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HELMUT GOLLWITZER AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE:

A THEOPOLITICAL APPRECIATION

Abstract: Helmut Gollwitzer's legacy as a politically concerned pastor and theologian is instructive for those today who want to take seriously both what Christian faith means for socio-economic justice and what that concern for socio-economic justice likewise means for the theological task. I treat three aspects of Gollwitzer's work in order to highlight his significance for the contemporary situation: (1) his interesting application of the traditional idea of *suum cuique*, especially vis-à-vis Bonhoeffer; (2) the connection he draws between the Christian gospel and the necessity of combating economic-political privilege; and (3), his conclusions concerning Christian faith and theology's failings in the face of atheist criticism of religion and what this means for continuing to do theology in the contemporary situation. One eye is kept on the Occupy Wall Street movement throughout the discussion in order to highlight how Gollwitzer's thought illuminates matters in our own day.

As the title of this paper suggests, I will not offer much by way of groundbreaking or constructive argument. My goal is simply to illuminate some ways that Helmut Gollwitzer's theo-politics resonate in our own day. So if this paper has something like a unifying argument, it is simply that Gollwitzer deserves more attention than he has generally received. To that end I will highlight a number of aspects in Gollwitzer's thought that are especially pertinent today. I determine this pertinence by convergence between these aspects of Gollwitzer's thought and the Occupy Wall Street movement, hereafter referred to as #OWS. #OWS likely needs no

introduction in this context, but it may be that Helmut Gollwitzer is new to some of us.¹ So, who was Helmut Gollwitzer?

Helmut Gollwitzer was a noted German churchman and theologian. Academically speaking, Gollwitzer gained significant attention as a result of his debate with Herbert Braun on the nature of theological language.² But Gollwitzer also received broader cultural attention thanks to the popular book he wrote reflecting on the five years he spent as a prisoner of war in the Soviet Union after World War 2.³ These accomplishments propelled Gollwitzer toward selection as the successor to the chair of his teacher—Karl Barth—at the University of Basel. He very nearly received the appointment, and the story of his near-appointment to that post reveals the good and bad in Gollwitzer’s notoriety. Well respected as a former prisoner-of-war, pastor, and intellectual, Gollwitzer was nonetheless greatly distrusted by the Swiss authorities because of his outspoken criticisms of capitalism and nuclear armament. An editorial in the *Junge Kirche* periodical from April 1962 summarizes the situation nicely: “The Basel authorities would have liked to appoint Gollwitzer, the distinguished scholar and persuasive preacher, to the university chair, but not Gollwitzer the representative of the so-called ‘Movement for World Peace’ and the

¹ Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt, reflecting on the unavailability of Gollwitzer’s writings in German bookstores merely a year after his death, attributes part of the blame to how the media drives public awareness ever onward at breakneck speed. But he also attributes Gollwitzer’s rapid disappearance to the character of his theology: “[Gollwitzer] himself linked his theological work so closely with the course of time that it can, with the time, pass quickly.” Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt, “Was nicht im Dienst steht, steht im Raub” Zum ersten Versuch einer Gollwitzer-Biografie von Gottfried Orth, *Evangelische Theologie* 57, no. 2 (1997): 162.

² A recent account of this debate, along with Eberhard Jüngel’s subsequent criticism of Gollwitzer’s position, can be found in Bruce L. McCormack, “God Is His Decision: The Jüngel-Gollwitzer ‘Debate’ Revisited,” in *Theology as Conversation: The Significance of Dialogue in Historical and Contemporary Theology, A Festschrift for Daniel L. Migliore*, ed. Bruce L. McCormack and Kimlyn J. Bender (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009).

³ Paul Oestreicher compares the attention that Gollwitzer received as a result of this publication with that received by J. A. T. Robinson a decade later in Britain after the publication of *Honest to God*. Paul Oestreicher, “Helmut Gollwitzer in the European Storms,” in *The Demands of Freedom: Papers by a Christian in West Germany*, ed. Helmut Gollwitzer (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1965), 7.

spokesman of every anti-nuclear congress.”⁴ The profoundly uncomfortable thing about Gollwitzer was his deep insight that a gospel so radical as to involve God becoming a human being to enact reconciliation with the world through self-sacrifice called for correspondingly radical political engagement.⁵

This, of course, raises the question of how to think about the Christian’s engagement in political matters. As Gollwitzer puts it, the Christian is not entitled to decide about whether to be involved in politics “but only of *how* to take part, with what motives, with what aims and methods, on which side.”⁶ In other words, Christians always already find themselves in the midst of political life and must do their best to bring their existence in that political life into greater conformity with the gospel. At what sort of political engagement does the gospel aim? While Gollwitzer allows for difference in opinion concerning whether and to what extent any particular policy might accomplish a given goal, he believes that Christians should be united concerning the principle toward which they strive politically.⁷ That principle is “togetherness.” Gollwitzer believes that togetherness is the place where the desperate needs of contemporary society intersect with the hope embodied in biblical proclamation of the Kingdom of God, which he describes as “perfect togetherness without any conflict.”⁸ Standing at this crossroads, togetherness impinges on both the “what” and the “how” questions of Christian political engagement. Promoting political initiatives ordered toward authentic and meaningful

⁴ As reprinted in Helmut Gollwitzer, *The Demands of Freedom: Papers by a Christian in West Germany*, trans. Robert W. Fenn (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1965). 148–49.

⁵ One scholar notes that the church in general “is—from its beginnings—an impenetrable mixing bowl for various concoctions of not-unexplosive blends of piety and politics.” Harald Schroeter-Wittke, “Der Deutsche Evangelische Kirchentag in den 1960er und 70er Jahren - eine soziale Bewegung?,” in *Umbrüche: Der deutsche Protestantismus und die sozialen Bewegungen in den 1960er und 70er Jahren*, ed. Siegfried Hermle, Claudia Lepp, and Harry Oelke (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 218–19.

⁶ Helmut Gollwitzer, *An Introduction to Protestant Theology*, trans. David Cairns (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1982). 191.

⁷ Gollwitzer, *Demands of Freedom*: 72.

⁸ See Gollwitzer, *Protestant Theology*: 191–2. Gollwitzer draws very briefly here on the imagery found in Mi 4.3f, Zec 3.10, and Rom 14.17.

interrelation between free individuals is both the aim of all Christian political action and the criterion by which it is judged.

This account of Christian political engagement requires a shift away from thinking about the Christian life as a question of merely personal discipleship or as primarily concerned with maintaining and advancing one's own religious purity. This way of thinking is especially prevalent within Christianity in the United States. But Gollwitzer undermines this approach when speaking of the true political significance of Martin Luther's thought: "the aim is no longer to become holy but to obey, to practice love and to be God's helper in the world."⁹ So a Christian's political life should always be at the service of others, that is, it should serve togetherness. Three particular ways that Gollwitzer works out this commitment to togetherness are interesting with reference to #OWS.

First, Gollwitzer creatively reinterprets a central dictum of classic ethical and political theory—*suum cuique*, "to each his or her own."¹⁰ The German equivalent of this phrase—*Jedem das Seine*—functioned as a propaganda tool in the Nazi regime, with roots even further back in Prussia. It even featured prominently at the Buchenwald concentration camp.¹¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer addressed this concept in his *Ethics*. For Bonhoeffer, *suum cuique* highlights the individual's basic human rights that the community must respect and maintain, even while the

⁹ Helmut Gollwitzer, "The Real Luther," in *Matinus Luther: 450th Anniversary of the Reformation* (Bad Godesberg: Inter Nationes, 1967), 13. As Gollwitzer writes elsewhere: "Freedom means liberty for the other person." Gollwitzer, *Demands of Freedom*: 33.

¹⁰ This notion goes back at least as far as Plato. His *Republic* defines justice both as "doing one's own work and not meddling with what isn't one's own" and as judging that "no citizen should have what belongs to another or be deprived of what is his own." Plato, "Republic," in *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 4.433. It is worth noting, however, that matters are complicated by some of the ways Plato both undercuts and builds upon an account of love as love of one's own in his *Symposium*.

¹¹ "CDU stoppt Kampagne "Jedem das Seine", " *Spiegel Online* (March 11 2009), <http://www.spiegel.de/schulspiegel/wissen/nazi-slogan-cdu-stoppt-kampagne-jedem-das-seine-a-612757.html>.

community arbitrates between the conflicting rights of individuals.¹² Whereas Bonhoeffer uses this principle negatively to establish an abstract safeguard of individual human dignity vis-à-vis the community, Gollwitzer deploys it positively by concretizing matters in terms of economic justice. Drawing on Marxist analysis, Gollwitzer describes how this principle is betrayed in the capitalist context: “No one in this system receives the *suum cuique*, neither the workers, who receive less than their due, and thus always an unjust payment, nor the owners of the means of production, who receive more than they ought, and thus always an unjust payment.”¹³

Second, Gollwitzer explores the theme of togetherness further when he defends his theologically motivated Democratic Socialism. Drawing once again on the fruit of Marxist analysis, Gollwitzer notes that virtually all human society is built on privilege and committed to the maintenance of that privilege, which Gollwitzer calls “class struggle from above.”¹⁴ For Gollwitzer, opposition to such privilege is central to Christian existence. This opposition stems from the radical equality built into the Christian encounter with God, albeit explicated in terms of Gollwitzer’s Lutheranism: “No one has any advantages over the other, because all people have to rely on hearing and can and must help each other like brothers and sisters by means of the word.”¹⁵ The radical dependency involved in one’s encounter with the gospel stands diametrically opposed to any form of privilege that seeks to establish distinctions or, to paraphrase Pauline language, “dividing walls” (see Eph 2.14) between people. Just because all people stand as beggars before God, no one should be reduced to standing as a beggar before a fellow human being. In another place Gollwitzer talks about the inner freedom that encounter

¹² See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Richard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Stott, vol. 6, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005). 181–85.

¹³ Gollwitzer, *Protestant Theology*: 201.

¹⁴ Helmut Gollwitzer, “Why I am a Christian Socialist,” *Christ und Sozialist*(1980), <http://portland.indymedia.org/en/2003/04/62441.shtml>; for the German text, see <http://www.brsd.de/historisch/31-warum-bin-ich-als-christ-sozialist-1980>.

¹⁵ Gollwitzer, “Real Luther,” 12.

with the gospel imparts, and how this inner freedom longs for outer freedom. He then takes the next step: “what Christians long for they must also grant to others and wish for them! This is the tendency toward equality, under the constraint of Christ’s love: I cannot wish to have more than others, either of outward or inner possessions and possibilities.”¹⁶ For Gollwitzer, this means that opposition to unjust structures of privilege is a necessary factor in Christian promotion of togetherness.

Third, Gollwitzer modeled the sort of togetherness to which the gospels calls the church in his active dialog with Marxist ideas and representatives. I have noted at various points that Gollwitzer draws on Marxist analysis in his thinking, but this does not mean Gollwitzer was uncritical of Marxism.¹⁷ For example, he suspects that Marxist thought possesses an implied eschatology insufficient to the task of supporting its utopian and messianic claims, providing a compelling meaning for human life, and properly safeguarding the value of human individuals as something more than a means to an end.¹⁸ But togetherness means also that Gollwitzer must take seriously the Marxist criticism of religion—i.e., that Christianity functions as a mechanism of social control and oppression. Part of the church’s theological task resulting from this criticism is to recognize that “the world no longer takes [the church] for granted.”¹⁹ The church must consequently give up on apologetic endeavor. It must recognize that what to Christians look like basic questions of human existence that are answered by the gospel are in fact also awakened by

¹⁶ Gollwitzer, *Protestant Theology*: 199.

¹⁷ For many in our own context, this willingness to positively engage with Marxism will be suspicious given that, as Hugh McLeod has noted, “for some of the revolutionary Christians of [the late 1960s and early 1970s] Marxism simply replaced Christianity as a world-view.” Hugh McLeod, “European Religion in the 1960s,” in *Umbrüche: Der deutsche Protestantismus und die sozialen Bewegungen in den 1960er und 70er Jahren*, ed. Siegfried Hermle, Claudia Lepp, and Harry Oelke (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 43. As Gollwitzer’s *Christian Century* obituary put it: “Gollwitzer found much to recommend in the Marxist critique of the capitalist system, but he always stressed that his position was formed in the crucible of the Christian gospel—in some ways anticipating and, later, paralleling liberation theology.” “Anti-Nazi theologian Helmut Gollwitzer dies,” *Christian Century* 110, no. 32 (November 10, 1993): 1118.

¹⁸ See Helmut Gollwitzer, *The Christian Faith and the Marxist Criticism of Religion*, trans. David Cairns (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970). 104–23 and esp. 17–18.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 150.

encounter with the gospel. Consequently, “the Church . . . is thrown entirely upon its faith in the self-evidencing power of its message.”²⁰ As Gollwitzer puts it elsewhere, the Marxist criticism “can only be disproved by action,”²¹ namely, the action of bearing witness to the gospel and especially by doing so through political engagement aimed at togetherness.

Undoubtedly, the parallels between Gollwitzer’s thought and Occupy Wall Street on these three points are so obvious to those who have been paying attention to #OWS over the past year and more that I hardly need to point them out. Forgive me as I do so briefly. First, Gollwitzer’s interpretation of the *suum cuique* and #OWS’s criticisms of insufficiently regulated capitalism are highly suggestive. For instance, #OWS decries our society’s economic inequality, which has rapidly ballooned over the past four decades or so.²² But Gollwitzer would see all this as predictable given that capitalism’s basic dynamic is that “profits are produced by the work of large numbers of people and appropriated by a few.” In such a system demand for things like “development of the infrastructure, the relief of the public from fatiguing work—none of these interests of people in a more human life produce anything like so high a profit, and are therefore reduced to secondary priorities.”²³ The injustice ingredient to this state of affairs raises serious obstacles to true togetherness.

²⁰ Ibid., 165. Gollwitzer quickly adds, however: “not as if [the church] were now permitted to speak in the alien language of Canaan.”

²¹ Helmut Gollwitzer, *The Rich Christians and Poor Lazarus*, trans. David Cairns (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1970). 71. See also Gollwitzer, *Demands of Freedom*: 139–40.

²² One study focused on wealth distribution showed that the top 20% of folks in our society control over 80% of the nation’s wealth, while the bottom 60% of folks control less than 10%. See Michael I. Norton and Dan Ariely, “Building a Better America—One Wealth Quintile at a Time,” *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 6, no. 1 (2011). There is also the matter of society at large backing irresponsible economic practices as financial firms—i.e., the Wall St. bailout—without securing concomitant debt relief. #OWS has recently begun to develop structures aimed at challenging the current debt-driven economy and its social consequences. One such structure is the Rolling Jubilee, which plans to purchase commoditized debt for the purpose of forgiving said debt. See <http://strikedebt.org/> and <http://rollingjubilee.org/>. Finally, there is the issue of an economic recovery, both in the mid-2000s and more recently, that generally benefitted only the already wealthy while passing by the middle and lower classes. See Robert Frank, “The 1% Captures Most Growth From Recovery,” *The Wall Street Journal* (March 6 2012), <http://blogs.wsj.com/wealth/2012/03/06/the-1-captures-most-growth-from-recovery/>.

²³ Gollwitzer, *Rich Christians*: 51–2.

Second, #OWS hopes to contest this injustice by way of combatting unjust privilege. Indeed, dissatisfaction with such privilege is a fundamental component of #OWS, which can be characterized as a deep and visceral reaction to a social order that has concentrated wealth in the hands of the few while disadvantaging the many. In #OWS nomenclature, these are respectively the 1% and the 99%. But #OWS also sees clearly that, as Gollwitzer puts it, “economic power is political power.”²⁴ Consequently, working toward a more just distribution of economic and political power is a necessary expression of togetherness. So Gollwitzer: “What I possess in social privileges beyond my creaturely and spiritual necessities should become the rights of everyone. Thus I will not participate in the struggles of those who want to maintain their privileges but in the struggle of those who want to dismantle these privileges to favor the disadvantaged.”²⁵

Third and finally, how does #OWS relate to Gollwitzer’s engagement with Marxist criticism of religion? This point is certainly less obvious than the preceding two. But perhaps the more difficult thing for the church to hear from Gollwitzer, both in his day and our own, is that the accusations made by Marxist criticism “are a catalogue of actual Christian degenerations”²⁶ for which Christians must take responsibility. In many ways, #OWS serves the same function for the church in the United States today. While #OWS has generated interest among and received support from individual congregations, and many church folk have been involved in and around

²⁴ Here is a more complete quotation: “Economic power is political power, however much that fact may be disguised in our form of democracy, and to however large an extent the possessors of economic power may leave the business of politics to professional politicians.” Ibid., 49–50. Things have become less disguised in our own day, which has helped to motivate #OWS. One thinks especially of the Citizens United decision rendered by the Supreme Court. See “Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission,” *SCOTUSblog: Supreme Court of the United States Blog*, <http://www.scotusblog.com/case-files/cases/citizens-united-v-federal-election-commission/>.

²⁵ Gollwitzer, “Why I am a Christian Socialist”. 4.3. Michael Weinrich refers to Gollwitzer’s appreciation for Luther’s turn of phrase, “anything that is not service is robbery.” Michael Weinrich, “Gesellschaftliche Herausforderungen der Theologie: Erinnerungen an Helmut Gollwitzer,” *Evangelische Theologie* 59, no. 3 (1999): 171.

²⁶ Gollwitzer, *Marxist Criticism of Religion*: 151.

the protest work,²⁷ anything like organized support from the churches at a high level has been sorely lacking. Furthermore, the *ad hoc* Christian support for #OWS that has occurred is drowned by the staggering number of self-identified “Christians” who have supported in the past and continue to support politicians who are not only content to perpetuate *status quo* economic injustice but even advocate further acceleration of the sort of policies that produced this *status quo*. In this context, #OWS constitutes a prophetic indictment aimed not only at society as a whole but even more specifically and damningly at the church in particular. Gollwitzer’s not insignificant contribution is to provide the church with a theologically robust vision for recognizing movements like #OWS as just such an indictment. There is a very real sense that, from Gollwitzer’s point of view, Occupy Wall Street is doing the church’s work.

²⁷ Perhaps the best single resource on religious involvement with #OWS is <http://www.occupyfaith.com/>

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