narrative in Genesis repeatedly emphasises that they took everything. They took everything in the city, the houses, and in the fields. This common practice in the Old Testament of warfare combined with looting must have impoverished many people.

5. Conclusion
What are the central themes found in Old Testament texts on poverty and riches? The following themes dominate.

1. God ought to be the first priority of the ancient Israelites. They had to acknowledge God as the only God and worship and obey Him only. Obedience to His commands was demanded as gratitude for His liberation from Egypt and His election and salvation of Israel as nation. They had to become like God through being holy and caring deeply for the vulnerable and marginalised people in their society. Worship of God means not only adhering to religious duties, but living according to God’s prescribed ethical values. Ethics and worship are inextricable and interdependent.

2. The Old Testament promotes the humane treatment of the poor. Strong ethical values are presented for preventing dishonesty and favouritism. The emphasis is on poor people’s status as children of God whom He has created. For this reason no one may insult, humiliate, exploit, or oppress them.
If non-poor people do these things, God as the Good Shepherd will Himself take up the cause of the poor.

3. All non-poor Israelites are implored to help poor people generously and to give to them resources unselfishly. Care for the vulnerable and marginalised people of society is an imperative embodied in different moral values. The aim of this care is to relieve urgent basic needs and to help poor people to live non-poor lives again. The ethical values of the Old Testament empowered poor widows (Naomi and Ruth) to safeguard their survival in a male-dominated society.

4. The Old Testament portrays two kinds of help to the poor. One kind of aid is emergency poverty relief where the focus is on provision for the urgent needs of poor people that, if left unfulfilled, could endanger or seriously harm their lives. Hunger, thirst, and lack of clothing are examples of such needs. This aid can be given in various ways, one being the practice to harvest certain crops only once and to leave the remainder to the poor to collect. A second kind of aid aims to liberate poor people from their poverty. Aid serves the function of enabling poor people to become interdependent instead of dependent on others and to be self-reliant instead of relying on others for the basic means of life.

5. The prophets judged deep contrasts between rich and poor as deeply unacceptable. Such contrasts were usually based on selfishness, exploitation, and deliberate ignorance of God's commands. The ethical values of the Old Testament presuppose that special care is given to the weak, vulnerable, and marginalised people in society. Excessive wealth cannot be justified in the face of humiliating poverty.

6. Old Testament judgements on poverty and riches are always made to apply within specific contexts and not to be universally applicable to all
possible worlds. What concerns the prophets are how rich people they know of exploit and oppress the poor people the rich are sharing their lives with. Prophetic criticism and judgement deals with people in the world the prophets are part of, not all people everywhere of all times.

7. The Old Testament presents no idealised picture of poverty. The difficulties of poverty are clearly acknowledged. Being poor is hard and a constant struggle. Poor people are often exploited, oppressed, unjustly treated, and treated with contempt. Their personal relationships are often strained and even lost. Ruthless, wicked people exacerbate their situation. People are poor for various reasons, including unjust people not willing to make land available for the poor to farm on, violent conquest of colonial powers, and violent conflict that results in extensive looting.

8. The uncertainties of riches are clearly indicated in the Old Testament. Riches cannot protect the rich against all dangers and means nothing in the face of death. It is better to trust in God than in riches. Riches leads to more worries and can often not be enjoyed by those who worked for it. Nevertheless, riches are a gift from God to be enjoyed within its limited value.

9. God's promised blessings to Israel show that God intended human life on earth to be [1] rich in relationships with God, fellow humans, and creation and [2] abundant with prosperity, well-being, and meaning. This is seen in the lifestyles of the ancient heroes of faith, like Abraham and Jacob. Nowhere is poverty portrayed as an ideal lifestyle that God wishes for His people. If poverty was a state God willed for His followers, then why the strong emphasis on aid to help them escape from poverty? The strong emphasis on condemning the exploitative rich for their injustice towards the poor and the enormous significance attached to helping the poor presupposes that poverty is an unacceptable condition that is bad for human beings.
CHAPTER SEVEN

POVERTY, RICHES, AND THE NEW TESTAMENT

How important are issues of riches and poverty in the New Testament? Does the New Testament have unique ethical views on poverty and riches? Does the New Testament have different views from those found in the Old Testament? Are there links between faith in God and aid to the poor?

In this chapter I want to explore the message of the New Testament about poverty and riches. In the first section I look at the way in which the New Testament stresses the importance of the right priorities, i.e., that religion must come first. Then follows a discussion of several texts in the New Testament that contrast rich and poor. The next section looks at texts dealing with aid to the poor and then the final section follows on the metaphoric uses of the concepts "rich" and "poor" in the New Testament.

The New Testament was written when the Old Testament dominated religious life in Israel as the authoritative Word of God to Israel. For this reason the New Testament cannot be read correctly without "hearing the voice of Israel's Scriptures within these early Christian documents" (Hays 1996: 306). The inextricable links between the Old and New Testaments come to the fore when often one can detect the Old Testament values of how to deal with poor people as background assumptions in the New Testament's portrayal of situations where riches and poverty are at issue. These links and similarities in contents lead one to expect a fundamental continuity and significant overlaps in the moral values of both Testaments for dealing with poverty and riches.
1. Religion Comes First

In a series of New Testaments texts, the authors stress the point that to put God first trumps all other issues concerning poverty and riches. To give God first priority has significant implications for how Christians are to deal with poverty and riches.

1.1 Riches as Obstruction to Salvation

The story of the rich man asking Jesus what he must do to receive eternal life is found in Matthew (19: 16–30), Mark (10: 17–31), and Luke (18: 18–30). The differences between the three versions are minor and do not affect the meaning of the story. An example of these minor differences are found in the naming of the person concerned. Matthew (19: 20, 22) refers to the rich young man, Mark (10: 17, 22) only to the rich man, and Luke (18: 18, 23) to the rich man who was a Jewish leader.

The rich man presents himself as someone who fully obeys the second table of the law. Jesus says to the rich man that he must keep the commandments to get eternal life. In response the rich man says that he has done so. This response is significant. Despite keeping the commandments, he still felt the need to ask Jesus what he has to do to get eternal life. He knew that something was missing, despite his obedience to the Law (Grosheide 1954: 294; Gould 1896: 191).

Jesus challenges the rich man to do two things that will ensure him eternal life. He must sell all his belongings and give the money to the poor and then follow Jesus. This radical demand of Jesus to the rich man asks that he breaks all his ties with his wealth, show compassion to the poor, and follow Jesus as his spiritual leader. For the rich man this was a demand he could not fulfil, for he could not part with his riches. All three evangelists describe
him as very rich. He goes away from Jesus very sad, although it is not clear exactly why he was sad.

In response Jesus emphasises to His disciples through repetition how difficult it is for rich people to enter the Kingdom of God. It is more difficult for rich people to enter God’s kingdom than for a camel, the largest known domestic animal in Palestine, to go through the eye of a needle, a well-known small opening (Grosheide 1954: 297). Jesus emphasises the particular strong deterrent effect riches have on people’s faith in God (Allbright & Mann 1971: 233). His audience would immediately have realised the impossibility of a camel going through the eye of a needle (Hill 1972: 284). They are astounded at the impossibility of rich people to be saved, as they shared the common perception of ancient Israel – reinforced by Old Testament promises – that riches were blessings of God and prosperity signs of God’s favour to hard-working people obedient to the Law (Allbright & Mann 1971: 233; Evans 1990: 653; Hendriksen 1975: 398). Their response is to ask who then can be saved. Jesus answers them that God can save any human being, although for human beings themselves it is impossible.

If one important lesson from this story is that rich people can only enter the Kingdom of God through His power, what then about the requirement to sell all one’s belongings? Is that requirement universally applicable to all rich people? An interpretation that says no to this question could argue that Jesus used this requirement to determine the rich man’s loyalty. The rich man claimed that he obeyed the second table of the Ten Commandments. This obedience does not automatically imply obedience to the first table, that concerns a person’s relationship with God. To require that he sell all his belongings and give the money to the poor, asks of the rich man to make God’s concern for poor people fully his own.
Parting with all his belongings would show that his relationship with God has absolute priority in his life and that he trusts God fully to take care of him. He is not prepared to give up the security that riches give, i.e., that he can provide for himself. He values his earthly riches more than the riches in heaven that Jesus promised he would get if he sold all his belongings. Thus, despite his obedience to the commandments concerning his behaviour towards his fellow beings, he could not shift his trust in wealth to trust in God. He was enslaved by his belongings (Hendriksen 1973: 726). His riches obstructed his entry into God's Kingdom.

Should all rich people be required to sell all their belongings like this rich man had to do? Only if their riches have a powerful hold on them and obstruct their entry into God's Kingdom (Grosheide 1954: 296; Hill 1972: 283; Hendriksen 1973: 728). If this is so, selling all their belongings will help them learn the right priorities in life and how to trust God completely. Paul sounds a cautionary note about selling belongings and giving the money to the poor. In 1 Corinthians 13: 3 he says giving away everything you have without love will do you no good. This remark suggests that only a heart filled with love will make any gift or aid to poor people meaningful.

A particularly difficult section in Luke seems uncompromisingly set on commanding believers to sell all their belongings and give the money to the poor (Luke 12: 32–34). The section follows the parable of the rich fool with its emphasis on riches in heaven and a section on placing trust in God and not worrying about where food or clothes come from. The point this problematic section makes is that believers should save riches – that cannot decay or be destroyed – in heaven, because their hearts will be where their riches are. This idea echoes an almost identical saying of Jesus in the Matthean Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6: 19–21). Clearly the saying of Jesus that Luke reports presupposes that selling your belongings and giving the money to the poor is an important way of building up and saving riches in heaven.
However, should this unambiguous, radical demand be taken to apply to all Christians? Should Christians sell all their belongings and give the money to the poor? One could easily argue against this text by saying that soon all Christians would end up in poverty as well if they sell all their belongings. Another argument would be to say that such a demand is found nowhere else in the Bible. These arguments might work, but could be too convenient. Perhaps when they are combined with a further argument they might have somewhat more force. Can it be done in the following way?

Some of the sayings of Jesus are deliberately radical so as to grab our attention, to force us out of our comfortable everyday assumptions that have become so natural to us that we can see no alternative to them. Do any Christians really practice the radical demands of the Matthean Sermon of the Mount to take out their right eyes and throw them away or to cut off their right hands and throw them away? If not, why? I doubt very much that all Christians all the time obey the strict interpretation of adultery that Jesus gives. So, if they do fail that strict interpretation of adultery, why not do what Jesus said they had to do? Perhaps for a similar reason Christians are also not obeying the command of Jesus to sell all their belongings and give the money to the poor.

My hesitant interpretation that I hope is reasonably acceptable is that for some issues Jesus states his case so forcefully so as to draw our attention to take an issue seriously that we otherwise would have ignored. It seems so natural for heterosexuals to look at some attractive people from the opposite sex with desire, that it seems impossible to recognise the dangers thereof. The same with belongings. It seems so human and natural to use your possessions to your own advantage. By stating his demands so radically, Jesus shocks us into taking the morality of sex and possessions (riches) seriously. If so, then his commands about the right hand and eye is to warn Christians
to deal immediately and decisively with temptations that could lead to breaking His strict interpretation of the command on adultery. The same with the command to sell all your belongings. The danger of riches corrupting your priorities is serious. The desire for riches makes people selfish and focused on their own interests at the expense of compassion with poor people. Desire and love for riches also distract people from their focus on God as their highest priority and first love. For this reason, Jesus wants to convey the message that people must be prepared to deal with their riches in a decisive way so as to avoid inner corruption and to safeguard their ethical and religious values. On the other hand, there are people so desperately in need, that are so easily ignored, that believers must take their plight seriously.

A similar emphasis on riches as obstruction to salvation as discussed above is found in the parable of the sower. The seeds sown among the thorn bushes are choked and they do not bear fruit. The explanation given in Matthew (13: 22), Mark (4: 19), and Luke (8: 14) says that the love of riches chokes the message. Hearts filled with love and longing for riches are preoccupied, without room for thinking and doing God's word (Hendriksen 1975: 158). Choking is a slow and gradual process that eventually disables the plant to reach its potential (Plummer 1922: 221). Mark and Luke add the worries of this life as part of the chokers. Mark also adds all other kinds of desires and Luke the pleasures of this life as chokers. The important point is that the love of riches is described in this parable as something that can gradually stifle God's message in people's lives so that their lives bear no fruit.

1.2 Greed and Rich Fools

Jesus tells the parable of the rich fool in response to a question that He refuses to answer (Luke 12: 13–21). A man asks Jesus to tell his brother to divide with him the property their father left them. Jesus answers through a
counter-question that He does not have the right to judge or to divide the property between them. He goes on to warn his audience against every kind of greed. The link with the earlier question seems to be that Jesus judged the questioner to be greedy. Nevertheless, Jesus justifies his warning against greed by saying that persons' lives are not made up of their possessions. His warning is against materialism, where people judge the value of their lives according to the possessions they have.

Jesus tells the parable of the rich fool to illustrate the worthlessness of riches in determining the important things of a person's life. Initially the rich fool looks wise, as he builds bigger barns to store all his crops. His foolishness enters when he thinks that his riches are all he needs to live a good life of food, drink, enjoyment, and a comfortable tempo in years to come. His emphasis is on his own enjoyment of his riches, without thinking about needy persons or having any concern for God (Marshall 1978: 524). The emptiness of this life before God comes out when Jesus asks him what will happen if he suddenly dies, an ever-present risk for all humans. He will lose all his piled up riches, which will then go to someone else. So ultimately his possessions will have no value to him (Marshall 1978: 521). However, he is not rich in God's sight, as his life never earned him that. He never did the things that God rewards. It seems reasonable to assume that the tacit background of this text is that the rich fool has ignored the Old Testament message about poverty and riches. He directed his energies in pursuit of the wrong things and ignored the truly important aims in life (Marshall 1978: 521). Gathering riches without living a life in obedience to God out of gratitude for His love and mercy is foolishness, meaning nothing.

1.3 Acceptable Rich Men

Not all rich people in the New Testament have negative images. Zaccheus of Jericho had the potential and opportunity to earn a negative reputation. He
was a chief tax collector, a profession hated by the Israelites and one notorious for exploiting people. However, Zaccheus is rich and praised by Jesus (Luke 19: 1–10). What makes him different from the other rich people who are negatively portrayed?

The crucial factor distinguishing Zaccheus from the unacceptable rich people is his excitement about Jesus. His lack of physical length made it difficult for him to see who Jesus was when He was passing through Jericho. Zaccheus thought it so important to see Jesus that he ran ahead to climb in a sycamore-tree, regardless what it did to his personal dignity, to be able to get a good look at Jesus (Plummer 1922: 433). Jesus noted Zaccheus and said to him to come down as Jesus had to stay with him that day. Zaccheus shows his excitement by hurrying down and welcoming Jesus with great joy. The crowd of people who accompanied Jesus were dissatisfied that Jesus went as guest to Zaccheus’s house, whom they described as a sinner.

Zaccheus immediately reacts to their grumbling by addressing Jesus directly. The excited personal relationship that he has established with Jesus has an immediate effect on his ethical values. He must have known the strong duties toward the poor that God expected of his followers in the Old Testament. As if to take away the embarrassment caused by the crowd’s reaction to Jesus’ presence at his house, Zaccheus gives a public undertaking, a declaration of intent, to Jesus (Marshall 1978: 697). He promises to give half his belongings to the poor. He furthermore promises to pay back four times the amount to anyone he has cheated. Zaccheus wants to make restitution for his former evil habits (Marshall 1978: 694).

The Old Testament prescribed that wealth or possessions acquired through dishonest means had to be repaid in full, plus an additional twenty percent. Zaccheus undertakes to do much more than that. Through these undertakings Zaccheus immediately demonstrates the right priorities. His relationship
with Jesus has priority and belongings can be sacrificed to secure this relationship. To safeguard his relationship with Jesus, Zaccheus will fulfil more than his duties to the poor, as well as to those that he has cheated. Zaccheus was freed from his riches through his response to the relationship Jesus established with him (Groenewald 1973a: 8; Evans 1990: 661).

The reaction of Jesus to Zaccheus’s undertakings tells the full story. Jesus acknowledges that Zaccheus has experienced true salvation, as only God’s salvation can bring about a change of that scope in a person’s life. Significant is that Jesus calls him a true descendant of Abraham. Besides being the one to whom God promised many descendants, Abraham was also an obedient and very rich man. Zaccheus falls in Abraham’s category, i.e., a rich person who immediately believes in God and obeys His commandments.

Another example of an acceptable rich man is found in Acts 10: 1–7. God uses Cornelius, a Gentile, in teaching Peter the lesson that all people, not only Jews, are acceptable to God. Cornelius must have been moderately rich. He was a captain in the Italian regiment of the Roman Army. His pay was considerably higher than that of common soldiers (Barrett 1994: 499). The fact that he took two house servants and one of his personal attendants along on his journey, suggests that he was no poor man (De Villiers 1977: 214). He was a sincerely religious man who worshipped God with his whole family. When an angel called him to get involved with Peter, he told Cornelius that God was pleased with the prayers Cornelius was constantly praying to God and the works of charity he did to help the Jewish poor people. Again we find that a rich person is acceptable to God if the person has God as highest priority and uses accumulated riches to serve the poor.

These requirements for the acceptable rich person come to the fore in one of the scathing attacks Jesus makes on the Pharisees (Matthew 23: 23; Luke
11: 41–42). Their emphasis on religious rituals made them lose sight of the real priorities of their religion. For this reason Jesus advises them to give to the poor what is inside their cups and plates and then everything will be ritually clean. Whereas their tithing is done in the strictest detail, sometimes going beyond what is required of them, they forget the bigger picture with its main priorities, i.e., love for God, justice, mercy, and honesty (Hendriksen 1973: 830; Hill 1972: 313; Marshall 1978: 497). The ideal, Jesus says, is both to give priority to the essentials, the weightier matters and to observe minor commandments as well (Plummer 1922: 311; Evans 1990: 505).

1.4 Don’t Worry; Trust God

Matthew and Luke both wrote about Jesus’ advice to his disciples not to worry about food, drink, or clothes, but to trust God for such things. Matthew prefaches his text on worries with a short section about the impossibility of serving two masters simultaneously. The two masters he refers to are God and money. Anyone trying to serve both these masters will hate and despise the one and love and be loyal to the other. Matthew explicitly links this section with the section on worries by saying that Jesus tells his disciples not to be worried because of the impossibility of serving two masters. What does Matthew mean? Matthew seemingly suggests that to serve God wholeheartedly implies not to be worried about food, drink, and clothes, but to trust God for those things.

Matthew and Luke both emphasise the point that Jesus makes, i.e., that instead of worrying, believers should have the right relationship with God. This relationship requires that they serve only one master, i.e., God. Their main concern must be God’s Kingdom and what He requires of them. They must accept and believe that God knows what they need and that He will provide for them. Their lives are worth more than food and their bodies worth more than clothes. The way God takes care of birds and plants suggests that He
would do even more for humans whom He values far more than birds and plants.

Matthew also presents reasons drawn from common sense against being worried about food, drink, and clothes. Every day has enough troubles of its own and therefore it makes no sense to add more worries to it. No one has ever lived longer or grown taller as a result of being very worried. Thus, to be worried, common sense tells us, is to make life more complicated than it needs to be and a waste of energy that produces nothing.

These Lukan and Matthean texts have a strong message for poor people. All people – poor people included – are challenged to have the right relationship of trust with a caring God. Their first priority must be God, His Kingdom, and His requirements for their lives. They must furthermore trust that God knows their needs and will provide for them. They must accept that His loving care towards them far surpasses the loving care He expresses towards birds and plants. For these reasons, and the other common sense ones, they must quit worrying to eliminate the destructive influence of worrying from their lives. Desperately poor people, as many others, might find this difficult to do, although enormously comforting. To be able to trust that God knows what a person needs and believe that He will provide it as well, must relieve poor people of enormous burdens.

1.5 Be Satisfied with – and Work for – What You Have

The apostle Paul suffered many trials and tribulations during his missionary work in the early church. Part of his problems was a life-style that could at times be characterised as poor. He states that he was often hungry, thirsty, clothed in rags, and worn out from hard work (1 Corinthians 4: 11; 2 Corinthians 6: 4). He did not want to rely too much on the support of the early churches and thus often used his skill as tentmaker to provide for his needs.
and those of his helpers. In Philippians 4: 10–20 he thanks the Philippian believers for sending him gifts as token of their care for him. As part of thanking them, Paul tells them that he has experienced negative conditions, such as being in need, being hungry, and having too little. He has also experienced having more than enough, too much actually, and being full.

Paul’s attitude towards these diverse conditions is important to note. He stresses that he has learnt to be satisfied with what he has, to be content regardless of his situation. This is possible, because Christ gives him the power and strength to face all conditions. Thus Paul says that Christians can be satisfied with their conditions, good or bad, and be content. This is possible if they accept the challenge to learn to deal with their conditions through the strength available in Jesus Christ. A further source of comfort for Paul was that although he and his co-workers seemed to be poor and have nothing, they nevertheless possessed everything in God and made other people rich through sharing their faith (2 Corinthians 6: 10).

A similar message accompanies the warning in Hebrews 13: 5 that believers should keep their lives free from the love of money. They are advised to be satisfied with what they have. Again, they are not expected to do so by themselves. To be satisfied with what you have is possible because God is portrayed as their Helper who will never leave or abandon them (Hebrews 13: 6). God’s presence and care can enable believers to make peace with their conditions.

Paul insisted on not becoming dependent on the churches for financial support so that he could safeguard his ministry against charges that he wants to enrich himself (Grosheide 1959: 183; Groenewald 1973b: 95). In order to do so, he worked very hard and long hours to provide for himself and his co-workers (2 Thessalonians 3: 8). In Acts 20: 33–35 Paul states this case similarly, but he adds that by working hard believers have the responsibility
to provide for the weak. Who the weak is, is not clear. Paul quotes a saying of Jesus, not found in the gospels, to support his case (Kee 1997: 242). The saying conveys the idea that there is more happiness in giving than in receiving. For this reason believers have a responsibility to work hard and not be a drain on other people’s resources. Paul seems to suggest that through hard work and earning good income believers are enabled to help those who are weaker.

Paul translates his hard work to achieve self-reliance in support of his ministry into a command that he gives the Thessalonians. He offers himself and his co-workers as examples to the Thessalonians of hard workers who earn their own living. In the light of such praiseworthy examples, the Thessalonians must resist associating with people who are lazy and meddle in other people’s affairs. They should rather admonish these people to follow the example set by Paul and his co-workers. Although Paul seems to justify these prescriptions from his own attempt to safeguard his ministry, he twice describes them as commands that he issues in the name of Jesus Christ the Lord. For Paul the obligation to work (hard) to earn your own income was an important obligation for believers. Through self-reliance they do not place any burden on other persons to take care of them, but are able to help those weaker than themselves (Du Preez 1981: 65). Through earning their own living they will also gain the respect of people who are not believers (1 Thessalonians 4: 11–12).

Paul states this thought in a revised form in his letter to Titus (3: 13–15). In this case he emphasises that believers should learn to spend their time doing good by providing for real needs. Believers should live such lives, so that they will not live useless lives. Titus is advised to help the people concerned to have everything they need to be able to help others. Useful lives are lives spend doing good as God defines it. Believers have the responsibility to enable one another to live such lives.
1.6 Faith Made Perfect Through Actions

Is James against Paul? This question often arises when James 2: 14–26 with its emphasis on faith and actions is discussed. Any conflict with Paul’s writings is more apparent than real (Grosheide 1955: 382). James’s fundamental point is that faith must result in action, otherwise it is meaningless. Differently put, if Christian faith does not affect what a person does or does not do, it cannot be alive in any meaningful way. True, living faith must make a difference to a person’s life. Good deeds and right actions are integral parts of faith and thus legitimate tests whether a faith that works is active in a person (Pretorius 1988: 66). To this message the apostle Paul would not object; on the contrary, he would embrace it wholeheartedly!

To substantiate his point that faith without actions is dead, James draws two contrasts that are implicit in his text. He contrasts a living faith where faith and actions work together with a dead faith because it has no actions. James gives an alternative formulation of this idea when he states that faith is made perfect, brought to fulfilment, through the actions that flow forth from it. True, genuine faith needs the accompanying actions that authenticate it (Stulac 1993: 109). James draws another contrast, i.e., between showing your faith by your actions and not having faith if your actions do not prove it. He uses an example from poverty relief to make this point. It is no good saying to people in need of food or clothes that God will bless them and wish them to keep warm and eat well. Instead of saying these things to them, they must be given food and clothes.

This example of need satisfaction is a comparison with dead faith which has no actions to make it legitimate. James uses the example for comparative purposes and not for its own sake. Nevertheless, its use in this context is instructive. James takes it as self-evident that people in need must be helped immediately. Help must be concrete enough to satisfy those urgent needs.
James is not only convinced that he is right about this, he also assumes that his readers think the same. For this reason he can use it as an example to demonstrate his point about a living faith.

John makes the link between poverty relief and a life of faith much closer. This link is found in a section that emphasises that believers must love one another because Christ has shown them what love is through dying for them on the cross. His sacrificial death must be emulated by the believers: their love must make them willing to sacrifice their lives for one another (Grayston 1984: 113). If they are willing to sacrifice their lives, how much more must they not be prepared to use their capacity to give help in service of others (Stott 1964: 142–143; Grayston 1984: 114; Houlden 1994: 100). John makes a direct link between love for God and love for fellow human beings. Rich people cannot claim to love God if they close their hearts to people in need. True love for God will thus show itself in action towards one’s fellow human beings in need. Love cannot only be words and talk, but as in the case of James, must be demonstrated through acts of love towards others. Action, as the proverb says, speak louder than words (Stott 1964: 144).

1.7 Jesus or the Poor?

Many non-poor people justify their lack of involvement with poor people by reference to the saying of Jesus that the poor will always be with us. Could it be that Jesus is saying that poverty is an insoluble problem that His followers can therefore ignore? Is such an interpretation outrageous and an abuse of this saying of Jesus (Allbright & Mann 1971: 315)? If so, why?

The choice between Jesus and the poor is only valid in the one specific case where the woman used expensive perfume to prepare Jesus for His burial (Matthew 26: 7–13; Mark 14: 3–9; John 12: 3–8). The alabaster jar with perfume made of pure nard that the woman poured over Jesus’ head (Mat-
The woman's deed. Against the criticism of the disciples that she wasted money that could have been used to benefit the poor, Jesus emphasises that His life on earth will not last much longer. The disciples will have many opportunities in future to take care of the poor; however, their opportunities to do something for Jesus, to show their love and respect for the Son of God whilst on earth, are running out (Hendriksen 1973: 900; Groenewald 1980: 272). The woman used such an opportunity to do something for Jesus by preparing His body for burial (inadvertently?) through pouring expensive perfume over Him (Grosheide 1954: 387; Hendriksen 1954: 180). Jesus adds the remark that her deed is so special that it will be remembered wherever the gospel is preached. This remark both serves as comfort to the woman and further reinforces the reprimand to the disciples.

1.8 The True Riches of the New Testament

In 1 Timothy 6: 5–11 the apostle Paul summarises some of the main themes of the New Testament on riches. The danger and uncertainties of riches and Christian religion as the true riches and appropriate focus of human life are both there in detail. He introduces these issues through the problem of teachers of false doctrines who thought they could make money by means of religion. In response to their views, Paul sets the record straight by pointing to the metaphoric riches true religion gives.
Paul warns people who want to be rich against the temptations and traps that could ruin them. One must notice that Paul refers to people who want to be rich, as the desire to become rich can be as destructive as having a large surplus of riches (Smelik 1973: 83). The lure of a luxurious lifestyle can erode moral values and religious spirituality. The power of the many desires awakened by riches can be destructive. That the love of money is the source of all kinds of evil has become a common proverb. Paul expands this idea by referring his readers to people who were so eager to have money that they drifted away from their faith with resultant broken hearts and deep sorrows. Love of money and a desire to be rich can have major negative consequences on people, believers included. Paul asks Timothy to admonish rich believers not to place their hope in the uncertainty of riches, but to place their hope in God.

In contrast to the dangers of riches, Paul points to the true riches that faith and trust in God brings. Religion can make a person very rich, on condition, Paul says, that believers are satisfied with what they have. Believers must develop the capacity to be satisfied with any circumstances (De Kruijf 1966: 71). As we brought nothing into the world, nor can take anything out of it, enough food and clothes ought to satisfy us. Although we cannot take anything out of this world at death, we can store treasure in heaven with God which will ensure that we will have true life with God after death. This is the focus that a rich believer's life ought to have. What does it mean for a believer to have the right focus that will ensure riches in heaven?

Paul says that believers must place their hope in God who generously gives to us everything for our enjoyment. From this basis believers must show their faith in God by doing good (works), being generous and sharing with others (Davies 1996: 54). An ethical lifestyle based on God's commandments with an emphasis on generously sharing what you have available (belongings, money, friendship, support, etc.) with others is what generates
riches in heaven. Believers ought to be concerned to get God’s approval by being rich in good deeds (Davies 1996: 54).

2. Contrasting Rich and Poor

Several texts in the New Testament draw sharp parallels between rich and poor people. In these texts rich people are the villains and the poor people are protected. Does this mean that God has made a choice for poor people and He is against rich people? Such a view would be simplistic, therefore I will explore these texts in greater detail to uncover their deeper meanings.

2.1 The Lukan Beatitudes

One of the more difficult sections in the gospel of Luke is the author’s version of the Matthean Beatitudes (Luke 6: 20–26). Whereas Matthew’s focus is on spiritual qualities of the truly happy and blessed people, Luke emphasises real life circumstances in which people are now living. Luke does not only present a series of blessings, but also pronounces woes on people who are called the rich. Does Luke condemn all rich people and offer a poor lifestyle as the ideal for Christians?

We can only make sense of this section if we note the strong contrast that Luke sets up between rich and poor. The contrast is neatly presented in parallels. Once these parallels are noted, the section becomes a devastating judgement on certain kinds of rich people. The rich people are those who live luxurious lives now without concern for the poor and do all they can to gain public approval. Perhaps a visual presentation of the parallel contrasts will illuminate the reasons for this interpretation.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BLESSINGS</th>
<th>WORST</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Happy are you poor</td>
<td>how terrible for you who are rich now</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the Kingdom of God is yours</td>
<td>you have had your easy life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happy are you who are hungry now</td>
<td>How terrible for you who are full now</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you will be filled</td>
<td>you will go hungry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happy are you who weep now</td>
<td>How terrible for you who laugh now</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you will laugh</td>
<td>you will mourn and weep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happy are you when people hate you, reject you, insult you... all because of the Son of Man</td>
<td>How terrible for you when all people speak well of you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>their ancestors did the very same thing to the prophets</td>
<td>their ancestors said the very same things about the false prophets</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The precise parallels with sharp contrasts betray that Luke refers to a situation where the concepts rich and poor get specific meaning. He is not referring to any kind of rich or poor person. Luke clearly assumes a relationship between rich and poor in this section. Simply put, the poor are poor because the rich are rich. Why this interpretation? Luke is addressing a situation where the rich are leading an easy life, with more than enough to eat and laugh about. Not only is that their life-style, but they also determine their lives by the demands of getting good reputations and praise from other people. They are not concerned with the needy, poor people in society, but are indifferent to their plight (Marshall 1978: 256). The rich also do not have a commitment to the “Son of Man.” They are only concerned with their own desires and need for public approval (Marshall 1978: 246). They thus fit the profile of the false prophets of the Old Testament, who do not proclaim, nor live according to, God’s moral requirements as expounded in the Mosaic Law.

The poor people are people who live in physical and psychological need, but get no help from those better off, i.e., the rich. They are pitiable by outward appearance, but are judged to be happy because of what Jesus promises them (Marshall 1978: 245–246). Poverty is thus not depicted as a condition
that brings about happiness; rather, God’s promise of the Kingdom is the source of happiness (Marshall 1978: 249). Luke emphasises that they are poor and hungry now, and weep now. He refers to their present need. In contrast to the rich, the poor have miserable lives, without the benefit of loving care expressed by those, the rich, able to do so.

In the context of future rewards, a future reversal of fortunes, and penalties, Luke presents us with a picture where the poor experience gross exploitation by the rich. If the section is read as a whole and judged to apply as a whole to the rich and to the poor, then those addressed as the poor are not just any poor person. The poor of this section then becomes those who also suffer, like the prophets of the Old Testament, because of their relationship with Jesus Christ, the Son of Man. This relationship with Christ is a vital qualification, which implies that the poor suffer hatred and contempt not as a result of their own wrong actions and unacceptable behaviour, but because of their links with Christ (Plummer 1922: 181).

If this interpretation holds, then Luke sketches a situation where poor believers are severely exploited by the rich unbelievers of their society. Luke’s message now becomes one of comfort to the poor (Marshall 1978: 246). Are they comforted by the fact that poverty, sorrow, and hunger are opportunities for developing certain virtues, while wealth, laughter, and having enough to eat are sources of temptation (Plummer 1922: 179)? No. They are promised that their hunger will be changed in future to being filled. Their weeping will change to laughter.

Is this a “pie in the sky” message where the poor people are promised eschatological justice and rewards in future in exchange for acquiescent and submissive behaviour now? Perhaps, if one notes that Luke promises them a great reward in heaven for suffering ill-treatment from others as a result of their commitment to Jesus. Perhaps not, if one looks at the statement that the Kingdom of God already belongs to them. In this case, they are not
promised the Kingdom, but Luke states as a fact that the Kingdom is theirs (Plummer 1922: 180). The poor thus already share in God's rule over creation and the lives of people, but will also have part in God's future establishment of His Kingdom.

Is the comfort of future rewards, a future reversal of fortunes, and possession of God's Kingdom enough for people suffering from poverty, hunger, and psychological distress now? Perhaps not. However, Luke offers them something more. He presents them with God's strong judgement on their predicament. This judgement shows the injustice of their poverty that results from their exploitation by the rich and the rich's neglect of their obligations towards the poor. This insight into their situation, provided by a strong normative evaluation thereof, can be the starting point for collective action to do something about the extreme degree of difference between rich and poor in their society.

2.2 The Rich Man and Lazarus

Luke's story of the rich man and Lazarus has a similar message (Luke 16: 19–31). Again the profile of the rich in this story is one of a person who ignores the plight of the poor and who does not care about God either. As in Luke 6: 20–26, Luke gives a list of contrasting parallels between the life of Lazarus and the rich man (Marshall 1978: 635). Again, his intention is to show the direct link between exploitative rich people and suffering poor people. The contrasts can be presented as follows.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RICH MAN</th>
<th>LAZARUS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>dressed in most expensive clothes</td>
<td>covered with sores</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lived in great luxury everyday</td>
<td>brought to the rich man's door; hoping to eat bits of food falling from his table</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>died, buried, in Hades in great pain</td>
<td>died, carried by angels to sit beside Abraham at the feast in heaven</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
you were given all the good things ⇔ Lazarus got all the bad things
you are in pain ⇔ he is enjoying himself

In this section, as in Luke 6: 20–26, Luke shows us rich and poor in an exploitative and non-caring relationship. The paths of the rich man and Lazarus crossed practically everyday. Lazarus was brought to the rich man’s gate with the hope of getting bits of food from the rich man’s table to eat. Lazarus was very poor, as he could not provide his own food, nor did he have relatives or friends who could provide him with food. Luke does not even tell us about the clothes of Lazarus; what stands out is his health problem, a body covered with sores. Luke mentions that Lazarus had a difficult life in which he got all the bad things. The rich man’s life is sketched by Luke in contrasting terms. The rich man dressed in the most expensive clothes and lived in great luxury. He focused on the enjoyment of his riches and doing so in view of other people (Groenewald 1973a: 192). What is clear, though, is that he ignored the plight of the poor man in front of his gate everyday.

The situations of Lazarus and the rich man are reversed at death. Lazarus dies and is carried by angels to sit beside Abraham at the feast in heaven. In contrast, the rich man dies, is buried and suffer great pain in Hades. The conversation between Abraham and the rich man is telling. The rich man negotiates with Abraham for pity, but he still assumes an attitude of superiority towards Lazarus. He asks Abraham to send Lazarus to cool his lips with water and when that request fails, he begs Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers to avoid a fate similar to his. He has the attitude that Lazarus is inferior and ought to be commanded to be him of service (Marshall 1978: 638).

In answer to his first request to send Lazarus to cool his lips, Abraham reminds him of the reason why his fate differs so much from that of Lazarus.
Lazarus got all bad things in his earthly life, whilst the rich man were given all good things. By implication, the rich man did nothing to alter the desperate poverty of Lazarus through the use of his considerable resources. Now after death, their conditions are reversed, as Lazarus enjoys himself and the rich man is in pain. The rich man failed to use available opportunities to make wise use of his wealth (Plummer 1922: 390). The rich man is not punished for being rich. In an ironic twist, Lazarus ends up at the heavenly feast next to Abraham, one of the richest men in the Old Testament. Not riches, but uncaring, unloving, and heartless neglect of the urgent needs of the poor lead to his unfortunate fate (Plummer 1922: 394).

Abraham’s answer to the rich man’s request to send Lazarus to warn his brothers to avoid a similar fate is significant. Abraham says with great conviction that the only way to avoid such a fate is through taking Moses and the prophets seriously. If people are not willing to accept the authority of Moses and the prophets, then nothing else, not even someone risen from death, will convince them to do so. This implies that the rich man was in Hades because he ignored the message of Moses and the prophets. He thus ignored God’s word and refused to help the poor. He used his riches for his own benefit and kept it all for himself. Furthermore, Abraham’s answer implies that the message of Moses and the prophets is strong enough and sufficient in itself to convince people to accept God as father and to take care of the poor in their midst. This story of Jesus thus legitimises the Old Testament message on poverty and riches.

2.3 Rich Man, Poor Man in James

James gives his version of a strong contrast between a rich man and a poor man in James 2: 1–11. His version is complicated by the way his readers discriminated against a poor man as compared to the prejudicial way they treated a rich man. He wants his readers, whom he describes as believers,
not to judge people on their outward appearance. His example of judging people on outward appearance is their contrasting treatment of rich and poor. James disagrees strongly with their conduct and presents several reasons why he judges it to be wrong.

In the case of James he also presents a series of parallels between the rich man and the poor man that highlights the contrasting ways the believers treated these two people. It can be illustrated as follows.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THE RICH MAN</th>
<th>THE POOR MAN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a rich man wearing a gold ring</td>
<td>a poor man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fine clothes</td>
<td>ragged clothes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>show more respect</td>
<td>you dishonour the poor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have this best seat here</td>
<td>Stand over there; sit here on the floor by my feet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the ones who oppress you and drag you before the judges; speak evil of that good name...given to you</td>
<td>God chose the poor... to be rich in faith and to possess the kingdom...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The contrast is clear. Rich and poor are easily recognisable by their outward characteristics. The rich man's fine clothes and gold ring immediately betrays his economic status, whereas the poor man's ragged clothes gives his economic status away. The believers respond correspondingly. They show more respect to the rich man and offer him the best place to sit. They dishonour the poor man by telling him to merely stand over there, or to sit at their feet. James rejects their conduct as an instance of judging people according to their outward appearance.

The most important reason James presents for rejecting preferential treatment for the rich and discriminating behaviour against the poor is that such behaviour is not in accordance with the law of the Kingdom, i.e., to love your
neighbour as you love yourself. The readers, addressed as believers in Jesus Christ, ought not to treat people in such a way (Pretorius 1988: 51). The interpretation James gives to this commandment excludes the possibility of judging people according to their outward appearance; on the contrary, judging that way becomes a sin.

The status God ascribes to poor people is another reason for rejecting any discriminating behaviour against them. God have chosen poor people to be rich in faith and to possess His kingdom that He promised to those who love Him. Who are God’s children, then, to disregard His example and denigrate the people chosen by Him? Again, as in Luke, the support for poor people is not unqualified. The poor people James defends against unfair discrimination are those chosen by God, who love Him. Poor people, as fellow believers who were chosen by God, thus deserve full respect like any other person (Pretorius 1988: 56).

James portrays the rich in a similar way than Luke does. The rich for James are people who oppress the readers, take them to court, and violate God’s name. For this reason the rich are not worth to be given preferential treatment above poor believers by James’s readers (Pretorius 1988: 51). To treat them thus, James judges as creating distinctions amongst believers that are irrelevant in the church. Their judgements in favour of the oppressive rich are based on evil motives and not in accordance with the second part of the Great Commandment.

2.4 God Looks at the Heart, Not the Amount

The story of the poor widow has its impact because of the strong contrast it contains. It is not just a contrast between the two copper coins the widow dropped in the offering box and the lots of money the others gave. The contrast extends further between one poor widow and many rich men. Widows
were one of the most vulnerable groups in patriarchal ancient Israel and here a single widow of limited means is contrasted with many men of considerable means, the most powerful group in ancient Israel. In that context most people would value the high monetary value of the contributions made by the many rich men and treat the widow’s minuscule contribution (and herself) as insignificant and irrelevant. The powerful group with big contributions drawn from their large resources must surely be more important to God’s work than a poor widow with her small contribution that even depletes her resources. Or, that’s how people would think.

Jesus reverses this judgement. In God’s Kingdom people are not valued according to the amount or size of their monetary or other contributions. Jesus makes the surprising remark that the widow put more money in the offering-box than all the others. How can that be? The last contrast in the story explains the way Jesus evaluates this situation. The many rich men dropped in a lot of money, but in proportion to their means, they gave only part of what they could spare of their riches. The poor widow, in contrast, gave all that she had. The repetition of “all that she had” emphasises that what she gave was all the resources she had available to live on. This means she gave everything she had, not just part of what she could spare.

Through judging the proportion of the income and wealth that the people gave, Jesus comes to the conclusion that she gave more than all the others. Thus, in the eyes of Jesus the poor widow deserves more credit and praise than all the rich men combined. The divine standard that Jesus applies seems to be that what people do with their available resources to serve God is what really counts. The poor widow has more value in God’s Kingdom than the rich men. Poor people thus need not feel insignificant in God’s Kingdom because they have fewer resources to contribute.
This message is reinforced by Luke 16: 14–15. Jesus says to the Pharisees that God knows their hearts and can thus look past their attempts to make themselves acceptable to other people. Their attempts to make themselves acceptable and respectable will not necessarily impress God. Jesus explicitly says that what human beings consider to be of great value is worth nothing in God’s sight. This statement reinforces the idea that God judges people differently from the way people in ancient Israel would have judged the value of a poor widow’s contribution against those of many rich men.

2.5 Treat the Poor (as Special)

Jesus also made a habit of inverting the distinctions that dominated social life in ancient Israel. In Luke 14: 7–14 Jesus makes two points that go against the usual ways of doing things in ancient Israel. Whilst having a meal with a leading Pharisee, Jesus noticed how some of the guests chose the best places for themselves. He told them what He calls a parable to instil humility in them, so that they would rather humble themselves and be made great, than make themselves great and be humbled. His advice to them was to take the lowest place at a social function and be asked to move to a better one, rather than the other way around.

When He was finished speaking to the guests about humility, Jesus turns to the host with a typical strong Lukan contrast. With this contrast Jesus wants to undermine a view so strong that it is almost regarded as natural. Practically all people give a lunch or dinner for their friends, relatives, acquaintances, or colleagues and associates at work. Jesus tells the host not to invite such people, as they can invite him back and that is equal to being paid for his invitation to them. Rather, Jesus encourages the host to give a feast and invite the marginalised people who cannot pay him back, like the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. He will eventually get repaid by God at the resurrection. The message again is to do something special for the poor
in society by treating them as human beings with dignity who are valuable in the sight of God. Does this mean that believers should not invite their friends and relatives for dinner? Not necessarily, if Marshall’s explanation is plausible. What is stated in Semitic idiom as “do not do this, but that,” really intends to say “do not do so much of this, but more of that” (Marshall 1978: 583).

2.6 Condemning the Rich

James (5: 1–6) writes one of the strongest condemnations of rich people found in the New Testament when he discusses the dangers of riches in his letter for the third time. The clue to the interpretation of this section is found in James 5: 4. The clue is that James draws a sharp contrast between the rich and their workers who are poor as a result of the rich exploiting them. The contrast is between the rich and those who work in their fields and gather in their crops. As in the case of other authors elsewhere in the New Testament, James is not addressing the rich in abstract, but the rich people he knew, who were ruthlessly exploiting their workers.

In this context James’s strong condemnation of the rich makes sense. These rich people have not paid the wages of their workers, who have complaints and cries that have reached God. The workers suffer a life of urgent need and experience a desperate struggle for survival (Pretorius 1988: 108). Even worse, the rich are so powerful that they can condemn and murder innocent people without anybody resisting them. While withholding their workers’ wages and murdering innocent people, the rich are piling up riches and living luxurious lives full of pleasure. They handled their enormous wealth irresponsibly (Stulac 1993: 168). As elsewhere in the New Testament, the condemned rich are those who live alongside the poor but do not care for them at all. The condemned rich also lacks faith in, and obedience to, God. Lack of care for the poor and lack of faith in God usually go together.
For James it is not enough to condemn the rich. He goes further by pronouncing woes on them. The exploitative rich must weep and wail over the miseries that they are going to suffer. They are going to lose their riches through decay. Their bodies, clothes, and riches (gold and silver) will be lost. Their riches will rot away, moths will eat their clothes, rust destroy their silver and gold and eat up their flesh. Whether these are normal processes of decay or something else is not clear. James refers to a day of slaughter for which they have prepared themselves (James 5: 5), but the reference is too vague to draw any conclusions from it. James seems to be saying the following. To gather riches that will eventually decay is a futile exercise (Pretorius 1988: 104). Their hopes and dreams based on their abundant riches will be destroyed through inevitable decay (Stulac 1993: 164).

2.7 Difficult Texts

James 1: 9–11 is difficult to interpret because James briefly states a contrast between rich and poor without giving much detail. He addresses Christians and asks them to be glad when God lifts up the poor and brings down the rich. These sayings are then complemented by a metaphoric description of the mortality of the rich. What could it mean?

The section rests on two assumptions. One is that the poor are down and needs lifting up, as the rich are up and needs to be brought down. The other assumption is that God judges a role reversal between rich and poor to be appropriate. The text assumes that the poor is in a lowly position from which they need to lifted up. We could only speculate what this low position might be. Perhaps the reference is to their meagre means and resources, their low position in society, or their perception of themselves. Similarly, the high position of the rich could refer to their abundant means and resources, their high status in society, or their pride about their achievements and status.
The safest interpretation of James 1: 9–11, though not necessarily the correct one, is to establish a link with James 2: 1–13. In that section James indeed enhances the lowly social status of the poor by showing that God has chosen the poor to be rich in faith and to possess his Kingdom. He furthermore requires that His followers treat the poor, full participants in the community of faith, according to the second part of the Great Commandment (Pretorius 1988: 37). The rich are brought down by James. They must not get preferential treatment because of their socio-economic status, as they are not more important to God than the other believers. On the contrary, the rich James refers to are people who harm Christians through oppression and court action. They also defile God’s name. The poor believers thus deserve far better treatment than James’s readers have given them and the rich do not deserve any preferential treatment. In this way God effects a reversal of fortunes through enhancing the human dignity of the poor and stripping away the special privileges of the rich.

The second part of the section in James 1: 9–11 is a bit easier. James compares the rich to a flower of a wild plant. The point of the comparison is the transience of the lives of the rich. They are mortal like flowers of a wild plant that die and are destroyed when the sun gets hot. The rich too are vulnerable to being destroyed in the midst of their daily activities, without any prior warning. Rich people are exposed to the uncertainties and the risks of destruction of everyday life, despite their wealth of resources. This exposure is an equalising factor that should remind rich people not to put too much trust in their wealth (Pretorius 1988: 38).

A second difficult text to interpret forms part of Mary’s Magnificat, her song of praise to God after she shared her pregnancy with Elizabeth (Luke 1: 39–56). The part at issue here is verses 51–53. They seem to be comments on the nature of God. God is portrayed as being against the proud, mighty
kings, and the rich. He is also portrayed as being for the lowly and the hungry.

Perhaps it is sufficient to say that Mary’s portrayal of God rests on her interpretation of the sacred texts of ancient Israel and her understanding of God’s involvement in Israel’s history. The text is a song of praise that highlights God’s character as an almighty, good, and faithful God. The text does not claim to make any moral prescriptions or give any interpretation of societal issues. What is significant, though, is that God is understood as being on the side of the weak and powerless, whilst being against the mighty, the rich, and the proud. Again, God is the One who will reverse the fortunes of these two groups by humbling the powerful, proud people and elevating the marginalised persons, a common theme in the Old Testament (Groenewald 1973a: 25; Evans 1990: 175–176).

Written against the background of the Old Testament and in the context of Luke’s gospel, the weak and powerless would be those who seek help from God and have a relationship with Him. The powerful, the rich, and the proud would be those who reject God, oppress and exploit their fellow beings, and have no mercy or compassion for the marginalised people in society.

A similar text in Luke (4: 18–19) is a quote from Isaiah 61: 1–2 that Jesus uses to announce His Messianic mission. When he has read it, he declares that this section of Isaiah has come true as they heard it being read. What can this possibly mean? The section reminds of the return of the Israelites from exile and the joy at the release during the year of the jubilee (Plummer 1922: 121; Marshall 1978: 184). The section tells us more about God’s plans for salvation through Christ and His aims for humans. God has a deep concern with the marginalised, the weak, and the vulnerable people of society. In this case the poor, blind, oppressed, and captives are specifically men-
tioned. The Messiah is sent to take away these characteristics so that these people will become humans only. He is also sent to save God’s people.

3. Giving Aid to Poor People

As in the case of the Old Testament, the New Testament places heavy emphasis on the responsibility of God’s followers to aid the poor. This responsibility is attributed a deep meaning and judged to be close to the heart of Christian faith. What are the dimensions of aid found in the texts of the New Testament?

3.1 Judging Sheep and Goats

One of the most intriguing passages in the Bible deals with the responsibility of Christians to give aid to the poor and marginalised people of society. In Matthew 25: 31–46 we find a picture of what to expect at the final judgement. This section forms part of the apocalyptic discourse (Matthew 24: 1 – 25: 46), that in turn is part of the fifth discourse section in Matthew’s gospel (Matthew 23: 1 – 25: 46). In the apocalyptic discourse Jesus first sketches some of the characteristics of life when his second coming will take place (Matthew 24: 1–35). The second section of the apocalyptic discourse has its focus on the need for believers to be on guard, as they do not know when the second coming will happen (Matthew 24: 36–44; 25: 1–13). An important part of being on guard is to be busy with the right kind of activities. The need to be faithful and wise and to be busy developing the talents, capacities, and opportunities that God gives, is stressed (Matthew 24: 45–51; 25: 14–30).

The story of the final judgement (Matthew 25: 31–46) fits in this context. This section is clearly consistent with its context, where the focus of Jesus is on the demands believers will have to deal with, and the responsibilities they have, while waiting for Jesus’ second coming (Hill 1972: 330). The section demonstrates on what basis all people will be evaluated at the final judge-
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ment. The description of the final judgement is "very dramatic [and] frequently symbolic" (Hendriksen 1973: 885). Jesus is addressing his inner circle of disciples in this section on how they should be living while waiting for His second coming.

Several things make this section so intriguing. One example is why the righteous deny knowing that they ever treated Jesus in the way He tells them they did. The others – never classified, but only referred to as "the goats," "the others," "those on his left," and "these" – similarly do not recall when they failed to give aid to Jesus. Another example is whether the criterion for eternal life here is good works, or not. When discussing this section as a possible guideline for dealing with poverty, the question arises what it means that Jesus identifies so strongly with needy, marginalised people.

The section starts with a description of the setting. Two metaphors flow into one another. Jesus is described in terms of the metaphors of king and shepherd. He is depicted as a king coming in majesty with his angels to judge all the people in the world. His judgement will be a division of all people into two groups, as shepherds divided their sheep and goats at night time in ancient Israel. Those on the right are the sheep who did the right things, who did God's will, and receive eternal life, or alternatively, they are invited to come and possess God's kingdom. This kingdom has been prepared for them from the creation of the world. Does this mean that they have earned the right to eternal life through good works? No. One could argue that since the kingdom has been prepared for them since creation, therefore their care for people in need followed on their experience of God's grace. The case for this interpretation is not very strong, as one could also argue that God prepared his Kingdom for His followers in general and that they now receive that as a result of doing the right things.
One crucial phrase in Matthew 25: 34 makes the interpretation of this section easier. An important trace of the opening section of the Sermon on the Mount provides a key for unlocking the meaning. The sheep, the people who did the right things, are called those who are blessed by God. This phrase reminds of the Beatitudes in Matthew 5: 3–12. The emphasis in Matthew 25 is not on blessings that are promised and must still come in future. The emphasis is on those already blessed by God, as in Matthew 5: 3–12. The people on the right, the sheep of Matthew 25: 31–46, can be linked and identified with the truly happy and blessed people of Matthew 5: 3–12.

This interpretation can be strengthened by taking the unity of the Matthean Gospel seriously. Why should the characteristics of the people truly happy and blessed by God depicted in Matthew 5: 3–12 be different in the later sections of Matthew? His addressees, the disciples, ought to have been familiar with the characteristics of His followers spelt out in the Beatitudes. The deeds performed in the lives of the sheep of Matthew 25: 31–46 seem to be fully consistent with the characteristics of the truly happy and blessed people of Matthew 5: 3–12. Can one not argue that care for people who are hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, strangers, or in prison is merely the practical manifestation of the lives of people who thirst for justice ("...whose greatest desire is to do what God requires" [TEV]), who are merciful to others, who mourn, who are humble, who are pure in heart, and who work for peace? Could one not say that being like this and doing these things are to do the will of God, as the sheep are said to have done?

There are interesting parallels between Jesus' address to those on the right (the "sheep") and those on the left (the "goats"). They can be illustrated as follows.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Left: the goats</strong></th>
<th><strong>Right: the sheep</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- you that are under God’s curse</td>
<td>- you that are blessed by my Father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- the eternal fire that has been prepared for the Devil and his angels</td>
<td>- the kingdom has been prepared for you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- away ..to the fire</td>
<td>- come and possess the kingdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was hungry</td>
<td>I was hungry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was thirsty</td>
<td>I was thirsty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was a stranger</td>
<td>I was a stranger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was naked</td>
<td>I was naked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was sick</td>
<td>I was sick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was in prison</td>
<td>I was in prison</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>you would not......</strong></td>
<td><strong>you fed..., gave..., took care..., visited..., received..., clothed...</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- then they will answer him, “When, Lord, did we...”</td>
<td>- the righteous will then answer him, “When, Lord, did we...”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- whenever you refused to help one of these least important ones, you refused to help me</td>
<td>- whenever you did this for one of the least important of these members of my family, you did it for me!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- will be sent off to eternal punishment</td>
<td>- will go to eternal life</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In both cases Jesus speaks in the first person and tells them that He Himself was hungry, thirsty, naked, a stranger, sick, and in prison. Both groups are astounded by these words, as most people today. Both ask Jesus when did they see or meet Him in those conditions. His answer reveals His strong identification with these marginalised groups of people who are considered to be the least important people in society (Hill 1972: 330). Satisfying their urgent needs is the same as doing it directly for Jesus, whereas neglecting their needs are the same as neglecting Jesus in similar conditions. What does this strong identification mean?

I doubt whether there are many texts in the Bible with a stronger message about the obligation to engage in emergency poverty relief than this one. Jesus points to the enormous value that He attaches to alleviating people’s urgent needs. He makes this point by showing his identification with people who exhibit misery of all kinds and degrees (Hill 1972: 331). People living in absolute poverty do not have enough to eat or drink, clothes to wear, and
they thus get sick easily. To help them in their crisis has the same value as helping Jesus, were He on earth in a similar situation. Jesus makes it clear that He wants His followers to serve Him through helping those who are in serious (physical) need (Hill 1972: 331).

Not only does this section say something about aid to those in need, it also says something about how to treat people in need. If doing something for them is the same as doing it for Jesus, one would have to treat them with respect similar to the respect one would show to Jesus. No discriminating, denigrating, or dismissive treatment may be allowed; full respect for each human being as image of God is required. This requirement implies that taking care of people’s physical needs must be done in a way that respects their value as human beings. Aid should not harm the self-respect and self-image of people in need through insensitive and disrespectful conduct.

The story ends with those on the left ending up with eternal punishment, because of what they neglected or omitted to do. The sheep, those on the right, receive eternal life because they positively cared for people in need (Hendriksen 1973: 887). Those blessed by God, who are to possess God’s kingdom, are the people who lived lives pleasing to God by taking care of people in need (Grosheide 1954: 382). As in the Beatitudes, no sins or shortcomings are mentioned, except failure to fulfil positive duties to the least important people with whom Jesus fully identifies (Hendriksen 1973: 891). Jesus thus interprets aid to people in need as fundamentally important to being a Christian and it forms a crucial distinguishing criterion between true believers and non-believers.

3.2 Keeping Aid Secret

Jesus draws a contrast between two styles of aiding people in need (Matthew 6: 1–4). The style of the hypocrites is public and Jesus rejects it. The
style that Jesus recommends to his disciples is to keep their aid private. The 
hypocrites make a big show of giving aid by making it known or doing it in 
public places (on the streets) and places of religious significance (houses of 
worship). In contrast the disciples are advised to avoid making such a big 
show of giving aid like the hypocrites do. The motive of the hypocrites for 
the public display of their charity is to be noticed and to receive praise from 
other people for their generosity (Hendriksen 1973: 319; Grosheide 1954: 
94).

Jesus advises His disciples to keep their aid a private matter even to the 
extent that their closest friends will not know what they are doing. The con-
sequence of making your aid public for other people to see is that their admi-
ration and praise are the full reward you are going to get (Hill 1972: 133). 
Jesus says to His disciples to avoid such a public display of giving aid moti-
vated by selfish interest for receiving recognition and praise (Hendriksen 
1973: 319–320). When aid is a private matter, God still knows about it. He 
will give you a reward in heaven. Aid must thus not be done to impress peo-
ple, but as service to God. When giving aid to poor people, the focus must 
be on serving them and serving God, not one’s own interests (Hill 1972: 
133).

Is this section in conflict with the apostle Paul’s emphasis that aid to poor 
people leads to gratitude towards God and praise for His grace that enabled 
people to generously contribute resources to alleviate others’ needs? The 
focus of Jesus here is against a public display of people’s generosity in or-
der to draw attention and get praise for the good deeds they have done. 
Good deeds with the aim of serving one’s own reputation and public image 
are unacceptable. Paul’s emphasis is on people giving aid through the grace 
of God. The Macedonian churches give aid because they belong to God and 
want to serve Him through service to others, despite meagre resources. In
this case, although their attitudes and deeds are public, God gets people's gratitude and praise for what has happened.

3.3 Taking Care of Widows

A cameo example of someone aiding the poor is Dorcas (Tabitha) (Acts 9: 36–42). She is introduced as part of one of the miracle stories in Acts. Tabitha dies and is raised to life again by the apostle Peter. She was actively involved in poverty relief in the Christian church at Joppa through making clothes (shirts and coats). She devoted her whole life to her project of helping the poor and doing good. From her story it seems as if her relief work was a specialised ministry focused on widows, a group very vulnerable to poverty in patriarchal ancient Israel (Acts 9: 39) (Witherington 1998: 333).

Whether she had abundant means, or made money through sewing is not clear. What is clear, is that she must have had considerable skills to run a relief project taking care of all the widows in Joppa. She also had to have time and means available (Witherington 1998: 331). Whether there is any link between her miraculous resurrection from the dead through Peter and her valuable work in poverty relief among widows is unsure. So too whether she had any training project in sewing for the widows, or whether she merely made clothes herself and used the proceeds from sales to support the widows. What can be said, is that Tabitha became a role model exemplifying Christian caring for poor people (Kee 1997: 126).

3.4 The Church in Jerusalem

The first congregation established in the Christian church after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem had important features and problems relevant to issues of poverty. How and why to give aid is one of them. These features and problems are highlighted in two summary passages in Acts, that give a glimpse of life in the first Christian church and serve as links or
bridging passages in Luke’s narrative presented in Acts (Witherington 1998: 156–157; Barrett 1994: 159). The new, post-Pentecostal believers were one in heart and mind and thus in close fellowship, whilst praising God (Acts 2: 44, 47; 4: 32). They met day after day and had meals together in their homes (Acts 2: 46). The way the congregation in Jerusalem dealt with riches and poverty is often presented as the ideal of Christian sharing or socialism. But is the matter that simple?

The sense of unity in faith and mutual obligation that members of this community experienced were expressed in their sharing of belongings (Kee 1997: 54). The Christian believers viewed their belongings as not their own and shared everything they had with their fellow believers in need. They sold their properties (land and houses) and brought the proceeds to the apostles for distribution amongst needy believers (Witherington 1998: 162). The proceeds were distributed by the apostles according to need and as a result no one in the congregation was in need (Acts 2: 45; 4: 32, 34–35). The wealthier believers showed loving care by selling their belongings to provide for the needs of the poorer believers (De Villiers 1977: 98).

Selling their belongings to earn money for poverty relief was an entirely voluntary matter that each individual could freely decide on (Witherington 1998: 216; Barrett 1997: 267). There was no transfer of private property to communal ownership, nor any communal control of ownership of property (De Villiers 1977: 64, 65; Witherington 1998: 208). There is no indication that their sharing of belongings in this way is prescribed to believers, as no apostle suggests or teaches that all believers ought to share their belongings in this way (Barrett 1994: 252). There is also no evidence that their practice was followed by the other Christian communities described in the New Testament (Barrett 1994: 169). A serious question for supporters of this practice is whether it is sustainable over time. The answer provided by the rest of the story of the Jerusalem congregation – that one can piece together
from scattered information in the New Testament – suggests that it is not (Jonker 1966: 197).

Luke, the author of Acts, does not only sketch the positive side of the first church and ignore the problems experienced by believers. He briefly discusses the problems and their solutions (Witherington 1998: 247–248). In the context of voluntary sharing of possessions amongst members of a newly found, excited, worshipping Christian community, Luke points out two problems. In contrast to the voluntary sharing of the proceeds of the sale of possessions, as exemplified by Barnabas (Acts 4: 36–37), the story of Ananias and Sapphira shows how some believers threatened the strong ties of solidarity and generosity amongst the new church community through acts of deceit (Acts 5: 1–11) (Barrett 1994: 255; Kee 1997: 75). Ananias and Sapphira also sold property that belonged to them, but deceived the apostles in the process of handing over the proceeds to them for distribution. They tried to deceive the apostles that the part of the proceeds they handed over were the full amount (De Villiers 1977: 103; Barrett 1994: 266–267). They thus colluded to keep the true price of their property a secret, lied to the apostles, and according to Peter, to God as well (Witherington 1998: 215). When Peter confronts Ananias with his deception and lie, he emphasises that the property, as well as the proceeds from the sale, belonged to Ananias and Sapphira. Their sin was to deceive and lie to God, the apostles, and the community. Sapphira is confronted when she arrives three hours later than her husband and gets an opportunity to set the record straight and confess her sin. She fails to do so, thus confirming their collusion (Witherington 1998: 217–218).

A second problem in the first congregation in Jerusalem regarding the sharing of possessions was that the Greek-speaking Jews felt that the widows belonging to their group were neglected by those distributing funds daily (Acts 6: 1–7). The apostles acknowledged the problem as an important defi-
ciency in administration to deal with right away by calling together the whole community (Barrett 1994: 303; De Villiers 1977: 122–123). The issue was important because widows were a particularly vulnerable group of the poor in their society (Barrett 1994: 306). The apostles realised the need for a division of labour between preaching the gospel and ministering to the concrete needs of poor people (Kee 1997: 89). They recognised that their calling was not to handle finances, but to be involved with preaching and prayers. They suggested that the congregation choose seven men filled with the Holy Spirit and wisdom. These men were to be put in charge of the distribution of funds for the needy so that the apostles could focus on their calling.

The harmonious sharing of belongings and joyful worshipping of God was rudely interrupted by persecution spearheaded by Saul after the stoning of Stephen, one of the seven men chosen to deal with the congregation’s finances. The persecution had the effect of scattering the believers throughout Judaea and Samaria. The scattering of believers led to an upsurge in missionary work, as the believers proclaimed the Gospel wherever they went (Acts 8: 1–4). There is a faint resemblance between these events and the events at the tower of Babel in the Old Testament (Genesis 11). The believers clustered together in Jerusalem and their persecution kick-started God’s mission to the nations. Their scattering through persecution aided the widespread preaching of the gospel message; paradoxically, that which their persecutors hoped to prevent (Witherington 1998: 199, 282). Luke’s earlier quote of Jesus’ words that his followers would proclaim the gospel not only in Jerusalem, but also in Samaria and Judaea, was now fulfilled (Witherington 1998: 279). Ironic that the great missionary of the New Testament, Paul, was responsible for starting this evangelical outreach to surrounding areas through his persecution of Christians under the name of Saul.

Another calamity hit the Jerusalem congregation. A severe famine struck Judaea (Jerusalem) in the time of emperor Claudius (Acts 11: 28). The
famine and persecution were not the only reasons for the need that arose among believers in the church at Jerusalem. Their previous generous sharing of the proceeds of the sales of their belongings could have impoverished them in the long run. Their funds would soon have run out through selling their capital assets and using the money to distribute among the needy. It is difficult to see anything else happening if they did not have ways in which to generate new income once they had no more belongings or capital assets to sell. This way of addressing poverty through sharing the proceeds gained from selling possessions was never obligatory and was not followed anywhere else in the New Testament. In the end this strategy – plus the famine and persecution – left the church at Jerusalem vulnerable.

The disciples at Antioch decided to collect money for the believers in Judaea (Acts 11:29). The apostle Paul worked with Barnabas at Antioch at that time and he made a strong commitment to seek further help for the believers in Judaea from the other churches in Gentile areas (Acts 11: 25–26; Galatians 2: 10) (Groenewald 1971: 228). Paul emphasises (Romans 15: 27) that the churches decided freely to make contributions for the church in Jerusalem (Judaea), although he believes he could make a case for them having an obligation to help the church in Jerusalem. In his two letters to the Corinthians he extensively discusses the issue of aid to the church in Jerusalem. How does he justify the obligations of other churches to give aid in this case and how should they go about it?

Paul presents several reasons in support of his call to the Corinthians to generously support the poor church in Jerusalem. The most obvious reason is that the church in Jerusalem shared their spiritual blessings with other people through which these others became believers sharing in God's riches (Romans 15: 27) (Stuhlmacher 1994: 241–242). Besides bringing the message of God's salvation to the members of these churches, the church in Jerusalem was the leader in spiritual affairs who settled doctrinal conflicts,
gave moral support, and brought joy through their encouragement, as Acts 15 clearly demonstrates. In return the Gentiles have an obligation to aid the church in Jerusalem with their material blessings (Romans 15: 27). Paul elsewhere restates this idea of reciprocal help when he says to the Corinthians that it is only fair that they help others in need while they themselves currently have plenty. Why he describes this as fair is that in times when the Corinthians are in need, other churches in turn will help them (2 Corinthians 8: 13–14). Paul thus emphasises that need most possibly is not a permanent characteristic of a church and that churches should help one another in turn, as equals ought to do. Ironic is that the “mother” church in Jerusalem is the one needing financial help, despite being the spiritual leader that brought the message to the other churches.

The most important reason that Paul advances in support of his call for aid to the church in Jerusalem is to point to the example of Jesus (2 Corinthians 8: 9). Jesus deprived Himself of the riches of God in heaven and made Himself poor by becoming a human being. He did this so that his death and resurrection can enrich human beings immeasurably. His followers ought to emulate his example.

Another example presented as reason for giving aid is the churches in Macedonia (2 Corinthians 8: 1–6). Paul uses them as example to show the Corinthians what God’s grace can achieve in a congregation. He uses the example not to blame or put the Corinthians to shame, but rather to inspire them. He wants to show them what God’s grace can achieve in people’s hearts who are poor and experience troubles (Grosheide 1959: 222). What makes these churches an example is that they gave themselves both to God and to Paul and his helpers to be available for service. This is remarkable as these churches went through testing times and were very poor themselves. Nevertheless, they begged Paul to be allowed to make their contribution and when they did, they were very generous as a result of the great joy they
have in their faith. What impresses Paul about these churches is not the amount of money they gave, but that they gave freely with a joyful heart and more than he could reasonably expect (Grosheide 1959: 225).

The example of the Macedonian churches points to the important link between a believer’s relationship with God and giving aid (Groenewald 1973b: 114–115). The Macedonians gave themselves fully to God and the service of the apostle Paul out of gratitude for God’s grace that brought them endurance and joy in times of trouble. Their giving is voluntary and comes from inner experiences of joy and gratitude. Giving aid to the poor gets deep religious meaning as it expresses an important dimension of the relationship between believers and God.

When Christians give expression to fellowship in such joyous and generous ways despite their own adverse conditions, it becomes a strong reason for glorifying the God who enables people to do so through His grace (2 Corinthians 9: 13) (Pop 1971: 237–238). Giving aid becomes a testimony of faith to other people, for which believers will glorify and thank God. Paul also motivates the Corinthians to give aid by saying to them that he wants to find out how real their love for other people is (2 Corinthians 8: 8). The Corinthians were rich in many things, such as faith, speech, knowledge, eagerness to help, and love for Paul and his helpers (2 Corinthians 8: 7). He wants to see their love for God and their fellows expressed in giving aid to the believers in Jerusalem. When he discussed the issue with them earlier, they showed a willingness and an eagerness to make such contributions (2 Corinthians 9: 1–5). Paul now wants to see them put their good intentions into practice, to make true their promises to him. He wants to see them complete the good works that they have started at an earlier stage to contribute to the alleviation of the plight of the church in Jerusalem.
Paul's arguments establish the obligation of Christians to help fellow-believers in a distant congregation deal with their poverty. How should this obligation be put into practice? Paul advises the Corinthians not to give with an attitude of regret or out of a sense of duty. Rather, they should give gladly (2 Corinthians 9: 7). As in the case of the church in Jerusalem, giving part of your belongings for God's service must be voluntary (Pop 1971: 244). Paul reminds the Corinthians that they need not be afraid that their giving would impoverish them. He assures them that God will give them enough resources so that they will always have what they need and be able to generously contribute to good causes (2 Corinthians 9: 8, 11). To organise this giving practically, Paul advises them to put an amount proportionate to their income aside every week. These contributions of the individual members must be saved so as to be easily available when Paul and his helpers arrive (1 Corinthians 16: 2). He suggested that they choose people to take their aid to the church in Jerusalem. He would give them a letter to establish their credentials (1 Corinthians 16: 1–3). One could speculate about his motivations for not offering to take their money to Jerusalem himself. He might want to allay suspicions that he could enrich himself, or he could think it important that the church in Jerusalem meet their benefactors and thank them personally (Groenewald 1971: 229). Paul clearly states that he wants to do what is right before God and people and thus he does not want believers to complain about the way he handles the aid they collected for the church in Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 8: 20). Paul is sensitive to criticism that might harm his ministry and thus does not ignore possible suspicions that he might abuse the funds the Corinthians have collected (Grosheide 1959: 245).

This kind of giving is important as expression of the faith of believers. When they give part of their material resources for the needs of other believers, two good things follow for God. Their contributions not only satisfy the needs of believers, but also lead to an outpouring of gratitude to God (2 Corinthians 9: 11–12). People receiving this aid know that the grace of God enables
people to give generously for their cause. From this follows a second good thing for God. People will praise and honour God for his love, grace, generosity, and faithfulness. God will get the glory for the charitable deeds of His children (2 Corinthians 8: 19; 9:13).

4. Metaphoric Riches and Poverty

There are many examples in the New Testament where the concepts “rich” and “poor” are used as metaphors. These metaphoric uses seem to be irrelevant to this study, as they do not directly, or even indirectly, point to ethical values dealing with poverty or riches. However, there is one aspect of the metaphoric uses of the concepts “rich” and “poor” that is relevant to a study of New Testament ethics on poverty and riches. The relevant aspect concerns the nature of the metaphoric uses made of these concepts. More specifically, do the authors of the New Testament use the concepts “poor” and “rich” in positive or negative senses? And what is depicted as being rich or poor in a metaphoric sense? A brief overview will suffice.

God’s heaven is depicted in many metaphors referring to riches and wealth. In Revelation many jewels and precious metals are used as metaphors to describe the physical characteristics of the heavenly city or the clothes of its inhabitants. Heaven is depicted as a place of abundance and wealth, reflecting the splendour of God. In line with this wonderful portrayal of God’s dwelling place, what God offers to believers are similarly sketched in metaphors reflecting richness and wealth. The key metaphors speak about Jesus’ riches before He came to earth and that He thus made Himself poor to become human for our salvation. Fortunately, through His voluntary poverty every human being can become immeasurably rich. The New Testament refers to the wealth of His glory, His infinite riches, rich blessings, and the hidden treasures of God’s wisdom and knowledge.
God offers these riches to human beings as good enough to satisfy their non-physical hunger and thirst in a satisfactory way. God’s riches are offered as the satisfaction for our needs. Our non-physical hunger and thirst for true, eternal life will be satisfied by Jesus who is the true bread of life who gives streams of live-giving water to all who needs it. No one who has enjoyed His bread and water will thirst again. His flesh and blood is depicted as fulfilling a similar function.

Images drawn from the economic sphere and from issues somewhat related to poverty and wealth are used in three parables. The parable of the workers in the vineyard where workers are hired all throughout the day, but still paid the same amount at the end of the working day makes a point about God’s free choice how he wants to reward his followers (Matthew 20: 1–16). The parable is accompanied by the warning that those who are first will be last and vice versa. The parable of the gold coins is found of the context of eschatology and aims to make the point that believers should be ready for Christ’s second coming by busying themselves with responsible use of what God has entrusted them with (Groenewald 1973a: 209). They must fulfil the commands God has given them even in the absence of Jesus between His first and second comings (Grosheide 1954: 379; Marshall 1978: 700–701; Plummer 1922: 444). Each person must take responsibility for determining and using the gifts and opportunities they have (Hill 1972: 329). The parable of the shrewd manager shows what shrewd use the desperate manager, who has been fired, makes of his master’s accounts in order to secure friends for himself who could be sympathetic to his plight after he has lost his job.

In an interesting combination of metaphoric and literal uses of the concepts “poor” and “rich,” the apostle John tells us in Revelation how Jesus judged two of the seven congregations who are addressed. The congregation in Smyrna was literally poor, but Jesus valued the spiritual wealth of its mem-
bers (Revelation 2: 9). The other congregation, Laodicea, was literally rich and proud of it, without realising the full extent of their spiritual poverty. They are advised to buy pure gold from Jesus, again a metaphoric reference.

An interesting pattern emerges in the metaphoric uses of poverty (poor) and riches (rich) in the New Testament. When the concepts rich and riches are used in the New Testament, they consistently refer to positive things, like what God has in store for believers (heaven, the new Jerusalem, blessings). The concepts poverty and poor consistently refer to things that are bad, lacking, or deficient. Even the metaphoric use of poor in the "poor in spirit" of Matthew 5: 3 is negative. Such people know their own insignificance and unworthiness before God. As a result of their insight into their own deficiencies and shortcomings and their willingness to acknowledge it, God will respond positively to them. Thus, the metaphoric uses of poverty (poor) and riches (rich) never leads to an exaltation of poverty as a positive condition of life that believers ought to strive for. Rather, believers with resources have a strong obligation to help ameliorate and eradicate conditions of poverty.

5. Conclusion

What are the central themes found in New Testament texts on poverty and riches? The following themes dominate.

1. God must be the first priority and main focus of people's lives, whether they are rich or poor. Human lives without God, however rich or poor, are meaningless. All cases of condemnations of rich people are of rich people characterised by their trust in riches rather than in God. Poor people portrayed as those favoured by God are characterised as people chosen by God, who put their trust and faith in God.
2. The New Testament makes strong normative judgements on riches. People can be rich and believers, but on condition that God enables them to accomplish the impossibility of choosing to serve the right master, i.e., God rather than Mammon (money). The unwillingness to be satisfied and content with what you have goes with a love for riches. This desire for riches is a source of many troubles that can ruin people, even believers.

Acceptable rich people are those who have God as first priority in their lives and share His concern about helping the poor who are in need. Through their good deeds and right actions — as positive responses to God’s commands — they gather riches in heaven, which are the only ones that count. They do not rely on decaying earthly riches and refuse to let such riches obstruct their way to God’s salvation.

Riches can corrupt people’s priorities and stifle their love for God, like the case of the rich man who ignored poor Lazarus day after day. When the rich man begs Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers to avoid a fate similar to his, Abraham affirms the legitimacy of the Old Testament scriptures (the law and the prophets). Those scriptures are sufficient to teach their readers the right priorities. If people do not listen to them, they will listen to nothing else. Jesus teaches all people, but poor people especially, not to worry about food, drink, and clothes. Again the message is to have the right priority, i.e., to put trust and faith in God who will take care of His children more than He takes care of birds and plants.

The rich people who rely on their riches for a good life are most often also those people who reject God and His concern for the poor. They often go further and exploit and harm poor people, often believers included. Their riches result from their injustice towards more vulnerable members of their society.
3. The New Testament takes over the Old Testament ideas about the important moral obligations of believers to help poor people and strengthens and deepens them. The New Testament attaches major significance to the responsibility of believers to aid poor people. Jesus identifies to such an extent with poor and needy people that he regards helping or neglecting them as being done to Himself. That identification has enormous consequences for how non-poor people ought to treat poor people so as to respect the human worth and dignity of the poor.

Several justifications are offered to motivate believers to fulfil these responsibilities toward poor people. Some of the strongest are the following. Jesus left the riches of heaven to become poor on earth. Through his voluntary poverty He made believers immeasurably rich by giving them access to God's salvation. As a result believers have the obligation to serve God through obeying His commands, inter alia those directed to safeguard, and care for, the weak and vulnerable members of society. Believers must become like God in their compassion and care for the poor. Their faith in a loving and caring God must be authenticated by the loving deeds that flow from their faith in, and experience of, a compassionate God.

A further argument is that aid to poor believers is justified because doing so will make the aided grateful to God. People noting the aid will glorify God for His grace that motivates people to give aid. As aid to the poor forms a central part of the responsibilities of believers, the need to put faith into action or to make love concrete provides additional strong justifications for helping the poor.

Aid must be used to glorify God, not to enhance personal status through seeking public recognition. Aid must be given gladly and in proportion to a believer's available resources. Aid can be given personally, as the rich man ought to have given poor Lazarus in front of his gate everyday. Aid can also
be organised collectively through a congregation. If necessary, a division of labour can be made in the church for effectively organising and administering the collection of aid. How to practically organise the collection of aid depends on the circumstances of the congregation involved. The Christian witness of people involved with the collection and distribution of aid must be protected through measures designed to make it abundantly clear that they do not benefit personally from such aid.

Through hard work Christians must ensure that they themselves become self-reliant and not in need of aid. Through self-reliance they become givers of aid rather than being recipients of aid or burdens to others.

4. The New Testament portrays two kinds of help to the poor similar to the Old Testament. One kind of aid is emergency poverty relief where the focus is on provision for the urgent needs of poor people that, if left unfulfilled, could endanger or seriously harm their lives. Hunger, thirst, and lack of clothing are examples of such needs. The New Testament regards this kind of help as enormously important.

A second kind of aid aims to help a poor congregation rid themselves of their poverty. This aid serves the function of enabling the poor believers to become self-reliant again in order to empower them to help other poor people in turn.

5. The Bible never talks about riches and poverty outside a specific context where such people live together. Never are the Biblical authors concerned about rich people in general, or interested in comparing rich people across different societies. What matters is the relation between rich and poor who live together and share their lives in a specific geographical area. The contrast that counts is the one between the rich and the poor living together here and now. The behaviour that is important is between the rich in this context
and their poor neighbours. Whether a rich South African person would be relatively poor when compared to Americans does not matter. What matters is how rich South Africans compare to the poor people they share their country and lives with. Not only how they compare, but how the rich treat the poor. This way of talking about poverty and riches has enormous practical implications.

6. The New Testament judges deep and sharp contrasts between exploitative, rich people and suffering, poor people to be totally unacceptable. In all of these contrasts sketched in the New Testament the rich people do not live according to the Old Testament ethical values for treating the poor. The rich are rich because they are exploiting and ignoring the poor. Through exploitation and deliberately ignoring the poor, the rich are showing no concern for God’s commandments and thus have no compassion or love for the suffering poor. These rich people will only experience their earthly pleasures derived from their riches, but are desperately poor in God’s sight and will not receive eternal life. The suffering poor people who place their trust in God are blessed by God and will get big rewards in heaven.

7. A strong theme in the New Testament is that God judges people differently from the way usually considered to be appropriate in human societies. God – especially through the eyes of Jesus – is not impressed by people’s standards of human worth. God does not think rich and mighty people are the most important or valuable members of society just because they have riches or power. He chose the poor to be rich in faith and as His chosen people they must be treated with respect for their God-given human dignity. A good example of God’s judgement that differ from those usually made by humans is the following. God does not think that the considerable financial contributions of many rich men to the synagogue are worth more than the meagre contribution of the poor widow – she gave all the money that she had left.
Jesus is not impressed by the way people host feasts for their friends, relatives, and acquaintances. He would rather see believers invite those people who cannot reciprocate and who therefore probably never gets any invitation to go anywhere. Through these kinds of judgements the New Testament shows that God easily reverses the judgements current in ancient Israelite society (and elsewhere), giving poor people more status and worth than most people were willing to acknowledge. In this way God restores the human dignity and worth of the vulnerable people of society and puts the others who look down on them to shame. In many cases the exploitative rich now living in luxury will face a role reversal with the suffering poor they are now exploiting.

8. The metaphoric uses of the concepts rich and riches in the New Testament consistently refer to positive things, like what God has in store for believers (heaven, the new Jerusalem, blessings). The concepts poverty and poor consistently refer to things that are bad, lacking, or deficient. Thus, the metaphoric uses of poverty (poor) and riches (rich) never leads to an exaltation of poverty as a positive condition of life that believers ought to strive for. Rather, believers with resources have strong obligations to help ameliorate and eradicate conditions of poverty.
CHAPTER EIGHT

CHRISTIAN ETHICS, POVERTY, AND RICHES
IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETIES

What is the message of the Bible about poverty and riches for us today? This is the question that has guided the thesis thus far. The best possible answer to this question will result in a Christian ethics of poverty and riches appropriate to the ethical problems of contemporary societies. How does one formulate this kind of ethics? To whom is this ethics to be addressed?

A Christian ethics of poverty and riches – like any other Christian ethics – has three audiences (cf. David Tracy in Van Huyssteen 1999: 74). One audience is the Christian Church. In this context the Church not only means the clergy or synods, but especially individual Christian believers – both rich and poor. A second audience is any society where Christians live. Christians believe that their views on social issues must be heard by all engaged in politics, those participating in the economy, and citizens active in the organisations and associations of civil society. A Christian ethics that claims to be theological also aims to engage fellow scientists in dialogue, especially those who are interested in issues of poverty and riches.

I have argued throughout the thesis that a Christian ethics that hopes to be credible and worthy of being a partner in dialogue with these audiences must be developed in the following way (cf. De Villiers and Smit 1996). I have first argued that major parts of theology function scientifically and that theological results and theories are argued for rationally. The scientific and rational character of large parts of theology enables theologians to become legitimate partners in dialogue between scientists, as well as equal partners in
political deliberation in the public sphere of society.

The scientific, rational way I have proposed for answering the guiding question of this thesis, i.e., "What is the message of the Bible about poverty and riches for us today?" is as follows. There is no way of making meaningful ethical judgements without fully understanding the ethical issue under consideration. For this reason I have devoted a chapter to fully understand the complex phenomenon of poverty. Understanding poverty does not yield sufficient background information for developing an ethical theory. What more is needed, is to understand why poverty is a serious moral issue. I have tried to point out the detail of why poverty should be a matter of serious concern for all humans. Thereafter I analysed the phenomenon of poverty in terms of the various dimensions of the concept of justice, so as to capture the main moral issues in terms of the dominant categories used in contemporary public philosophy.

Armed with this detailed background, I then went to the ancient sacred texts of the Bible to examine what they have to say about the ethical issues involved with poverty and riches. I formulated a set of dominant themes that emerged from the detailed analysis and interpretation of both the Old and New Testaments. Thus, at this stage the ingredients for putting together a Christian ethics appropriate for today have been gathered, but not yet integrated.

What thus remains to be done in this thesis is to develop a Christian ethics of poverty and riches by integrating our current understanding of the phenomenon of poverty, our contemporary moral insight into the issues raised by poverty, and our results from close readings of the ancient sacred texts of the Bible. This will be done in the following way. I will first give a brief reformulation of the moral challenge that poverty presents to us today. Next I will integrate the ethics found through close readings in the Old and New
Testaments into a Biblical ethics of poverty and riches. This Biblical ethics will be evaluated comprehensively in terms of the way we today understand the complexities and injustices of poverty. In the light of this evaluation I will formulate a proposal for a Christian ethics of poverty and riches. I will attempt to reformulate a Biblical ethics of poverty and riches to be appropriate to contemporary societies and to translate its contents to suit current circumstances.

1. The Challenge of Poverty to Ethics

What, in a nutshell, is the challenge that poverty poses to contemporary ethics? I have already established that poverty is a serious moral issue that demands the attention of all people and that poverty is a matter of justice that comprehensively affects its sufferers. What, by way of summary, are the main issues that contemporary ethical theories must address?

1. Poverty concerns matters of life and death. Poverty can lead to people's death. Lack of food, water, shelter, or clothes can cause people's death. Food with inadequate nutritional value, water that spreads disease, shelter offering no protection against the elements, and clothing that exposes people to cold weather can all cause diseases that lead to ill-health and eventually death, or severely diminish people's vulnerability to disease and illness. The greater risks of crime in poor areas have similar consequences.

2. Poverty causes or exacerbates bad relationships. Through a diversity of reasons, being poor can cause relationships to deteriorate within families, between friends and neighbours, within communities, and amongst citizens in a state.

3. Poverty leads to squandered human potential. Lack of money, energy, and time, inferior opportunities, and social illiteracy can cause poor people's human potential to be wasted through lack of proper development.
4. **Poverty means public humiliation for poor people.** Many poor people suffer public humiliation in a number of ways. Poverty is mostly a condition visible for everyone to see. Non-poor people often treat poor people like dirt and blame them for their poverty or for simply being there. Their mere presence presents a moral challenge many people refuse to face.

5. **Poverty means more burdens and reduced quality of life for many people.** The physical, psychological, and sociological consequences of poverty stacks up more burdens for poor people to carry through their lives than would have been the case without their poverty.

6. **Poverty shows people's inhumanity towards one another.** Poverty illustrates the bad side of human beings, as they often turn a blind eye towards the suffering of their fellow humans. Not only do many people not care about the suffering poor, some exploit them and do all kinds of injustices to them.

7. **Poverty exposes widespread responsibility for a condition of injustice.** Many people are blameworthy for the suffering poor people experience. Some people are responsible for directly causing poverty, many more others are responsible for choosing not to care or refusing to get involved. Poor people themselves are responsible in a few cases for their poverty, but in many more cases they are responsible for exacerbating the circumstances and suffering of themselves or other poor people.

These are the issues that ethical theories must address, in condensed, summary form. How does a Christian ethics of poverty and riches deal with these issues? To answer this question, we must first look at a biblical ethics of poverty and riches.

2. **A Biblical Ethics of Poverty and Riches**

What are the central themes found in the Bible on poverty and riches that ought to form part of a biblical ethics of poverty and riches? The following
themes dominate.

1. The Bible gives no idealised picture of either poverty or riches. Poverty is shown as a condition that is difficult to handle, that is often accompanied by oppression and exploitation, and that puts severe strains on many relationships. The uncertainty and corrupting influence of riches are clearly portrayed. Riches are something acquired in different ways, could easily be lost, and has limited value for improving a person's life. Riches can easily corrupt a person's priorities by taking the place of God as object of deepest trust.

2. The Bible emphasises that God ought to be first priority in the lives of His followers. They must acknowledge Him as the only God. They must worship and obey Him only. Life without God – whether rich or poor – is meaningless. People must trust in God and not in their wealth. Only God can enable rich people to choose against relying on their riches and to rather trust in Him. Once people accept God fully as main focus of their lives, those lives must change. Obedience to His commands is demanded as gratitude for His liberation and salvation of people – whether the Israelites from Egyptian bondage or members of the human race from their sin. When accepting God's liberation and salvation, His followers must become like Him. Part of becoming like God is through being holy and caring deeply for the weak, vulnerable, and marginalised people in society.

3. God is portrayed in the Bible as the One who deeply cares for the vulnerable, weak, and marginalised people in society. He takes up their cause and demands that His followers should do the same. The ethical values prescribed to take care of the poor are particularly strong demands that are placed central to the meaning of being a follower of God. To take care of the poor (the vulnerable, weak, and marginalised members of society) belongs to the practical manifestation of belonging to God, showing that a person's
faith in God is authentic and true. The reason for this emphasis is that God showed this kind of loving care for His followers when He pitied them in Egyptian bondage, in Babylonian exile, and in the bondage of sin everywhere in the world. Jesus emphasises God’s care for the vulnerable in dramatic fashion by fully identifying with vulnerable people as if He Himself has been each one of them. In response to God’s merciful, loving care His followers must live their gratitude and worship through an ethical lifestyle pursuing justice towards all people.

4. Care for the vulnerable, weak, and marginalised people of society must become effective in the ways non-poor people give aid to them. The Bible knows of two kinds of aid that God’s followers must render to people in need. One kind of aid is emergency poverty relief. People in desperate need of aid to satisfy basic needs must be helped without any questions being asked. This kind of aid is unconditional for people in desperate need thereof. Helping people in this way belongs to the core of the message of the Bible. The other kind of aid is aid to help poor people escape from their poverty and to restore them to self-reliant, interdependent people similar to the others in society who are non-poor.

Aid can be abused to serve the interests of the givers of aid. They want honour and praise from fellow-citizens, which would be their sole reward. Rather, God’s followers should give aid in secret, knowing that God sees everything and will reward them. If aid becomes a public issue, God must get the glory and praise for empowering His followers to be able to give gladly and generously of their resources to people in need.

5. Poor people are not only in need of aid, but especially in need of humane treatment by non-poor people. Being poor is a public affair and needing help from others for things most people provide for themselves is difficult to accept. Any action towards poor people that contains insults, humiliation, op-
pression, or exploitation makes life much more difficult for poor people. The Bible is clear that poor people's dignity and worth as human beings may not be violated in any way. Poor people are God's creation just like any other person and therefore may not be treated any differently from any non-poor person. How important this matter is in the New Testament becomes clear when Jesus identifies with the weak, vulnerable, and marginalised people to such an extent that relieving their needs is considered to be as if one was relieving the needs of Jesus Himself. No follower of Jesus would consider treating Jesus in a degrading or humiliating way. People in need ought to be treated thus.

6. In the light of the strong emphasis in the Bible on [1] loving care for the vulnerable, weak, and marginalised people, [2] the great significance attached to helping poor people, and [3] the major importance of treating poor people with respect worthy of their dignity as God's children it is not surprising that people causing poverty are judged severely. Stark contrasts between suffering poor people and exploitative rich people are rejected in no uncertain terms as totally unacceptable. All such judgements on poverty and wealth are made within specific contexts to apply to the concrete circumstances of the world each author lived in. There is no abstract speculations about rich people in general or poor people in general, except perhaps a few proverbs in the Wisdom literature. Judgements on unacceptable contrasts between the rich and the poor always apply to situations the authors knew very well.

The issue for biblical ethics is thus how do people who share their lives relate to one another. What are their differences in income, wealth, and lifestyle? Where does the money of the rich come from? Are they rich because they exploit the poor? Are they oppressing the poor and trampling on them? These questions are relevant for a judgement of the level of wealth in a specific society, not how the rich in this society compares to the rich elsewhere.
in the world. The Bible thus looks at riches relative to the society and the poor living in that society. In the background of all such biblical judgements are assumptions about God's ethical values given in the Old Testament for helping and treating the poor. Why were they ignored and the poor allowed to get into such desperate situations? God's followers ought to take care of the poor in their midst and use their God-given abundance of resources to make a difference to the lives of poor people. To add to the miseries of poor people through injustice, oppression, exploitation, humiliation, and degradation is almost unforgivable.

Two significant differences between the Old and New Testaments affect the meaning and scope of the biblical condemnation of stark contrasts between rich and poor. The first difference affects the meaning of the stark contrasts. The sharp inequalities in the Old Testament function against the background of God's election of Israel to be His holy nation. The contrasts originate within a closely knit religious community committed to the same religious values. A shared commitment to foundational moral and religious values cannot easily be assumed in the New Testament context of Israel as province of the Roman Empire. This difference is important in terms of redressing sharp inequalities, as the comfortable Old Testament appeal to the powerful rich to implement divinely inspired, shared moral values is not available in the New Testament context. Other forms of political action might be needed for redress of inequalities in the context of strong moral diversity.

A related difference between the Old and New Testaments with significant implications is the scope of God's addressees. In the Old Testament God addresses His people, the nation of Israel. In the New Testament, God's message becomes universal in scope, aimed at the world. Now the moral values concerning stark contrasts between rich and poor cannot be limited to intrastate justice anymore. Obviously people share their lives in different ways with members of a small community, such as a family or village, than
they share it with citizens of a large modern state or inhabitants of the world. Nevertheless, the universal scope of the New Testament message that identify all humans as sharing life in God’s world has significant implications for international justice. No Christian group in any country can easily justify their non-involvement with poverty outside their own country’s borders. Sharp inequalities between countries ought to matter to rich and poor Christians in different countries.

7. Poverty is nowhere presented as an ideal lifestyle that God wants for His followers. Rather, there are enough reasons to argue that God wants non-poor lives for His followers. From various sources in the Bible it is clear that God wants His followers to live lives that are rich in quality relationships with God Himself, other people, and the rest of creation. God wants His people to have lives abundant with well-being and meaning. A life of poverty is portrayed as unacceptable and bad, with many negative consequences for poor people. A life of material wealth is likewise bad and unacceptable, as riches can corrupt people’s moral and religious judgement, scramble their priorities, make them short-sighted to value the true meaning of life, and cause them to be conceited and rude to other people. An ideal life-style for God’s followers is one that keeps their moral and religious integrity intact and keeps them from violating moral norms that will turn non-believers away from God.

The strong emphasis on aid to poor people in the Bible has the intention of alleviating, ameliorating, and eradicating poverty. This implies that poverty is not considered a condition God wishes people to stay in. God wants people’s poverty to be changed urgently through the help of His followers. This assumption underlying the urgency and importance of aid further reinforces the idea that God does not will poverty for His people. Further support for this idea comes from the metaphoric uses of the concepts rich and poor, especially in the New Testament. The metaphoric uses of rich all denote something positive, while the metaphoric uses of poor denote something
negative. Again, poverty is not exalted as something positive, but as a negative condition that God’s followers must strive to get rid of in the lives of all people they share their lives with.

3. Biblical Ethics and the Complexities of Poverty

The understandings of the complexities of the phenomenon of poverty found in the biblical texts are not as sophisticated or comprehensive as those yielded by the combined efforts of current human sciences. There are no definitions of poverty, no measurements expressed as numerous indicators of poverty, a few indications of the effects of poverty, and a couple of hastily mentioned factors influencing poverty and riches. No detailed discussions of the complex phenomenon of poverty, no exquisitely analysed empirical support for statements on poverty and riches, and no theoretically adequate scientific explanations of poverty are found.

The authors of the biblical texts do not present us with explicitly articulated or purposefully worked out descriptions and explanations of poverty. They work with implicit understandings of poverty and riches that they assume their readers share with them. It would be unfair to expect that their understandings of poverty and riches match ours, as we have all the many benefits of living about 2000 to 2500 years later. The authors of the biblical texts formulated ethical values for dealing with poor people and for motivating non-poor people to become involved with such human problems on a sustained basis.

The biblical authors correctly assume that poverty is an easily identifiable phenomenon – one can see who are poor through noticing their clothes, bodily condition, limited available resources, and their loss of assets, such as land. Poverty is a condition that can destroy people and makes life a constant struggle for its sufferers. Poor people’s human relationships are often
negatively affected by their poverty. They lose friends as a result of their poverty and find it difficult to make new ones. Their neighbours come to dislike them for their poverty and even their families have no use for them. Poor people have to be submissive to the rich who often dominate them and treat them like dirt.

A condition like poverty cause deep emotions in its sufferers. Poor people sometimes have knees weak from hunger and their bodies are no more than skin and bones. The suffering caused by poverty can hurt poor people to the depths of their hearts. The misery resulting from poverty are at times relieved through using alcohol. When poverty is accompanied by oppression it causes sorrow and grief. Besides those feelings, poor people also experience feelings of abandonment, as no one is prepared to help them for fear of the oppressors. Not only oppressors, but ruthless and wicked people can exacerbate the miserable conditions of poor people considerably by ignoring their rights and taking advantage of them. Political leaders can do likewise through injustice and exploitation. Political officials can perpetrate such iniquities and hide from responsibility within the chains of command found in hierarchical bureaucracies.

Poor people are often badly treated through public humiliation and degradation. They suffer contempt from others, rich people mock them, and oppressors scorn them. The powerful – whether their power derives from politics, crime, or riches – are often unkind to the poor, would trample them underfoot if necessary, persecute them if they want to, and would even kill if they judge it in their interests.

Despite the negative effects of poverty on humans, it remains possible to live a life of moral integrity reinforced by genuine religious spirituality. There are no compelling reasons for poor people to become morally corrupt or religiously apostate. The Bible several times sketches groups of suffering poor
who trust God completely and live according to His commands. God also consistently demands integrity and spirituality from poor people. Many poor people live morally better lives than many rich people and often have better insight into character than many rich people who often judge themselves to be wise.

The Bible points to a few factors that could cause poverty, though there is no comprehensive and depth understanding akin to contemporary social science of the myriad factors impacting on poor people’s lives. Three categories of causes can be distinguished. People can cause poverty in the lives of others. Unjust people sometimes will not allow farming on unused land, despite the fact that allowing such farming could provide basic necessities for the poor people working the land. Poverty often results from exploitation, oppression, and injustice by people intent on enriching themselves or reinforcing their positions at the cost of others. Such people may acquire others’ possessions through theft or dishonesty. Poverty often continues because people refuse to intervene out of fear for those with power who are exploiting or oppressing the poor. Poverty also continues because some people ignore the plight of the poor and are unwilling to provide any kind of help or support.

Poverty can also occur as a result of circumstances created by social forces. A monarchical system of government easily becomes exploitative and oppressive with the result of impoverishing people. The expansionary drive by political leaders of strong nations to dominate and conquer other nations can create instant, shock poverty through colonial conquest involving military force. Similarly, violent conflict causing death, destruction, and enabling looting also cause poverty overnight besides the traumas of lost loved ones and destruction of livelihoods.

At a more personal level, poverty can be caused by the loss of a father or husband in a patriarchal context, as the experience of Ruth and Naomi
shows. Similarly, negative circumstances and ill-fortune can lead to poverty due to sudden loss of income, wealth or property, despite wise spending of resources. Negative personal characteristics like laziness gets a major share of the blame for poverty. Bad behaviour, such as excessive drinking and expensive taste in food can also cause poverty. A strong desire to become rich can blind people for the dangers of becoming poor, while negative attitudes like an unwillingness to learn and improve can also cause poverty.

The biblical understanding of poverty must be complemented and contrasted with the understanding of wealth and riches. There is a negative view in the Bible about the desire to be rich, as that desire can be destructive. The desire to be rich can never be satisfied, leads to many temptations and traps, and the lure of a luxurious life-style can erode moral values and stifle religious spirituality.

Riches can be acquired in various ways, some harmful and others not. Riches can be acquired through dishonesty, but will do its owners no good. Governments (kings) can acquire riches through forced labour or heavy taxes, although both cause resentment and resistance. Riches easily acquired will also be easily lost, while riches acquired through hardship will last longer. A capable wife can aid her husband in acquiring riches, while having wisdom can also lead to riches. Becoming rich will not occur through luxurious living.

Riches have several effects on their owners. Rich people attract people as friends, though they also attract danger from which they need protection. Their riches can protect them to a certain extent, but not completely. Rich people often judge themselves to be wise and can be rude to their subordinates, especially the poor. Not only are rich people capable of humiliating poor people, but also of exploiting and oppressing them for further gain. Rich people sometimes have the power to arbitrarily withhold the wages of their
needy employees. They might even murder poor people who come in their way to thwart their plans. While doing things like these, they deliberately ignore the desperate plight of the poor.

Despite a seemingly untouchable position of power, rich people have to face the uncertainties and burdens of riches. Their own death can prevent them from enjoying the riches they have worked for, as the rich are subject to sudden, unforeseen deaths as much as anybody else. Some rich people might not have close relationships or worthwhile relationships where they can meaningfully share their riches. The more a person’s riches increase, the more worries come along too. Riches can become a burden that distracts from its enjoyment. Furthermore, riches can be lost in the blink of an eye, without the opportunity to recover from such loss again. For that reason, riches are not something one ought to place trust in. The ability of riches to do worthwhile things for their owners are limited, as riches mean nothing in the face of the greatest crisis of human life, i.e., death. Riches cannot be taken along in death, cannot secure God’s favour, and neither can it buy anything in God’s heaven. For these important events riches mean nothing.

4. Biblical Ethics and the Injustices of Poverty

The authors of the biblical texts lived before the larger part of the history of philosophy took place. They did not have access to the detailed normative analyses of issues of justice accessible to us today. Nevertheless, these authors are aware of many of the issues of justice we discuss today and have given answers that either apply directly to such issues or could imaginatively be applied to contemporary issues through intelligent interpretations. In what follows, I will indicate the contribution that a biblical ethics of poverty and riches makes in terms of the six categories of justice identified earlier.
The first category of justice deals with recognition. The main issue involved is to find ways of appropriately recognising the humanity of fellow beings. A biblical ethics of poverty and riches is particularly strong on this point. All people share the same value before God as His creatures. The poor are explicitly mentioned as sharing the equal human dignity that God gives to all humans. The strong identification of Jesus with the weak, the vulnerable, and the marginalised reinforces this point. These people must be treated as if they are Jesus, thus with appropriate respect for their human worth and dignity.

Many of the specific injunctions concerning the appropriate treatment of poor people flow from this central claim that all humans are equal before God. Poor people must participate as full members in the Old Testament feasts of ancient Israel and the poor who cannot repay their hosts are the ones to be invited to feasts and dinners. People created in the image of God may not be oppressed, exploited, ill-treated, destroyed, or deprived of their rights. Poor people may not be embarrassed, humiliated, or discriminated against. Others may not take pleasure in their misery, nor laugh at them. Non-poor people should not ignore them, nor fail to notice or care for them. Lives highly valued by God are at stake.

The second category of justice concerns reciprocity. This category deals with fair terms of co-operation at interpersonal, social, and institutional levels. The terms of co-operation can be presupposed in social conventions, embodied in promises, agreements, and contracts, or specified in responsibilities and obligations. A biblical ethics on poverty and wealth is particularly strong in this category as well. The terms of co-operation are specified in a comprehensive set of moral values with the Ten Commandments and the commandments to love God and neighbours as fundamental. These moral values include several provisions for dealing with poverty through emergency poverty relief and efforts to re-establish self-reliance. The responsi-
bilities that these moral values lay on non-poor people simultaneously become legitimate claims that poor people can make on the non-poor people they share their lives with. Similarly, the commandments about treating poor people with respect so as to protect their dignity are part and parcel of the shared values that God’s followers agree to. Poor people can thus insist that they be treated properly, as the shared values of both the poor and non-poor specify. The agreement on a comprehensive set of moral and religious values thus enables poor people to legitimately claim alleviation of their poverty and proper treatment as rights conferred on them by God.

The third category of justice concerns the equitable distribution of goods that can be distributed like and analogously to material possessions. Although a biblical ethics of poverty and wealth does not prescribe any detailed specification of preferred distributive patterns, sharp contrasts in distribution of resources are vehemently rejected. There are several detailed condemnations of strong contrasts between the exploitative rich and the suffering poor. These normative evaluations of the often desperate circumstances of the poor suffering from skewed distributions provide them with an awareness of the moral wrongs they are suffering. This consciousness of a divinely sanctioned disapproval of their poverty can be political dynamite, empowering the poor to challenge the exploitative and oppressive circumstances they are living in.

A biblical ethics of poverty has more to offer on distributive issues of justice. The non-poor must help the poor generously and give them part of their resources freely and unselfishly. Such aid must be provided, if possible, when it is needed, and procrastination must be avoided. God does not expect His followers to do more than they can; what is required is to do what is possible within the means and time available.

Not only must the non-poor share their resources through generous giving to
those in need, but also through various other measures. Harvesting their crops only once and leaving the remainder for the poor to collect was one way of sharing resources in agriculturally dominated ancient Israel. Other ways were allowing the poor to fully participate in religious festivals despite their inability to contribute anything, providing interest-free loans that were written off in the Sabbath year, using the tithes of every third year as a store of food where the poor could collect whatever they needed, and hosting dinners and feasts for those unable to pay back the host in any way. The motive for these acts of distribution are similar: all people must be able to share in God's blessings. Viewing property, possessions, utilities, and basic necessities as God's blessings makes distribution easier, as a strict interpretation of private property is overruled in favour of viewing everything as God's gifts to be shared by all His (human) creatures.

The fourth category of justice is justice as enablement. In this category, institutions and behaviour are judged according to the degree to which people's self-development and self-determination are enabled or constrained. The moral values contained in a biblical ethics of poverty and riches are strongly enabling, as discussed earlier. These reciprocal moral values accord poor people legitimate claims to appropriate treatment and ameliorative aid from members of their community. Several commandments has enablement of the poor as aim. The cancelling of all outstanding debts in Sabbath years takes away burdens that constrict and constrain poor people. The right to buy back land lost through poverty, that could be exercised with help from family or after enough money has been collected, is similarly aimed at enabling poor people to eventually return to their former non-poor status. If not bought back before the next year of restoration (every 49 years), the land automatically returns to the family, with the implicit hope of breaking any long term culture of poverty that might be developing.

The prescribed religious offerings can also place burdens on the poor who
do not have money available for buying the required animals. For this reason several cheaper alternatives are presented without any damage to the religious significance of the offerings. Special provision are made for widows, a particularly vulnerable group amongst the poor. Women are enabled in two other ways. Wives in polygamous marriages are enabled to demand continued care of the same quality after their husbands have found new favourites. Daughters without fathers or brothers in patriarchal ancient Israel are enabled to take care of themselves by being allowed to inherit their father’s land.

The fifth category comprises justice as transformation. Here issues of changing existing institutions, practices, and behaviour are explored. Several examples of transformative justice at work are found in biblical narratives. What unites these examples are the role of individuals who take the initiative to rectify a situation on the basis of shared moral values that are slightly extended or modified. Ruth and Naomi as two poor, vulnerable widows in patriarchal ancient Israel engineer their own survival and well-being through using several Old Testament commandments to their advantage. Nehemiah uses Old Testament moral values to angrily condemn exploitation and oppression in the post-exilic community busy restoring Israel. In difficult economic circumstances Nehemiah uses extraordinary measures in the sense of somewhat stricter interpretations of commandments aiming to enable the poor to escape their poverty and rebuild their society after the destruction of the violent conquest and the abandonment of exile. Zaccheus is personally transformed by his meeting with Jesus and undertakes to rectify his illegitimate acquisitions of taxpayers’ money through repaying them fourfold, considerably more than the 120% repayment required by Old Testament commandments. As penitence he will donate half his belongings to the poor as well.

The book of Deuteronomy is an excellent example of justice as transforma-
tion. Whether in its original setting before the Israelites entered the promised land, or in the setting of its final revision after the exile, the book gives important pointers to successfully effect a just transformation. Fundamental to a just transformation is agreement on foundational values for guiding the transformation. The strong commitment demanded from the Israelites to worship and obey God only shifts their loyalty in the right direction for starting and maintaining a new course. The emphasis on teaching the new values to adults and children and being able to justify the rationale of those values to one another and the next generation are important elements of any successful transformation. Being continually aware of the core values to be obeyed through leaving reminders everywhere and strong calls for obedience from leaders further facilitates effective transformation. Incentives for obeying the new set of values were given in the form of promised blessings and sanctions for punishing moral failure came in the form of curses. Commitment to make the transformation work lies in the strong ties that are urged between people and God, the latter being the source of the values and the inspiration of the transformation. Adherence to the new values are to be enforced through judges appointed by Moses, the leader.

Justice as retribution has its focus on appropriate sanctions, penalties, or punishment for those persons who violate society’s accepted principles of justice. Retribution presupposes a clear vision of what injustice is and clarity on the concept of responsibility, so as to be able to accurately determine who must be held responsible for specific injustices and to what degree. The degree of responsibility for injustice is strongly affected by the distinction between active and passive injustice. Active injustice occurs when perpetrators of injustice deprive or harm other people’s lives and dignity. Passive injustice results when persons are indifferent to injustice happening. Passively unjust persons are people who tolerate injustice and ignore the claims of victims of injustice.
A biblical ethics on poverty and wealth has no trouble apportioning blame for poverty. Active injustice in the sense of deliberately depriving people of wages, possessions, or land are often condemned. Selling poor people into slavery for failing to pay small amounts of debt and taking poor people's belongings they have given as security for loans are similarly roundly rejected. Sometimes the rich are held directly responsible for exploiting and oppressing the poor, sometimes political leaders or government officials must take the blame.

Interesting cases of passive injustice occur in the New Testament. Several rich people are condemned for failing to notice and attend to the desperate situation of the poor, although they have more than enough means available for giving aid. They neglect the explicitly prescribed duties in the Old Testament, ignore the desperate plight of poor people, and continue to live in luxury. Similarly, the "goats" of Matthew 25 failed to help the weak, vulnerable, and marginalised when they were hungry, naked, in prison, and so on. What the "goats" did wrong was their failure to notice people in need and their neglect of those people who really needed their help. They were guilty of passive injustice.

5. Evaluation of a Biblical Ethics of Poverty and Riches

What are the strengths of a biblical ethics on poverty and riches? Does a biblical ethics on poverty and riches have unique aspects not found in any other ethical theories? I want to argue that the uniqueness of a biblical ethics lies in the strengths that I am going to outline below. These strengths are as follows.

A biblical ethics on poverty and riches provides us with a strong and wide-ranging set of moral values for dealing with poverty and riches. Strong contrasts between rich and poor are rejected outright; poor people's dignity are
protected in the strongest possible way; care for the poor is a high priority, with God as example; aid for emergency relief and self-reliance are judged to be close to the core of a comprehensive, authentic biblical lifestyle; and the values implicitly assume that poverty is bad for humans and must be eradicated. Riches are portrayed as uncertain and not worth trusting in; as capable of upsetting priorities, corrupting integrity, and stifling moral values; as inadequate in death and for securing God's favour; but nevertheless a gift of God to be enjoyed.

This set of values on poverty and riches is made even stronger through their link with a comprehensive network of moral and religious values that have the explicit intention of providing people with meaning in life and moral guidance to cover most areas of human life. The main focus of the biblical texts is to offer humans God's salvation that will provide them with meaningful lives lived in love towards God and their fellow humans. Treating others lovingly - as defined by God's love for humans witnessed in the death of Jesus on the cross - means that poor people too must be loved and helped to realise their God-given potentialities.

Adherence to a biblical ethics of poverty and riches is further strengthened by incentives and sanctions. In the Old Testament God's followers were promised blessings like abundance and happiness for living out these values, while their neglect could bring about negative consequences like natural disasters, illness, or death. In the New Testament the incentives are different. Now incentives are riches in heaven and eternal life after death, whereas failures to adopt and live out these values result in sanctions like no heavenly riches and life after death in hell.

Perhaps the most important reason accounting for the strength and endurance of the biblical moral values on poverty and riches is the powerful commitment to God underlying and supporting them. Commitment to God is the
deepest motivation for making these values come to life. A personal relationship of deep gratitude and love towards God that flows into obedience to His commands results from the experience of His liberation and salvation from oppressive human nature and circumstances. This deep commitment to obey God out of love and gratitude, combined with the desire to become like God, drives many of His followers to passionately embrace His values and exert themselves to ensure the implementation of those values. A further incentive for Christians to implement God's commands is that the credibility of their faith is at stake in the way that they live their values in their daily lives. Furthermore, Christians are under a strong command to communicate their faith to non-believers. One of the strongest and most convincing ways of doing that is to manifest God's love towards others concretely in their lives. Loving the poor by treating them as God commands ought to be a large part of their practical witness to others about God's love.

What are the weaknesses of a biblical ethics on poverty and wealth? Differently put, what does a biblical ethics on poverty and riches fail to provide us? There is no detailed understanding in the biblical texts of the nature, consequences, or causes of poverty. A biblical ethics on poverty and wealth also does not help much in determining how sharp contrasts between riches and poverty arose or what the causes of specific persons' poverty were. To what extent people are responsible for their own poverty, how much responsibility they must take, and how that affects aid are also not specified. Similarly, no detailed analysis of the moral issues involved is given. Practically nothing is said about the practical implementation of the moral values on poverty and riches, while the best possible strategies for giving aid is not discussed, nor is any indication given of when aid does more harm than good. There is no indication whether aid by individuals is better than aid by groups, organisations, or institutions. All the above are details to be worked out that could only be learnt through experience thoroughly reflected upon.
The shortcomings of a biblical ethics of poverty and wealth point to the need for interdisciplinary dialogue between normative prescriptions provided by theological ethics, the detailed descriptions and comprehensive explanations of the human sciences, and the conceptual and argumentative analysis of philosophy. Part of appropriating a biblical ethics of poverty and riches in complex, modern societies means that such interdisciplinary dialogues must take place to determine the ways in which biblical ethics can become relevant in new circumstances. Interdisciplinary dialogues should not only be between academics, but also with practitioners and professionals with practical experience. Through numerous inputs the concrete implications and detailed applications of a biblical ethics on poverty and riches can be determined in ways that make sense to ordinary citizens of contemporary democracies.

6. A Christian Ethics of Poverty and Riches for Today

One major problem in the way of developing a Christian ethics of poverty and riches is whether values that originated in contexts so far removed in time, culture, economy, and socio-political organisation can be brought across those distances into our contemporary world. Before presenting an outline of a Christian ethics on poverty and riches, I want to argue that the differences between the societies where these values originated and our contemporary world are less important than the similarities. Thus, these values can still apply to our world today.

The Old Testament values concerning poverty and riches originate within the context of a group of wandering nomads waiting to cross the border into their promised land after a journey of forty years through desert from Egypt to Canaan. The values are refined and implemented in the context of establishing and maintaining a monarchical governmental system, with an economic system based on agriculture and growing international trade. The Old
Testament values were finalised during experiences of colonial conquest, exile, return, and restoration. Conquest and exile were God’s punishment as a result of the unwillingness and inability of Israel to keep God’s commandments.

Some of the New Testament values on poverty and riches are formulated in the context of the promised Messiah living temporarily on earth during the Roman occupation of Israel after yet another colonial conquest. The other New Testament values are articulated in the context of non-Israelite individuals accepting the message of the Messiah in neighbouring countries also under Roman occupation.

Today we are living in vastly different conditions. We want to apply values in highly differentiated, complex modern societies that were developed between 2500 and 3000 years ago. Modern societies differ in important respects from those in ancient Israel. Modern societies are characterised by democratic political systems with large, hierarchical bureaucracies which claim power over many more aspects of citizens’ lives than ever imaginable in ancient Israel. High levels of urbanisation give modern societies a different demographic complexion from ancient ones. The scientific and technological explosion of the past four centuries have given humans vast amounts of knowledge and insight into the nature and workings of their world, enlarging their abilities to harness nature’s forces to enable them to live lifestyles unimaginable a couple of centuries ago. All these changes made human life on earth so much more complex, poverty included. Through the human sciences – that started to come of age since the middle of the nineteenth century – knowledge and insight into the complexities of human life have grown enormously. The phenomenon of poverty is no exception. Collective human understanding of many dimensions of poverty have grown immensely, as studies by diverse human sciences such as sociology, economics, political studies, social work, psychology, theology, and philosophy have proliferated.
Can the values of the Old and New Testaments, developed so long ago before all the massive changes brought about by modernisation, give us any light on how to deal with poverty today? Perhaps one should note that the problem of poverty is bigger today than ever before. Not only is a major part of the world's population living in abject poverty, but the numbers of poverty-stricken people are still steadily growing. The contrast between rich and poor has also never been as big as now. The enormous wealth owned by some individuals – measured in billions of US dollars – are in stark contrast to the desperate poverty of billions of people on earth. Despite the popularity of liberal-democratic political views that endorse ideas on human rights, no significant impact on world poverty has been made. The success of the welfare state since World War 2 in Europe did a lot to reduce and even eradicate poverty in some European countries, but the provision of cradle to grave welfare benefits proved not to be sustainable over the longer term in the rich European democracies.

Despite the enormous differences between complex modern societies and the simpler societies of ancient Israel, it might be worthwhile to explore the ways a biblical ethics on poverty and riches might be applied to our contemporary societies to see where it leads. The exploration is justified by the wisdom developed over ages and the strong ethical values presumably embodied in the biblical texts.

There are also number of perennial similarities in human nature and behaviour that remain throughout history. There are still stark contrasts between rich and poor in many countries of the world. Poor people are still oppressed and exploited by the strong and rich in many societies and communities. Poor people still suffer injustice and are still exposed to public humiliation. Millions of people are still hungry, thirsty, without clothes, sick, and in prison – thus needing urgent help from others. Many people still suffer desperately,
while others still turn away and ignore their plight. The lure of wealth still
traps many people to trade their priority focused on God for the priority of
becoming rich. Thus, all the major issues that a Biblical ethics of poverty and
wealth deal with, are present in contemporary societies, although perhaps in
slightly different packaging.

These similarities between the contexts of the ancient sacred texts of the Bi-
ble and our world today enable human communication and dialogue across
many cultures and allow understanding of the values embodied in ancient
cultures of many centuries ago. It is perhaps not possible to apply all as-
pacts of a biblical ethics too directly to modern societies – some of the cir-
cumstances are perhaps too different. For example, agriculture does not
dominate many countries today as it did in ancient Israel. For that reason
most of us cannot harvest our corn fields or olive trees only once and leave
the rest for the poor – we don’t farm anymore. Nevertheless, to formulate a
Christian ethics on poverty and wealth means to raise the issue of how to
make a Biblical ethics of poverty and riches work in the new context of mod-
ern societies. Such a project might lead to exciting intellectual problems
whose solutions could energise a biblical ethics developed so many centu-
ries ago.

How should a proposal for such a Christian ethics look? In what follows I
want to present an outline of a Christian ethics appropriate for our contem-
porary world.

1. Poverty is a complex phenomenon that makes life very difficult for some
people. A Christian ethics of poverty and riches has to accept the complexity
of poverty as revealed by the human sciences. This complexity manifests in
the multiple ways in which characteristics of poverty can combine in different
instances of poverty. The complexity also emerges in the diversity of possi-
ble causes of poverty in the multitude of known cases. For these reasons a
Christian ethics of poverty and riches must either collaborate with the human sciences or acquire the necessary expertise to be able to [1] describe the characteristics of every case of poverty to be morally evaluated or [2] judge the causes involved in the specific case under discussion (cf. De Villiers and Smit 1994: 240).

A Christian ethics of poverty and riches must be aware of the multitude forms of hardship that poverty can cause. Furthermore, a Christian ethics of poverty and riches must be prepared to listen to the poor people involved in specific cases that are being considered. Theologians and ordinary Christians must listen to the voices of the poor whom they are directly concerned with, to understand how those people are experiencing their poverty. Just to show concern through being prepared to listen will already be a positive signal to poor people that someone cares.

The nature, degree, and complex interactions of injustices involved in specific cases of poverty must be investigated as well. The role of various people in causing or exacerbating poverty must be inspected. Interviews with poor people, community and political leaders, and experts in other sciences are needed, as well as research on the wider contexts of the cases of poverty under consideration (Cf. Hollenbach 1988: 189).

Christians must live the right priorities. The fundamental aspect of a Christian ethics of poverty and riches is that God must be first priority in the lives of His followers. They must acknowledge Him as the only God. They must worship and obey Him only. Life without God – whether rich or poor – is meaningless.

A Christian ethics of poverty and riches is only part of the far more comprehensive set of moral and religious values of Christianity. Values on poverty and riches are immensely strengthened by their link with a comprehensive
network of other moral and religious values that have the explicit intention of providing people with meaning in life and moral guidance to cover most areas of human life. The main focus of the biblical texts is to offer humans God’s salvation. This they get by worshipping and obeying God as the only God.

Commitment to God is the deepest motivation for making these values come to life. Once people accept God fully as main focus of their lives, those lives must change. A personal relationship of deep gratitude and love towards God that flows into obedience to His commands results from the experience of His liberation and salvation from oppressive human nature and circumstances. This powerful commitment to God is perhaps the most important reason accounting for the strength and endurance of biblical moral values. This deep commitment to obey God out of love and gratitude, combined with the desire to become like God, drives many of His followers to passionately embrace His values and exert themselves to ensure the implementation of those values.

This kind of life provides Christians with meaningful lives that ought to be lived in love towards God and their fellow humans. Treating others lovingly – as defined by God’s love for humans witnessed in the death of Jesus on the cross – means that poor people too must be loved and helped to realise their God-given potentialities. The love of God for humans that His followers must exhibit is the driving force in Christians that “causes you to have regard for the poor” (Lamprecht 1993: 64).

Adherence to a Christian ethics of poverty and riches is further strengthened by incentives and sanctions. For Christians the incentives are riches in heaven and eternal life after death, whereas failures to adopt and live out these values result in sanctions like no heavenly riches and life after death in hell.
A Christian ethics of poverty and riches is thus embedded in a wider framework of moral and religious values that give meaning to people's lives and offer many reasons for obedience to such ethics. The chances of the ethics being implemented are thus higher than any ethics standing on its own or not linked to a broader framework claiming to give meaning to life through a personal relationship with a Higher Being.

*Equal human dignity.* A Christian ethics of poverty and riches will have to strongly affirm the equal human dignity of all people, regardless of their socio-economic status. All people share the same value before God as His creatures. The poor are explicitly mentioned as sharing the equal human dignity that God gives to all humans. The strong identification of Jesus with the weak, vulnerable, and marginalised reinforces this point. These people must be treated as if they are Jesus, thus with appropriate respect for their human worth and dignity.

In this respect, a Christian ethics can support the liberal-democratic rights to equal respect that express the equal dignity and worth of all people. Christians can therefore insist that these rights of poor people must be respected at all times and under all circumstances. The implications of the equal human dignity of poor people must be pointed out in detail, such as that poor people may not be embarrassed, humiliated, or discriminated against. Another implication is that others may not take pleasure in their misery, nor laugh at them. Equal human dignity also means that non-poor people should not ignore their plight, nor fail to notice them or show concern. The significance of equal human dignity shows in the following quote from the pastoral letter of the American Roman Catholic Bishops called *Economic Justice for All: “The ultimate injustice is for a person or group to be actively treated or passively abandoned as if they were non-members of the human race”* (Hollenbach 1988: 82).
Not only does equal dignity mean that non-poor people must refrain from doing things that violate poor people’s worth as human beings. It requires that non-poor people must positively do certain things to affirm the worth of poor people as human beings. Poor people must be enabled to participate in communal festivities as full members, as they did in the Old Testament at the feasts of ancient Israel. Furthermore, non-poor people must treat them as special by inviting them to festivities, like Jesus commanded hosts to invite the poor, who cannot repay their hosts, to feasts and dinners.

Poor people must be treated humanely by non-poor people. To be poor is open to public eyes and often a shameful matter. A Christian ethics of poverty and riches must demand that poor people be treated like Jesus when given aid. Jesus identified with the weak, vulnerable, and marginalised people to such an extent that relieving their needs was considered the same as relieving the needs of Jesus Himself.

Commandments about treating poor people with respect so as to protect their dignity are part and parcel of the shared values that God’s followers agree to. Commandments that lay duties and obligations on non-poor people thus create correlative expectations in the poor that they will be properly treated. Poor people can thus insist that they be treated properly, as the shared values of both the poor and non-poor specify. In this way a right to human dignity can easily arise.

Values for helping poor people. A Christian ethics of poverty and riches has a number of values specifying how to help poor people. These values have their basis in the character of God. God is portrayed in the Bible as the One who deeply cares for the vulnerable, weak, and marginalised people in society. He takes up their cause and demands that His followers should do the same. Part of becoming like God is through being holy and caring deeply for
the weak, vulnerable, and marginalised people in society. In their pastoral letter called *Economic Justice for All*, the American Roman Catholic Bishops say that, "no one may claim the name Christian and be comfortable in the face of the hunger, homelessness, insecurity, and injustice found in this country and the world" (Hollenbach 1988: 83).

Ethical values for helping the poor are of fundamental importance in the broader framework of ethical and religious values of Christianity. To help the poor belongs to the core values that practically demonstrates believers' commitment to God. Helping the poor functions as yardstick for a person's faith in God, indicating whether it is authentic and true. God's followers ought to take care of the poor in their midst and use their God-given abundance of resources to make a difference to the lives of poor people.

Care for the vulnerable, weak, and marginalised people of society must become effective in the ways non-poor people give aid to them. The Bible knows of two kinds of aid that God’s followers must render to people in need. One kind of aid is emergency poverty relief. People in desperate need of aid to satisfy basic needs must be helped without any questions being asked. This kind of aid is unconditional for people in desperate need thereof. Helping people in this way belongs to the core of the message of the Bible.

The other kind of aid is aid to help poor people escape from their poverty and to restore them to self-reliant, interdependent people similar to the others in society who are non-poor.

Several commandments contained in a Biblical ethics of poverty and riches have enablement of the poor as aim. Some examples are the following. The cancelling of all outstanding debts in Sabbath years, the right to buy back land lost through poverty, and cheaper alternatives for prescribed religious offerings without any loss of religious significance are all measures aimed at
enabling poor people to escape from their poverty (cf. Roy 1993: 99). These measures do not make sense in our world today, but the underlying principle that poor people must be enabled to use their limited resources to escape the traps of poverty can be implemented in a variety of ways. A Christian ethics of poverty and riches must consult specialists on aid to the poor to find out what forms of aid are effective in specific cases for reaching such goals. More important though, is to listen to the poor themselves and to let them take the initiative and control in the process of change. The Christian Church must avoid treating the poor as recipients of aid, rather than equal partners. Non-poor Christians must allow poor people to minister to their needs as much as they minister to the needs of poor people. In that way poor people's equal worth and dignity are practically recognised (Philpott 1993: 84).

The reciprocal moral values about aid to the poor places moral obligations on the non-poor and accord poor people legitimate claims to appropriate treatment and ameliorative aid from members of their community. These legitimate claims of poor people and the correlative duties of the non-poor combine to guarantee aid to the poor, i.e., to give poor people rights against Christians to the basic necessities of life. Nicholas Wolterstorff (1983: 82) illustrates this point as follows: "If a rich man knows of someone who is starving and has the power to help that person but chooses not to do so, then he violates the starving person's rights as surely and as reprehensibly as if he had physically assaulted the sufferer." Christians thus ought to support political programs in favour of rights that secure the fulfilment of people's basic needs.

A Christian ethics of poverty and riches ought to have detailed views on ways how people can abuse aid to serve their own interests. A Christian ethics will insist that honour and praise for aid belongs to God for empowering His followers to give shares of their resources gladly and generously to
people in need. Aid to promote a person's own image, or theft of resources for aid through corrupt officials are examples that need detailed analyses and preventative measures. Similarly, procedures to safeguard the integrity of even trusted Christians like the apostle Paul ought to be worked out. No doubts about honesty or self-enrichment must be allowed to tarnish the integrity of Christians involved in aid work. Co-operation with, and consultation of, specialist aid workers and experts in accounting and development aid would be useful.

Stark contrasts. Stark contrasts between rich and poor who share a small rural community – or the whole earth, for that matter – ought to be rejected outright by Christian ethics. No situation can be condoned where suffering poor people live next to exploitative rich people. These kind of judgements are not to be made in abstract terms that are divorced from any social context. Such judgements on stark contrasts must be made of the concrete circumstances where rich and poor live together, from the micro contexts of very small communities to the macro context of the global community of states where all 6 billion people created by God eke out a livelihood. For these kinds of judgement a Christian ethics of poverty and wealth needs to co-operate with scientists in the fields of politics, economics, and statistics.

A Christian ethics on poverty and riches thus have the responsibility to promote economic policies that would aim at greater equality between rich and poor, thus drastically reducing the scandalous wide gap currently existing between rich and poor (cf. Roy 1993: 100).

Poor people can be empowered by normative evaluations of their desperate circumstances resulting from skewed distributions. They become aware of the moral wrongs they are suffering. A divinely sanctioned disapproval of their poverty empowers the poor to challenge the exploitative and oppressive circumstances they are living in. They can thus become agents of their
own liberation from poverty, capable of making a stand for their own interests against powerful and exploitative rich people.

Responsibility. A Christian ethics of poverty and riches must apportion blame for poverty. People who are responsible for causing poverty must be identified. A Christian ethics will be thoroughly aware of the myriad ways in which many kinds of people can cause poverty or exacerbate already existing poverty. As before, this awareness implies co-operation with scientists in other disciplines, as well as with the poor and rich people involved in the situation under investigation to better know what is going on.

Holding people responsible implies more than just identifying the people who cause poverty. Their precise role in causing poverty must be determined to show the degree to which they are responsible. Furthermore, their deeds and behaviour must be morally assessed to find out to what extent they are blameworthy.

A Christian ethics of poverty and riches has strong values condemning non-poor people for failing to notice and attend to the desperate situation of the poor, although they have more than enough means available for giving aid. Deliberate ignorance and refusal to aid are to neglect the explicitly prescribed duties of both the Old and New Testaments.

Ideal lifestyle for Christians. A Christian ethics of poverty and riches must be able to prescribe an authentic Christian lifestyle to guide Christians through the dangers of riches and the sufferings of poverty. What is an ideal lifestyle for Christians?

An ideal life-style for God’s followers – both rich and poor – is one that keeps their moral and religious integrity intact and keeps them from violating moral norms that will turn non-believers away from God. Neither poverty nor
riches must drive people away from God. He must remain first priority in their lives.

What God wants for His followers is that they must be “rich” by having quality relationships with God Himself, other people, and the rest of creation. He wants His people to have lives abundant with well-being and meaning.

Both being poor and being rich are judged negatively by a Christian ethics. To be poor is unacceptable and bad, with many negative consequences for poor people. A life of material wealth is likewise bad and unacceptable, as riches can corrupt people’s moral and religious judgement, scramble their priorities, and make them short-sighted to value the true meaning of life, and cause them to be conceited and rude to other people. Riches have many uncertainties and place extra burdens on people. Riches can be lost in the blink of an eye and its ability to do worthwhile things for their owners are limited, as riches mean nothing in the face of the greatest crisis of human life, i.e., death.

However, rich Christians obeying God’s commands to give gladly and generously to the poor can contributevaluably to poverty relief. For Christians to have resources to contribute to the poor, they must live a relatively simple life so as to have extra resources to give as aid. The example of Jesus is powerful in this context. As Son of God, He sacrificed the riches of heaven to come to the poverty of the earth to save human beings. During His earthly life He chose to live a simple life of very moderate means. His life contains a message that God values a life lived in simplicity through which the poor can benefit.

There are Christian churches with a tradition that some members choose voluntary poverty as an expression of solidarity with the poor and a public protest against their poverty. This practice makes a lot of sense, although
not necessarily something required of all Christians. Being able to make money can be useful for the Christian church’s aid to needy people, if combined with a heart full of compassion like God’s heart.

*Universal application.* A Christian ethics of poverty and riches will claim that it applies universally to all communities, societies, countries, continents, and the world as a whole. God’s claim to be Creator of everything, humans included, results in the further claim to His rule over all human beings. Not only poverty within micro-communities, such as an isolated rural farm, but poverty on our planet as a whole falls within the scope of a Christian ethics of poverty and riches. No rich person can ultimately deny responsibility for poor people anywhere in the world, as no poor person can interpret their situation without acknowledging the role of rich people from all countries.

*A society can change.* A Christian ethics of poverty and riches must take criticism seriously that people will never change to live according to Christian values and that poverty will persist or grow worse. Against such criticism a Christian ethics will insist that God can change people’s moral and religious values. Through such changes a society can be shaped into a new form and its normative values be given new contents so that the society grows closer to the ideals embodied in Christian values (cf. Philpott 1993).

However, exactly how such change can occur and how it can be facilitated must be demonstrated. A Christian ethics can point to the role of individuals taking the initiative to change situations by appealing to shared moral values, by slightly extending or modifying their scope, and insisting on and campaigning for their implementation.

More comprehensive moral transformation ending in a changed society also occur. A Christian ethics could try to develop a theory of moral change in dialogue with various sciences. A secularised version of the moral change
depicted in Deuteronomy might run as follows. Fundamental to a just transformation is agreement on foundational values for guiding the transformation. New values must be taught to adults and children. Everyone must understand the rationale of those values and be able to justify the values to themselves and successive generations. Every person must be made continually aware of the new values. Strong calls for obedience to the values from leaders further reinforces new values. People must have incentives for obeying the new set of values through rewards or punishments. Strong commitments to make a moral transformation work lies in strong ties urged between believers and God. Enforcement strengthens adherence to the new values.

7. Christian Ethics and Public Philosophy

Most Christians today are living in multi-cultural societies rich in all kinds of human diversity. Differences of language, culture, morality, and religion abound. Religious differences can amount to societies having various Christian groups, believers in other religions, and many people embracing different forms and degrees of atheism. Practically nowhere can Christians alone determine public policies. Strong emphasis on liberty, fairness, and equality in liberal-democratic societies has sensitised governments and citizens to accommodate all voices in their societies and not to allow dominant groups to exclude or marginalise minority groups. If Christians want to contribute to public policy in this context, they must make arguments defending their positions to their fellow citizens in the public sphere. Only through convincing fellow citizens of the merit of their views can Christians hope to have any impact on public philosophy and policy.

There are strong voices calling for religious views to be seen as private matters that ought to be excluded from public debates about political matters. A happy compromise between the Enlightenment and religions, Richard
Rorty believes, is that religion has been privatised so that it now seems bad taste to use religion in public discussions of political matters (quoted in Quinn 1995: 35). Robert Audi argues that virtuous (religious) citizens ought to advocate new laws and policies not by using religious reasons, but only when they can provide reasons that any rational adult citizen can endorse as sufficient for the purpose (Audi in Audi and Wolterstorff 1997: 17).

There are similarly strong voices arguing that the Christian Church must be allowed to attempt to influence public opinion as part of its social mission. This must be done while respecting the rights of non-believers and without imposing views on people who think differently (Hollenbach 1988: 3, 9). What is a wise option for Christians in contemporary circumstances?

A wise option seems to distinguish between two different kinds of political issues. One issue is what John Rawls (1993: 214) calls constitutional essentials and issues of basic justice. They involve fundamental matters that provide the constitutional framework within which ordinary politics, such as elections, the making of laws, the development of policy, and the exercise of power occur. The crucial, determining role of the framework calls for debates that justify or modify aspects thereof on the basis of reasons that all citizens can accept as "reasonable and rational" (Rawls 1993: 217).

All other political issues can be argued for by using any kind of reason, though such reasons will not necessarily be accepted by their target audience as convincing. This more inclusive view shows an openness to pluralism, allowing citizens to use whatever reasons they find appropriate to support their political positions (Wolterstorff in Audi and Wolterstorff 1997: 112). No input control is necessary for public debates on these kinds of political issues, as the process of dialogue and deliberation will sort out which of these reasons are judged acceptable. If citizens have the civility to listen to one another with attitudes of mutual respect, willingness to learn and conse-
quently modify their positions, then critical scrutiny and public assessment of justificatory reasons show which reasons succeed in rationally persuading opponents through non-coercive means (cf. Thiemann 1996: 121).

Christians in contemporary constitutional democracies thus can participate in most public debates on political issues. What are the prerequisites for them to make a positive impact on public opinion? The apostle Paul’s example of becoming like the Jews (Greeks, etc.) to explain the gospel to them is a useful starting point. As was the case in interdisciplinary dialogue with other sciences in Chapter Two, Christians would have to be fully conversant with all relevant knowledge and information, as well as competent in the reasoning style employed in the domain of politics. To present views informed by the human sciences, supported by rational argumentation, and presented with rhetorical force and communicative skill, seems basic. Christians must be willing to translate their important ethical values from their biblical context into principles applicable to modern constitutional democracies and loosely coherent, or in meaningful debate, with current conceptions of justice (cf. Thiemann 1996: 158). Such new packaging for Christian values must be complemented by finding additional reasons for political views other than those reasons internal to Christian ethics, if non-believers are to be convinced (Wolterstorff in Audi and Wolterstorff 1997: 112). Engaging in public reasoning in this style, implies acceptance of a fallibilist attitude. This attitude acknowledges that Christians make errors of judgement in identifying and interpreting moral obligations contained in their fundamental texts (Audi in Audi and Wolterstorff 1997: 14). Fallibilism leads to willingness to re-examine religious views in various ways in the light of critique or conflict with other values.

The pluralistic values of modern constitutional democracies provide further opportunities for growth in Christians. Those Christians who embrace pluralism see deep and strong commitment to their religion as compatible with
respect for other religions and a willingness to learn from them (Thiemann 1996: 161). They expect their moral insight to deepen through dialogue with people who have different moral values and other ways of life. Jeremy Waldron (quoted in Quinn 1995: 49) neatly articulates how this openness to moral pluralism works:

"I mean to draw attention to an experience we all have had at one time or another, of having argued with someone whose world view was quite at odds with our own, and of having come away thinking, 'I'm sure he's wrong, and I can't follow much of it, but, still, it makes you think....' The prospect of losing that sort of effect in public discourse is, frankly, frightening – terrifying, even, if we are to imagine it being replaced by a form of 'deliberation' that, in the name of 'fairness' or 'reasonableness' (or worse still, 'balance') consists of bland appeals to harmless nostrums that are accepted without question on all sides."

If fallibilism and openness to pluralism occur reciprocally within an atmosphere of mutual respect for persons holding serious moral views other than your own, processes of dialogue can create mutual understanding, establish deep social bonds, and result in communal solidarity based on shared political values. Within this context and with such attitudes, non-Christians will at least listen attentively to Christians and take their political views seriously.

Another factor inhibits the acceptance of Christian views in the public sphere. The strength and appeal of liberal-democratic values, accompanied by their embodiment in human rights, are clear from their embodiment in many countries during waves of democratisation in the twentieth century. Liberal-democratic values form the core of the public philosophy guiding modern states in many countries of the world. Although many interpretations of these values are possible, their general thrust tends toward support for substantial aid programs for the poor. Whether liberal-democratic values are
a result of the pervasive influence of Christianity in the Western world until the nineteenth century or not does not really matter here. What matters is that a Christian ethics on poverty and riches hardly present something radically new to the world at the start of the 21st century.

Many Christians believe that a Christian ethics on poverty and wealth does still have something worthwhile and meaningful to say to people in contemporary multi-cultural, modern, constitutional democracies. Does this message have unique contents? As indicated earlier, the uniqueness of a Christian ethics lies in its various strengths. These strengths were indicated as the following.

1. A Christian ethics on poverty and riches provides a strong and wide-ranging set of moral values for dealing with poverty and riches. This set of values on poverty and riches is made even stronger through their link with a comprehensive network of moral and religious values that have the explicit intention of providing people with meaning in life and moral guidance to cover most areas of human life.

2. Christians must treat other people lovingly as defined by God's love for humans witnessed in the death of Jesus on the cross. This implies that poor people must be loved as fellow humans created in God's image and helped to realise their God-given potentialities.

3. Adherence to a Christian ethics of poverty and riches is strengthened by incentives and sanctions. The incentives are to gather metaphoric riches in heaven and eternal life after death, whereas failures to adopt and live out these values result in sanctions like no heavenly riches and life after death in hell.

4. The powerful commitment to God underlying and supporting Christian values is the most important reason accounting for their strength and endurance. A deep commitment to obey God out of love and gratitude, combined with the desire to become like God, drives many of His followers to passionately embrace His values and exert themselves to ensure
the implementation of those values.

5. Christians are under obligation to implement God's commands to safeguard the credibility of their faith. Furthermore, Christians are under a strong command to communicate their faith to non-believers. A strong and convincing way of doing that is to manifest God's love towards others concretely in their lives. Loving the poor by treating them as God commands ought to be a strong incentive that demonstrates God's love to others through practical witness.

How should Christians communicate their unique message concerning poverty and riches to their fellow citizens? I want to look at this issue from two perspectives. One perspective is to view Christians in their public role as citizens of their country and the other perspective is to view citizens in their public role in civil society and their private roles in interpersonal relationships.

The first perspective views Christians in their public role as citizens of their country - a role that they share with all other members of their society, regardless of religious beliefs or moral convictions. This role is defined by the moral values of liberal-democratic political philosophy, expressed in human rights, and embodied in a constitution. These values define the rules of politics for a society. Within the spaces for political activity created by a liberal-democratic political system, Christians can engage in dialogue, use rhetoric, lobby, mobilise followers for collective action, utilise the media, and publish pamphlets and books to publicise their views and try to convince their diverse audiences of worthwhile proposals for public policy.

Should Christian groups go it alone or work together in alliances? Isolationist political strategies might not always be most attractive or prove to be most persuasive. Temporary alliances on specific issues of public policy with other Christian groups, members of different religions, and political organi-
sations of roughly similar conviction might prove more productive (cf. De Villiers and Smit 1995: 50). Nevertheless, whatever political strategy followed, Christians can at most hope to achieve what John Rawls calls an overlapping consensus. This means that their political views on an issue like poverty and riches might converge with those of other political groups, although not necessarily be the same. Their reasons for supporting a particular policy might differ from those offered by other groups. Nevertheless, this might be the only way for Christians to make a public impact in a society characterised by moral and religious diversity.

Sometimes Christians have the option of supporting secular views on justice that were not formulated with the aim to be in agreement with a Christian ethics, but that nevertheless have many overlaps in letter and spirit with an imaginative application of a Christian ethics to contemporary situations. Two theories of justice are good examples to illustrate the point. The famous theory of justice by John Rawls (1971) has as contents liberal-democratic political rights, fair equality of opportunity, and a principle of distributive justice close in spirit to a Christian ethics on poverty and riches. This Rawlsian principle runs as follows: “Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are ...reasonably expected to be to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged.” The emphasis that Rawls places on distributive inequalities that should be to the benefit of the poor people in society seems to be one way in which a Christian ethics of poverty and riches might be specified for use in modern liberal-democratic societies. Christians ought to be able to strongly support such a view, although Rawls does not present or justify it in a Christian way. Obviously many other elements of a Christian view of poverty and ethics can be added to a Rawlsian view on distributive justice, as a Christian ethics on poverty and riches goes far beyond distributive issues of justice.

The differentiated and context-sensitive view on justice presented by
Michael Walzer (1983) is a similar example of a theory of justice that could easily be supported by Christians. The strength of Walzer's theory of justice lies in his sensitivity to the societal context in which questions of justice are asked. Walzer distinguishes different spheres in society where the issues of justice differ and different principles of justice are thus called for. What is just in the sphere of politics is not necessarily just in the sphere of education. The contents of Walzer's theory is a sophisticated articulation of liberal-democratic values that need not concern us here. What is of concern is to note how close Walzer comes to a Christian ethics of riches and poverty. He distinguishes between emergency poverty relief and aid to help poor people get rid of poverty. In the case of emergency poverty relief the only criterion is to relieve hunger, for example, no other criteria are to be met by those in desperate need of food. Aid must be given in proportion to the need of poor people. However, Walzer also emphasises that poor people must eventually be led to independence, they must be set up on their own again, able to care for themselves. He rejects aid that breeds dependence or passivity, as he also rejects aid that violates the human dignity of poor people. The aim of both kinds of poverty relief is to restore poor people to fully participating, equal members of society again.

Walzer's theory of justice comes very close to the moral values of a Christian ethics of poverty and wealth, although the strong motivational aspects associated with religious spirituality are absent. This kind of secular theory of justice provides interesting opportunities for Christians. The considerable overlaps between Walzer's theory of justice and a Christian ethics of poverty and riches enable Christians to adopt Walzer's theory of justice as appropriate for contemporary liberal-democratic constitutional states. There is no reason to adopt Walzer's theory uncritically. The theory can be adapted to fit more comfortably with a Christian ethics of poverty and riches, or other aspects of Christian ethics. Through intellectual fermentation sophisticated secular theories of justice can be intermingled and fused with Christian eth-
ics, so that a coherent theory of justice appropriate to current contexts and circumstances can be woven together. Such a theory would be provisional and subject to revision. Hopefully such theories will proliferate, showing active intellectual involvement of Christians to change their society for the better through working constructively with fellow citizens.

Christians in modern constitutional democracies have other identities besides their public identity as citizens. The second perspective looks at Christians as believers or God’s followers. This perspective notes two roles. One is their public role as members of groups and institutions, such as churches and organisations. In this public role they form part of civil society. The other role is their interpersonal role in many family, friendship, work, and casual relationships. Both these roles ought to be meaningfully co-defined by a Christian ethics on poverty and riches. The contents of a Christian life-style consists of the interdependence of worship and ethics, determined by love towards God and fellow humans, and guided by God’s commandments. Such a lifestyle must include a substantial section defined by a Christian ethics on poverty and riches. What does this requirement imply for Christians in their roles in civil society and interpersonal relationships?

As God’s followers they have an identity as believers or Christians who play public roles as members of non-governmental organisations (churches, Christian groups and organisations) in civil society. Citizens organised into non-governmental associations form the organs of civil society, such as interest groups, sport clubs, and service organisations. Membership is voluntary and organisations are largely self-supporting and independent from the state. They are nevertheless public, constrained by all the societal rules, rights, and regulations that apply elsewhere. In the organs of civil society, people get opportunities to articulate their interests, formulate mutual goals and strategies for implementing them, and opportunities for commenting on, and sometimes demanding, governmental action.
In their public roles as members of civil society Christians in churches, smaller groups, and organisations must show a strong concern for poor people. Through collective action to address poverty Christians must authenticate their faith in the eyes of anyone concerned. Projects to assist poor people and eradicate poverty must be launched at local, regional, national levels. Such projects can be done by members of a specific religious group, but the role of ecumenical alliances of Christian religious groups can strengthen the witness of Christians as a strong force for positive social change. The possibility of Christians co-operating in interfaith alliances of religious groups or even with inter-organisational alliances of aid organisations can also be explored. In the context of civil society Christians need to demonstrate how a living faith transforms people to become caring like God cares for the weak, vulnerable, and marginalised. This transformation of people ought to enable Christians to become like God for their society, making a sharp impact through the improvement of needy people’s lives. Converting faith into deeds is a particularly effective witness to the truth of Christian faith and an important complement to other forms of mission and evangelism.

At interpersonal level Christians have perhaps more limited opportunities to aid poor people, because the complexities of poverty often necessitate forms of aid that are better done collectively or by specialists. Nevertheless, there are numerous ways for individual Christians to become involved at least in the life of one poor person they know, perhaps even in the lives of more. Emergency poverty relief through giving food, clothes, or shelter to poor people are obvious examples. Helping poor people to help themselves is another possibility through skills training projects. Sometimes aid can simply be to direct poor people to already existing agencies that can give appropriate help for the poor person’s needs. Generously donating money to aid organisations or getting involved in the organisation through expert, lay, or administrative work are others ways in which Christians can involve
themselves as individuals to make God’s care for the poor manifest in their lives. Through such involvement Christians demonstrate the truth and life of their faith.

The advantage for Christians – as individuals or groups in civil society – of continuous involvement in programs to alleviate and eradicate poverty are threefold. Through service to others in need, Christians are kept at the main focus of Christianity: God’s love for people in need must become visible in the way His followers focus on the urgent needs of other people. A second advantage is how God’s love becomes practical. This love of God has strong spiritual dimensions, but service to others in need demonstrates the practical aspects thereof: how God’s love changes the everyday life of people in need of basic necessities. A third advantage for Christians brought about by caring for the poor is the experience of changed, improved relationships that lead to a more humane society.

8. Disrupting Postscript

Does it make sense to systematise the scriptural material about poverty and riches into a theory of Christian ethics on poverty and riches? One might argue that this kind of theorising deprives the biblical message of some of its most powerful aspects. The vividness and fascination of narratives, the embeddedness of commandments in a wider narrative context, the excitement and passion of prophetic critique, the poetic beauty of the Psalms, and the directness of Jesus’ teachings are lost through systematising. The power of persuasion found in the rhetorical effectiveness of the biblical text is broken. Is it worth it?

Systematising biblical texts into an ethics of poverty and riches is only worthwhile as a guideline or broad framework for identifying main themes on this topic. These main themes can be used in educating Christians about
their moral responsibilities concerning poverty and riches, but not without the vividness and rhetorical power of the Biblical texts themselves. The main themes can guide Christians to a comprehensive reading of the Biblical texts to develop their own view on poverty and riches. In this way theological ethics can guide Christians not to make selective use of texts to suit their interests.

A theory of Christian ethics on poverty and riches can show Christians a style of thinking about moral issues that takes into account many kinds of background information from a diversity of sources. This would drive home the point that being a Christian does not give any person special skills to suddenly be an expert on issues they previously knew nothing about (cf. Hollenbach 1988: 185). Competent ethical judgements require sufficient background knowledge of the issue involved. A theory of Christian ethics on poverty and riches can demonstrate to Christians how such knowledge can enable them to understand the complexities of ethical issues in sufficient depth.

Theological ethicists ought to remind themselves of the diversity of moral discourses available to Christianity. Such reminder will keep them aware of the limited value of their ethical theories in the broader scheme of things. Christian ethics has four kinds of moral discourse available (cf. the appropriation of Gustafson by De Villiers and Smit 1994). These four complement one another as they are inadequate to function on their own. So-called ethical discourse is much like the rest of this thesis. Philosophical modes of analysis, argumentation, and assessment are employed to provide a coherent, systematic exposition of Christian values. Appropriate argumentation in support of values and principles are tied together in a theory of Christian ethics.

The ethical discourse needs to be complemented by the others for different
functions. Policy discourse is close to ethical discourse, but not used by observers or consultants, like theological ethicists often are. Rather, decision-makers, managers, or leaders driving human action in everyday life use policy discourse to figure out the best options implementable within limited space and time, through insufficient means, and by using constrained opportunities.

Prophetic discourse use strong emotional language, narratives, and practical demonstrations to deliver moral judgements against moral evil and religious apostasy. People addressed this way are called upon to change their ways fundamentally and embrace a vision of God’s better future. This kind of discourse is effective in touching people’s emotions and moving them to change their behaviour.

Narrative discourse is particularly important, as the ancient sacred texts of the Bible are dominated by narratives. The texts dealing with ethical issues are either narratives themselves, or embodied in narratives. For this reason, the nature and functions of narratives need serious consideration.

Narratives are particularly suitable to describe and interpret human lives (cf. MacIntyre 1998: 216). Narratives accommodate unpredictability as well as stability. Human lives show unpredictability, as we do not always know what is going to happen next – the future is full of good and bad surprises. However, human lives also manifest stability, as people’s lives often have constant features which are found through many aspects and large parts of their lives. Narratives can deal with both of these factors. The suitability of narratives for dealing with the nature of human lives lies also in the constraints that any narrative place on how the story-line can develop, while within those constraints there are almost infinite possibilities of further developments. A final aspect of the suitability of narratives is that the subjects of narratives can be held accountable for their choices and actions that combine to form a

When engaging with God’s Word in this way, Christians can develop a theory of narratives can have three functions (cf. Allen 1990: 33–34). Some narratives serve a poetic or aesthetic function to express beauty. Other narratives purport to convey information or explanation through their dialectical or epistemic function. Narratives are also used to convince people of other views through a rhetorical function. These functions often interact in one narrative (cf. Lyotard 1979: 20), providing strong stories with deep impact on people’s hearts, minds, and souls that often move them to action and change their lives (Bausch 1984: 27). Narratives challenge listeners to express their opinions, give their evaluations, and imagine themselves as part of the story (Bausch 1984: 21, 27). Growing curiosity about new developments and eager anticipation of outcomes engender emotional and intellectual involvement. Imaginative involvement leads to creative participation where people’s own narratives are brought into dialogue and confrontation with the story being told. Who can tell stories? A particularly attractive feature of narratives is that current listeners become competent to retell a story simply through listening. Often the only claim of narrators for being competent to tell a story is that they themselves were listeners once (Lyotard 1979: 20).

The fundamental issue for theological ethicists must be to encourage Christians to read, interpret, and appropriate the narratives of the ancient sacred texts of the Bible for themselves. Only through reading texts with their own Vorverständnisse (pre-understandings) at work, their knowledge of their own lives and circumstances brought into play, and their own application of those texts to their lives can God’s Word effectively speak to them. They must be willing to relate their stories to God’s stories and re-story their lives if necessary. If they are serious about their moral responsibility concerning poverty and riches, prepared to read all relevant texts on these matters, and open to being challenged by the radical demands of God’s word, then God can change their lives to deal with poverty properly.
When dealing with God's Word in this way, Christians can use a theory of Christian ethics on poverty and riches as a checklist for their views. They must engage a systematised Christian ethics through critical dialogue to challenge both their own views and the systematised view in the light of the biblical texts. These texts have the last say, and are the final arbiters for any interpretation aiming to appropriate their meanings for people living today.
Bibliography


