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Food Poverty and Christianity in Britain: A Theological Re-assessment

CHRIS ALLEN

Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, UK

The Christian response to food poverty in Britain has generally been two-fold. Foodbanks have become synonymous with Christianity and exemplify its charitable ethos. However, Christian churches have also called for social justice so that people can buy food in the normal way. Both responses are theologically problematic. The idea of foodbank is borne of a privileged theology that celebrates charitable giving, despite the humiliation it invites on recipients. Although social justice approaches originate in human rights discourse, the location of these rights in food consumerism means that it is equally privileged. Drawing on contextual and liberation theology, as well as ideas from radical orthodoxy, I argue that food poverty is better understood when we assign epistemological privilege to the poor. This leads me to advocate an alternative Christian response to food poverty.

KEYWORDS food poverty, foodbanks, Britain, liberation theology, contextual theology

Introduction

This paper is concerned with Christian responses to the growing problem of food poverty in Britain. In the first part of the paper, I argue that Christian responses to food poverty break down into two approaches. The first approach is emergent from the historically dominant Christian social tradition in Britain, which emphasizes charitable giving. Foodbanks are the charitable mechanism through which food is given. The second “social justice” approach has been derived from human rights discourse. It promotes the idea of minimum incomes (living wage, minimum wage, welfare payments) that enable people to secure food in socially acceptable ways, i.e. from food retailers.

The purpose of this paper is to reconsider these Christian responses to food poverty. My approach to this task is influenced by contextual and liberation theologies, which advise that any critique of Christian responses to social problems should consider whose voices are shaping those responses. I suggest that the charitable idea of foodbank is problematic because it is emergent from a privileged theology that

reflects the privileged nature of the church voices that promote it. It has nothing critical to say about economic privilege which, in fact, it celebrates as the means of helping others. But that is not all. I suggest that this noise of self-congratulation is also drowning out the “cry of the poor”¹ against the social injustice of food charity.

Although the social justice approach promotes a “human right” to food, I urge caution for two reasons. First, it is open to the accusation of theological vacuity because it is emergent from the political discourse of capitalism, which positions us as food consumers with money in our pockets and little else. Food consumerism appeals to a privileged and individualized life of buying, possessing, and gratification, and is incompatible with a Jesus that used food to emphasize our “communism of being.”² Second, its concern is limited to ensuring that the state empowers people in food consuming countries, such as Britain, to secure food in socially normalized ways, i.e. as food consumers. It has nothing to say about the production of food. As such, it renders the exploitation of the earth and its inhabitants in food producing countries analytically invisible.

A truly alternative Christian response to food poverty must overcome these epistemic problems by speaking in the voice of a poor Jesus that appealed to universal fellowship rather than human rights,³ and a generous God that provided the earth as a universal gift to be cultivated in common rather than exploited by the powerful at the expense of the poor.⁴ I suggest that this leads us back to early and radical Christian traditions that emphasize the fellowship of hospitality rather than the privilege of charitable giving. It also leads us back to early and radical Christian traditions that emphasize the earth as a divine gift to be cultivated-in-common rather than pillaged by the privileged. This leads me to conclude that Christians should now reassert their theology — in all of its radicalism — to reclaim food from the damaging grip of charity and consumer capitalism.

Two Christian responses to food poverty in the UK

As intermediaries between food donors and food recipients, foodbanks constitute a charitable response to food poverty that originated in North America. The first foodbank emerged in Arizona, USA in 1967 as a local response to food poverty.⁵ They subsequently spread in a more systematic way across North American countries in response to recession and large-scale unemployment in the late 1970s and early 1980s.⁶ Although foodbanks were initially developed as temporary relief operations to assist unemployed people,⁷ they have become a permanent and

¹ This term is used by Boff L. *Cry of the Earth, cry of the poor* (New York: Orbis Books; 1997).

² Mendez-Montoya AF. *The theology of food: eating and the Eucharist* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell; 2009), p. 93.

³ Mark 3, p. 31–35 and Galatians 3, p. 28.

⁴ Isaiah 3, p. 14; Isaiah 32, p. 18–20.

⁵ Riches G. *Food banks and food security: welfare reform, human rights and social policy. Lessons from Canada. Social Policy and Administration. 2002;36:651.*

⁶ See Riches, *Food banks and Food security*, p. 649–50.

⁷ See Tarasuk V, Eakin JM. *Charitable food assistance as symbolic gesture: an ethnographic case study of food banks in Ontario. Social Science and Medicine. 2002;56:1506.*

institutionalized feature of neoliberal capitalism in North America such that they now also serve the working poor.⁸

Although the first British foodbank was established in 2000, Christian churches in Britain have only recently adopted the idea of foodbank as a wholesale approach to tackling its growing problem of food poverty.⁹ This wholesale approach is managed by the Christian charity, the Trussell Trust, which has established a national network of foodbanks by working with parishes across the UK.¹⁰ Like their North American counterparts, Trussell Trust foodbanks provide “responsive emergency relief — a minimum of three days nutritionally balanced food and sign-posting to further help.”¹¹

Suffice it to say that foodbanks do not constitute a pragmatic Christian response to food poverty. The Archbishop of Canterbury has referred to them as a “great moment of opportunity”¹² for the Christian Church, whereas the Trussell Trust has suggested they are a “calling” that “shows Jesus love in action,”¹³ because they “provide Christians with a tool for undertaking the social action work that their faith calls them to do.”¹⁴

[T]he Trust point[s] to the biblical passage of Matthew chapter 25 as a key focal point for the foodbank initiative [...]. I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me a drink; I was a stranger and you received me in your homes.¹⁵

This Christian enthusiasm for the idea of foodbanks is matched by activity. From the beginning of 2010, the number of foodbanks launched grew from 55 to over 100 in 18 months. The first half of 2011 witnessed the opening of one new Trussell Trust foodbank every week whereas in 2010–11 foodbanks within the Trussell network fed 61 468 adults and children.¹⁶ According to Church Action on Poverty and Oxfam,¹⁷ the operations of foodbanks further expanded to accommodate emergency demands for food from half a million people in the UK in 2013. This had reportedly grown to one million people in the first half of 2014.¹⁸ Like their North American counterparts, British foodbanks are no longer simply providing temporary food assistance to people in “crisis” or “emergency” situations. They are increasingly and regularly serving food to the “working poor”¹⁹ and, as such,

⁸ See Riches, *Food banks and food security*, p. 654.

⁹ See Lambie H. *The Trussell Trust foodbank network: exploring the growth of foodbanks across the UK* (Coventry: Coventry University; 2011).

¹⁰ See *ibid.*, p. 9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. ii.

¹² See Bingham J. The Church must fill void left by failing state, says new Archbishop Justin Welby. *The Daily Telegraph*. January 1, 2013.

¹³ Trussell Trust, *Foodbank operating manual* (Salisbury: Trussell Trust; 2004), p. 1.

¹⁴ Lambie, *Trussell Trust foodbank network*, p. 14.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ See *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁷ See Cooper N, Dumbleton S. *Walking the breadline: the scandal of food poverty in 21st century Britain* (Manchester: Church Action on Poverty and Oxfam; 2013), p. 5.

¹⁸ See Milligan B. Food banks see “shocking” rise in number of users. *BBC News*. April 16, 2014.

¹⁹ See Davis R. How food banks became mainstream: the new reality of the working poor. *New Statesman*. December 17, 2012. Available from: <http://www.newstatesman.com/rowenna-davis/2012/12/how-food-banks-became-mainstream-new-reality-working-poor>; also Rayner J. Food bank Britain: life below the line. *The Observer*. August 16, 2013.

are in danger of becoming an institutionalized feature of the neoliberal economic landscape in Britain.²⁰

This is not to suggest that Christian churches and organizations do not acknowledge the limits of foodbanks. Some have also suggested that food charity does not address the “underlying structural causes of inadequate food access.”²¹ For instance, recent reports from the Baptist Union of Great Britain, the Methodist Church, Church of Scotland, and United Reform Church²², and Church Action on Poverty²³ argue that a key cause of food poverty is low income and an unduly punitive welfare system. They have called for a “campaign for social justice” so the “underlying structural causes of inadequate food access” can be addressed.²⁴ The core objective of this campaign is to secure minimum income standards²⁵ so that people routinely “acquire the food they need through the socially acceptable means of market incomes or state support.”²⁶ This involves appealing to the state to meet its obligations under the 1948 Declaration of Human Rights and Article 11 of the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights to “recognise the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family including adequate food” and to recognize “the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger” without resorting to emergency food supplies.²⁷ As Riches argues “why should such citizens not be able to shop for food like everyone else”?²⁸

Christian approaches to food poverty: a theological re-assessment

Foodbanks and the pursuit of social justice have provided a focus for a collective Christian response to food poverty in Britain. However, it has also created a problematic situation in terms of Christian thinking about food poverty which is this: the suggestion that foodbanks are a “calling” or that social justice is desirable is epistemologically deleterious. This is because such suggestions encourage misrecognition of current Christian responses to food poverty as either objectively identical (foodbanks are a “calling” that “show Jesus love”) or logically compatible (social justice as a desirable goal of social policy) with God’s will. In other words, they can too easily be assumed to be matter-of-fact truths that are unproblematic. Moreover, it results in a closure of the epistemic possibilities for

²⁰ Cooper N, Purcell S, Jackson R. *Below the breadline: the relentless rise of food poverty in Britain* (Manchester: Church Action on Poverty, Oxfam and Trussell Trust; 2014), p. 10; see also Riches, *Food banks and food security*, p. 654.

²¹ Lambie, *Trussell Trust foodbank network*, p. 30.

²² See Baptist Union of Great Britain, the Methodist Church, the Church of Scotland, and the United Reformed Church, *The lies we tell ourselves: ending comfortable myths about poverty* (London: Joint Public Issues Team; 2013).

²³ See Cooper N, Dumpleton S. *Walking the breadline*, p. 9–14; also Cooper *et al.* *Below the breadline*, p. 10, 14–18.

²⁴ See Lambie, *Trussell Trust foodbank network*, p. 29–31.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 34; Cooper and Dumpleton, *Walking the breadline*, p. 3, 15; Cooper *et al.* *Below the breadline*, p. 5, 13.

²⁶ Wynd D. *Hard to swallow: foodbank use in New Zealand* (Auckland: Child Poverty Action Group; 2005), p. 5.

²⁷ Buckingham D. *Food security, law and theology: biblical underpinnings of the right to food* (Manitoba: Canadian Foodgrains Bank; 2000), p. 10.

²⁸ Riches, *Food banks and food security*, p. 649–50.

recognizing alternative (perhaps more radical) Christian truths about food poverty. These alternative Christian truths become subjugated under the discursive weight of dominant Christian truths that currently present foodbank and social justice approaches to food poverty as theologically unproblematic, necessary, and desirable.

Yet if we have learned anything from liberation and contextual theologies, it is that there is no such thing as a neutral social space in which God's message can be discerned to matter-of-factly suggest that foodbanks constitute a "calling" or that social justice is a desirable response to food poverty.²⁹ Far from allowing us to treat such truth claims as unproblematic, liberation and contextual theologians advise that the Christian message can only be understood with reference to its socio-economic genesis since, as Astley suggests, it always bears "the marks of its origination"³⁰ in social and economic space: "All religious realities are learned and experienced by me, from and within my human context. They are never known by my 'jumping out of my skin' to embrace God [...]. All embracing is done from within this skin."³¹ This brings us to the core problematic. Since the Christian churches and their leaderships have historically occupied privileged social and economic spaces,³² their message has historically borne the imprint of its privileged origins as, indeed, Scandrett argues we should expect:

Where the social context of the theologian is that of a privileged class there must be a suspicion that their theological work would tend to reinforce that privilege.³³

That foodbank constitutes the predominant Christian response to food poverty in Britain should not therefore come as a surprise. It is entirely consistent with the historically dominant Christian social tradition in Britain that has oriented largely middle-class church organizations and their leaderships towards charitable giving activities rather than radical social change.³⁴ Foodbank theology is merely the product of a church whose privileged being has shaped its theological episteme³⁵ such that it understands charitable giving, rather radical social change, to lie at the heart of God's message. The social justice approach to food poverty is no different.³⁶ It merely reproduces the existing system of food privileges which are

²⁹ See Astley J. *Ordinary theology: looking, listening and learning in theology* (Aldershot: Ashgate; 2002); see also Gutierrez G. *A theology of liberation* (New York: Orbis Books; 1973).

³⁰ See Astley, *Ordinary theology*, p. 13.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

³² Gutierrez, *A theology of liberation*, p. 65; Sheppard D. *Bias to the poor* (London: Hodder and Stoughton; 1983), p. 42-43; Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Urban Priority Areas, *Faith in the city: a call for action by church and nation* (London: Church House Publishing; 1985), p. 74-75; Furbey R, Else P, Farnell R, Lawless P, Lund S, Wishart B. *Breaking with tradition? The Church of England and community organising*. *Community Development Journal*. 1997;32:144.

³³ Scandrett E. *Environmentalism of the poor and the political ecology of prophecy: a contribution to liberation ecotheology* (Sheffield: Urban Theology Unit; 2009), p. 25.

³⁴ Furbey *et al.*, *Breaking with tradition*, p. 144; Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Urban Priority Areas, *Faith in the city*, p. 174; see also Gutierrez, *A theology of liberation*.

³⁵ See Furbey *et al.*, *Breaking with tradition*; also Scandrett, *Environmentalism of the poor and political ecology of prophecy*; and Gutierrez, *A theology of liberation*.

³⁶ Referring to theological notions of justice Scandrett suggests that such "theology [that] emanates from the assumption of universalism which is the hallmark of the defenders of privilege."

allocated according to the unequal distribution of income both within the UK and between the UK and other countries. It has nothing to say about food inequalities.

As contextual and liberation theologians recognize, there is only one way around these problems and that is to produce theologies that arise from a situation of poverty reflected on in the light of the Christian story.³⁷ This requires us to produce “subterranean theologies” that assign “epistemological privilege to the poor”³⁸ and that are therefore “closer to the immediate experience and consciousness of ordinary people.”³⁹ In contrast to the intellectual theologies of the privileged that appear to “rise above their own context,” subterranean theologies openly bear the hallmarks of their marginalized and impoverished origins⁴⁰ by openly declaring their “preferential option for the poor”⁴¹; reflecting the fact that Jesus “carried out the work of redemption in poverty and under oppression.”⁴² When we produce such theologies, we are compelled to reconsider the Christian approach to food poverty and to embrace more radical alternatives as I will now argue in detail below.

A subterranean theology of food poverty

From foodbanks to fellowship

There are two key problems with foodbank theology. First, it is a theology of the giver, which means that it is the theology of those that are in privileged positions such that they are able to give. This is apparent in the way the church and its institutions represent the work of foodbanks. A key focus of attention has been the celebration of Christian givers and giving, while foodbank users tend to appear in the picture as grateful recipients of Christian giving.⁴³ Yet when we focus on the experiences of food charity recipients, foodbanks look very different. Contra the “real life stories” produced by the Trussell Trust, a wealth of social science research into the experiences of foodbank users shows that they are not straightforwardly experienced as compassionate sources of “help” but, rather, as humiliating⁴⁴ and demeaning⁴⁵ with “the vast majority [of foodbank users] [...] feeling shame, embarrassment, degradation and humiliation.”⁴⁶ These feelings are amplified by their need to accept food that is sometimes visibly substandard⁴⁷ and only “one step removed from the dustbin.”⁴⁸ Encounters with users’ experiences of

³⁷ See Astley, *Ordinary theology*; also Gutierrez, *A theology of liberation*.

³⁸ West G. *The academy of the poor: towards a dialogical reading of the Bible* (Sheffield: Continuum; 1999), p. 14.

³⁹ Astley, *Ordinary theology*, p. 71.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 13–14.

⁴¹ See Sheppard, *Bias to the poor*, Chapter 9.

⁴² Gutierrez, *A theology of liberation*, p. 300.

⁴³ see <http://www.trusselltrust.org/real-stories>.

⁴⁴ See Hamelin A-M, Beaudry M, Habicht J-P. Characterization of household food insecurity in Quebec: food and feelings. *Social Science and Medicine*. 2002;54:127.

⁴⁵ See Riches, *Food banks and food security*, p. 657.

⁴⁶ Tarasuk V, Beaton GH. Household food insecurity and hunger among families using foodbanks. *Canadian Journal of Public Health*. 1999;90:112.

⁴⁷ See Teron AC, Tarasuk VS. Charitable food assistance: what are food bank users receiving? *Canadian Journal of Public Health*. 1999;90:383.

⁴⁸ Lambie, *The Trussell Trust foodbank network*, p. v.

foodbanks also provide uncomfortable insights into the inequalities that exist between charitable givers (“the generous”) and receivers (“the grateful”) such that

[...] in keeping with the spirit of charitable giving, [foodbank users are often expected to] accept any gesture of food assistance with gratitude [...]. Some workers cited clients’ gratitude as indication of their need for food.⁴⁹

For these reasons, Riches has argued that “it is difficult to make the case that foodbanks are an appropriate response to food poverty.”⁵⁰ This brings us to our second problem with foodbank theology. Although Matthew 25:35 has been widely cited in foodbank theology, attention has been on the “giving” elements of the text present in the first sentence of the verse: “I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me a drink.” Barely any attention has been given to the second sentence of the verse in which Jesus says “I was a stranger and you received me in your homes.” Yet this is precisely the sentence that voluntarily impoverished and radical Christian movements, such as Catholic Workers, have emphasized in their “poor readings” of Matthew 25.⁵¹ Taken in the context of a poverty reading, then, Matthew 25:35 can equally be taken to mean that Jesus emphasized hospitality which, in contrast to the momentary act of giving

[...] calls us to enter into relationships with those who are different. Hospitality is a central biblical theme, particularly evident in the teachings of Jesus and his answer to the question “who is my neighbour?” The Christian tradition defines our neighbour as the stranger, someone who lacks the resources to sustain a “place” in society. Hospitality certainly means “entertaining strangers”, but it can require a changing of one’s own life and understanding in the process.⁵²

So there is a world of difference between giving and hospitality. The former legitimizes the ethics of possession and requires Christians to occasionally give to people in food poverty, whereas the latter is predicated on “being with”⁵³ and giving oneself to “others” in-relationship. The implications of this are profound because, as Tarasuk and Eakin’s research indicates,⁵⁴ momentary acts of charitable giving reproduce social inequalities by reasserting the privilege of the privileged, who too often come to expect their generosity to be acknowledged by the recipients’ gratitude. A poor reading of hospitality, on the other hand, requires radicalized forms of sharing that manifest in two ways. First, since hospitality exposes our lives to the gaze of impoverished others, it leads to a questioning of privilege that can only remain theologically justifiable if (as in foodbank) it is closed to the scrutiny of impoverished others. It follows that hospitality requires us to relinquish our claims to possessions that our privilege allowed us to buy and to

⁴⁹ Tarasuk V, Eakin JM. Charitable food assistance as symbolic gesture, p. 1512.

⁵⁰ Riches, Food banks and food security, p. 656.

⁵¹ Zwick M, Zwick L. The Catholic Worker Movement: intellectual and spiritual origins (New York: Paulist Press; 2005), Chapter 2.

⁵² Commission on Urban Life and Faith. Faithful cities: a call for celebration, vision and justice (London: Church House Publishing; 2005), p. 22–23.

⁵³ See Wells S, Owen MA. Living without enemies: being present in the midst of violence (Westmon, IL: Intervarsity Press; 2011), p. 30–32.

⁵⁴ Tarasuk and Eakin, Charitable food assistance as symbolic gesture.

share them with the person who has a genuine need for them.⁵⁵ This was a point that Catholic Worker Movement founder, Dorothy Day, and her colleague, Father John Hugo insisted upon:

Echoing the Gospel, Hugo stressed renunciation — “the best thing to do with the best of things is to give them up”, a phrase Dorothy often repeated. Don’t use what you don’t need, he said — and have as little as possible. The coat hanging in your closet on a winter day belongs to someone who is freezing without it [...]. Do it for the love of others, especially for the poor.⁵⁶

In other words, Jesus’ call to hospitality in Matthew 25:35 requires us to open our doors to others and freely share what is inside.⁵⁷ We are to give up our food, and to share and eat it in fellowship with others. Second, hospitality does not simply involve sharing food with others but, also, sharing lives with others. Far from issuing a straightforward injunction for Christians to “feed the hungry,” then, Wirzba points out that Jesus emphasized fellowship with those subject to “social systems of rejection and exclusion”

The gospels frequently show Jesus eating with people because table fellowship is among the most powerful ways we know to extend and share in each other’s lives. Jesus eats with strangers and outcasts, demonstrating that table fellowship is for the nurture of others and not simply for self-enhancement. Jesus rejects the social systems of rejection and exclusion by welcoming everyone into communion with him. Table fellowship makes possible genuine encounters with others [...]. By freely eating with everyone he breaks and challenges all the social taboos that keep people apart.⁵⁸

In table fellowship, Monoya⁵⁹ argues that we see Jesus recalling the manna tradition in the Hebrew Scripture. Following the manna tradition, we see him reshaping human beings into a community rooted in the divine gift of food rather than someone treating food as a human possession devoid of God:

Rather than encouraging the accumulation or possession of God’s gifts for private or individualistic purposes, the story of manna is a call to share with one another and thus nurture the life of the community, particularly those who are in greatest need [...]. God commands solidarity and sharing of food.⁶⁰

As such, we can now see that a poor reading of Matthew 25 as hospitality actually points away from food charity and towards a communism “founded on radical love that is to be shared among one another, and in loving one another, serving one another, we more fully participate in the powerful divine language of love.”⁶¹ It implies nothing less than the construction of a new polis rooted in participation, reciprocity, and co-abiding.⁶²

⁵⁵ See Forest J. *All is grace: a biography of Dorothy Day* (New York: Orbis Books; 2012), p. 177; see also Matthew 19: p. 21.

⁵⁶ Forest, *All is grace*, p. 177.

⁵⁷ See Zwick and Zwick, *The Catholic Worker Movement*, Chapter 2 and 6; also Acts 2: p. 44–46.

⁵⁸ See Wirzba N. *Food and faith: a theology of eating* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 2011), p. 147–48.

⁵⁹ See Mendez-Montoya, *The theology of food*, p. 122–42.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

⁶² See Cavanagh WT, *The world in a wafer: a geography of the Eucharist as resistance to globalization*. *Modern Theology*. 1999;15:181–96; see also Mendez-Montoya, *The theology of food*.

From consumption to creation

So far we have addressed the question of food distribution (giving or sharing?) but not the question of food sourcing (how do we get it?). As we saw above, the Christian answer to this question currently highlights the social injustice of lack of adequate income,⁶³ since this creates an “inability to acquire or consume an adequate or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways,”⁶⁴ that is, by acquiring food “through the socially acceptable means of market incomes or state support.”⁶⁵ In a nutshell, Christian leaders and organizations have called for minimum incomes in the form of minimum wages, living wages, and a just social welfare system.⁶⁶

However, there is a problem which, unsurprisingly, relates to the privileged origins of social justice discourse. Rather than speaking in the privileged voice of Christian charity givers, we now see a church speaking in the hegemonic language of capitalism and its privileged economic elite, i.e. the language of the “agribusiness” complex that reduces people to consumers of its food products. This would not surprise the likes of Milbank⁶⁷ who argues that the message of the Christian Church has long been shaped by the political discourse of capitalism and its privileged elite, which means that, strictly speaking, it cannot be considered theological. Milbank is clear about why this is the case: by acquiescing to capitalism and treating it as an autonomous secular realm legitimately governed by the state, the Christian Church has surrendered its claim to produce its own meta-discourse about social and economic problems in capitalist societies. As such, it has become subservient to the political discourse of capitalism which it now relies upon to supply it with understandings of social problems such as food poverty. It follows that its message enters the social world via the secular language, concepts, and values of capitalism and, as such, has transmuted into a set of prescriptions indistinguishable from the political discourse of capitalism that it tags along with. The church stands accused of putting a religious gloss on capitalism and thereby losing its unique purpose in the world.⁶⁸

This has not been without consequence. First, the appeal to normative modes of food acquisition (“socially acceptable means of acquiring food”) emerges from a capitalist ethic of consumerism that is self-serving rather than servant. Food consumerism consists of “a way of being not attuned to life with and for others but a life of self-enclosure and magnification.”⁶⁹ It posits a sovereign individual with the “human right” to possess food (while also enabling its use as an indicator of social status⁷⁰) and is therefore contrary to the Christian ethic of fellowship.

⁶³ Baptist Union of Great Britain, Methodist Church, Church of Scotland, and United Reformed Church, *The lies we tell ourselves*, p. 6–7; Cooper and Dumbleton, *Walking the breadline*, p. 3, 15; Cooper *et al.*, *Below the breadline*, p. 5, 10–11, 13–18.

⁶⁴ Radimer *et al.*, cited in Riches, *Food banks and food security*, p. 649.

⁶⁵ Wynd, *Hard to swallow*, p. 5.

⁶⁶ Lambie, *The Trussell Trust foodbank network*, p. 34; Cooper and Dumbleton, *Walking the breadline*, p. 3, 15; Cooper, *et al.*, *Below the breadline*, p. 5.

⁶⁷ See Milbank J. *Theology and social theory: beyond secular reason* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing; 2006).

⁶⁸ See Milbank, *Theology and social theory*; also Beed C, Beed C. *Theology as a challenge to social science*. *Australian eJournal of Theology*. 2010;16(1); and Barnes M. Introduction. In: Barnes M. editor. *Theology and the social sciences* (New York: Orbis Books; 2001).

⁶⁹ Wirzba, *Food and faith*, p. 114.

⁷⁰ Hamelin *et al.*, *Characterization of household food insecurity in Quebec*, p. 129.

Second, although Christian organizations have located the ethic of food consumerism within human rights discourse, thereby enhancing its appeal to Christians, it is problematic precisely because it is located within human rights discourse; it is anthropocentric. This is because it elevates the consumer rights of human beings above all else in Creation. Moreover, this anthropocentrism manifests geographically. This is because an emphasis on human rights to “market incomes or state support” that enable people “to shop for food like everyone else” refers to welfare statist and food consuming countries such as Britain. It renders the earth and its inhabitants in the food producing regions of the Global South politically and analytically invisible. This means that it has nothing⁷¹ to say about the “death machines”⁷² of agribusiness, which are destroying the earth and its inhabitants in food producing regions in order to serve food consumers in countries such as Britain. The consequences of this silence have previously been laid bare by Boff, with reference to the Amazon:

[F]arming projects sought to create a herd of two million head of cattle for export [...]. To speed up clearing [of the forest] many ranchers used defoliant Tordon 155-Br (Agent Orange) or Tordon 101-Br, which is even more destructive, sprayed from a plane, thereby polluting soils and river, and killing many people, especially Nambiquara Indians, who were almost wiped out [...]. Thirteen thousand Indians from thirty four different tribes in the region saw their lands invaded by cattle growers and lumbermen and many Indians were killed.⁷³

So what is to be done? Far from relying on political discourse to supply its understandings, Milbank⁷⁴ has suggested that theology return to its own *verstehen* in order to write its narrative and, therefore, establish its own unique purpose in relation to social and economic issues such as food poverty. This would entail an epistemic break with capitalist political economy in order to provide the conditions in which the radical social vision of the Gospel could be recaptured. Montoya⁷⁵ and Wirzba⁷⁶ are helpful here because they achieve this epistemic break with political economy. Their theological starting point is God’s universal gift of creation and our relation to it as consumers. They argue that consumer ethics require our separation from God and creation (as exemplified in the narrative of the fall, which produced a secular space for our “being’ outside God). This is because a world set apart from God becomes an object whose significance primarily relates to “being me,” i.e. made up of things “for me” to consume. The consumer ethic is thereby aligned with egocentricity yet, as Montoya argues:

⁷¹ The Church and organizations such as Christian Aid *do* promote “fair trade.” However, this is an ethical form of consumption that privatizes decisions about food sourcing. Moreover sociological research by Cherrier and by Littler has found that it leads to self-congratulatory egoism in the form of “consumer heroism.”

⁷² This term is used by Boff, *Cry of the Earth, cry of the poor*, p. 1.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

⁷⁴ See Milbank, *Theology and social theory*.

⁷⁵ See Montoya, *The theology of food*.

⁷⁶ See Wirzba, *Food and faith*.

To understand Being from [a theological perspective] [...] is to intimate Being as inherently the reception of a gift that nourishes, while simultaneously being an expression of gratitude.⁷⁷

For Montoya, the living unity that Jesus restored between human beings and the gift of creation — exemplified in his sharing of food — means that there is no autonomous space outside of God in which Christians can operate, i.e. as food consumers. There is only what Montoya refers to as a “communism of being,”⁷⁸ which stresses our existence as relational and dependent upon God; God gives life to us through his gift of Creation which is an invitation to gratitude rather than ego. Realization of this leads us into radical theological territory that necessitates a fundamental break with food consumerism because it has circumscribed our involvement in the relations of food production such that we now have barely any direct involvement with the divine source of our lives. Since what we eat is now “packaged” and “consumed,” it registers as a sign of our power as consumers, with money in our pocket, rather than something that humbly acquaints us with membership of creation⁷⁹ on which our lives depend.⁸⁰ In a nutshell, then, the embrace of food consumerism, in the name of social justice, is theologically questionable because it reproduces the system of food privileges, inequalities, and egoism that Christians should challenge.

An alternative Christian approach to food poverty

Two principles must now be central to an alternative theology of food poverty: membership (digging, planting, growing, nurturing, respecting) and fellowship (hospitality, neighbourliness, communism, being with). Suffice it to say that these are not new principles. They have a long historical presence in Christian responses to the food question. In relation to membership, for instance, we can recall the example of the third-century anchorites, the seventeenth-century Diggers and the twentieth-century Catholic Worker Movement. Anchorite relationships with food were ordered by the natural food giving rhythms of the earth such that they received what it provided with gratitude and humility, and in community and without greed.⁸¹ They listened to the voice of the earth, as it spoke to them through the seasons, rather than the political voice of the “chattering classes of Constantinople” that were interested in food in an entirely different, egocentric, way. The Diggers⁸² emerged in seventeenth-century Britain claiming that God’s creation was a “common treasury” and not purely for the benefit of the privileged few that claimed dominion over it. They argued that enclosures of common land

⁷⁷ Mendez-Montoya, *The theology of food*, p. 110

⁷⁸ See *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁷⁹ Wirzba, *Food and faith*, p. 138.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁸¹ See Grumett D, Muers R. *Theology on the menu: asceticism and the Christian diet* (London: Routledge; 2010), Chapter 1.

⁸² See Bradstock A. *Radical religion in Cromwell’s England: a concise history from the English Civil War to the end of the Commonwealth* (London: Tauris; 2011); also Hill C. *The world turned upside down: radical ideas during the English Revolution* (London: Penguin; 1991).

dishonoured the creator and were sinful so they occupied it with a view to establishing a new culture of living-in-common. The Catholic Worker Movement,⁸³ on the other hand, emerged in the 1930s' USA to establish "agronomic universities" where people could learn to live in membership with each other and Creation. The collective cultivation practices of "agronomic universities" ensured that what was eaten was received as the grace of God rather than given from the possession of one to another.

In relation to fellowship, we find examples in early Christian communities that gave up their belongings to share and eat together,⁸⁴ but also in St Francis of Assisi and, again, the Catholic Worker Movement. For St Francis, the only viable way to establish true fellowship was by reducing oneself to a life of "voluntary poverty" since this was the only way to live in true communism with the earth and its beings⁸⁵ and the poor.⁸⁶

Essential poverty is a way of being by which man and woman let things be; they cease dominating them, bringing them into subordination, and making them the object of human will. We give up being over them and rather place ourselves at their feet. Such an attitude requires a deep asceticism and a renunciation of the instinct to possess and satisfy desire [...]. Universal kinship results from this practice of essential poverty. We feel truly brother and sister because we can experience things with no concern for possession, profits or efficiency. Poverty becomes a synonym for essential humility [...]. From this position we can be reconciled with all things.⁸⁷

Catholic Workers provide the best contemporary example of this Franciscan approach to fellowship.⁸⁸ They refuse the privileges of consumerism by "giving up" on possession and embracing voluntary poverty because "the condescending tone of the term 'charity' can be avoided only if we sink to poverty ourselves."⁸⁹ In another contrast with Christian food charity, Catholic Workers also make no attempt to discriminate between the poor on the basis of "need" or "desert."⁹⁰ Conversely, the universal principle of hospitality is emphasized. Catholic Workers believe that food is a universal gift of God's grace that cannot, by definition, be brought under ownership or control or rationed according to desert. As such it is openly shared with anyone that comes through their door:

[G]atekeepers [...] have tremendous power and structural advantage over the poor [...]. When we deny to others what is rightfully theirs we sin. We have learned that we, at the [Catholic Worker] farm, have not offered the [people] here anything that we have not already robbed them of.⁹¹

⁸³ See Segers M. Equality and Christian anarchism: the political and social ideas of the Catholic Worker Movement. *The Review of Politics*. 1978;40(2); also Zwick and Zwick, *The Catholic Worker Movement*; and Forest, *All is grace*.

⁸⁴ Acts 2: p. 42-47.

⁸⁵ Boff, *Cry of the Earth, cry of the poor*, p. 210-11.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, Chapter 11; Zwick and Zwick, *The Catholic Worker Movement*, Chapter 7.

⁸⁷ Boff, *Cry of the Earth, cry of the poor*, p. 215-16.

⁸⁸ Zwick and Zwick, *The Catholic Worker Movement*, Chapter 7.

⁸⁹ Douglas, cited in *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁹⁰ See Zwick and Zwick, *The Catholic Worker Movement*, p. 51.

⁹¹ Albrecht S. Wherever you enter. In: *Catholic Worker Farm Newsletter* (London: Catholic Worker Farm; Advent 2013), p. 11.

The implications of these examples of membership and fellowship are clear enough. They require the church to renounce food charity and food capitalism and, instead, involve itself in the creation of new food spaces (outside of capitalism) that enhance membership and fellowship. This raises the question of what this might mean in practice. I would argue that it suggests a new kind of Christian presence in food politics in the form of (1) a public church that speaks the gospel of Jesus rather than capitalism; (2) an agronomic church that is also a land activist; and (3) a church that is a site of hospitality rather than charity. I will further elaborate on what the first two approaches should involve below rather than the third (hospitality) which has already been discussed above in relation to the Catholic Worker Movement.

First, a public church would recover its theological voice and thereby critique capitalist food systems. It would emphasize its own theological principles of membership and fellowship in debates on food poverty. It might even follow the example of Revd W. B. Whitehead who founded Labourer's Friend Society in 1846⁹² to campaign for new food spaces outside of capitalism, such as community allotments, which he argued were axiomatic satisfying the obligations of Christianity:

They who possessed the better things of this life might go on revelling in their luxuries — they might continue in the enjoyment of their worldly possessions, careless of the starving population around them, but such a state of apathy was little in accordance with the sentiments of a man who loved [...] his fellow creatures — totally inconsistent with the obligations of Christianity.⁹³

Such an approach would contrast with a public church that is currently limiting itself to campaigning for social justice in the form of minimum incomes.

Second, an agronomic church would understand that it needed to use its hands in the garden as well as its mouth in public. It would use its own vast and underused land wealth⁹⁴ to create community allotments and encourage collective practices of cultivation in each of its parishes. It would also procure expertise, tools, materials, and seeds for urban agriculturalists that might otherwise lack the requisite knowledge and finance to successfully cultivate community allotments.⁹⁵ The sociological research literature on allotment culture suggests that such an approach would find consistency with the theological principles of fellowship and membership. Sociologists have illuminated allotments as “third spaces”⁹⁶ and a “different kind of place in which different values prevail”⁹⁷ that are “an alternative to the prevailing culture of competition.”⁹⁸ For instance, Bonny's ethnography of allotments⁹⁹ unearthed a generous “culture of reciprocity”

⁹² See Burchardt J. *The Allotment Movement in England, 1793–1873* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press; 2002).

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

⁹⁴ Boyle C. How much land does the Church of England own? *The Guardian*. April 28, 2006.

⁹⁵ See Premat A. State power, private plots and the greening of Havana's Urban Agriculture Movement. In: *City and society* (New York: American Anthropological Association; 2009), p. 34, 42.

⁹⁶ See Bonny E. *The landscape and culture of allotments: a study in Hornchurch, Essex* (University of Nottingham: School of Geography; 2010), p. 9.

⁹⁷ Crouch D, Ward C. *The allotment: its landscape and culture* (Nottingham: Mushroom Bookshop; 1997), p. 271.

⁹⁸ See Crouch D. *The allotment, landscape and locality: ways of seeing landscape and culture*. 1989; *Area* 21:263.

⁹⁹ See Bonny, *The landscape and culture of allotments*.

involving the exchange of seeds, seedlings, and produce.¹⁰⁰ Some of her respondents also referred to allotments as sacred spaces that made them feel closer to God because they had liberated them from their food consumerism.¹⁰¹

[...] cultivating an allotment further constituted a political act of defiance against mainstream culture, offering an alternative space to practice alternative values. For many plot holders, growing their own produce offered a form of resistance to an increasingly artificial society, a society “so dictated by what the supermarkets say” that “you end up losing your essence as a human being.”¹⁰²

As well as using its own land wealth, a land activist church would note that food poverty in cities such as Liverpool sits within walking distance of “land banks” that were acquired by forcibly evicting poor families from their homes and that are now awaiting prestige development “when economic conditions are right.”¹⁰³ It would take the view that that such a situation dishonours God’s “common treasury” and violates our memberships-in-creation. Like the Diggers and contemporary peasant movements in Latin America, it would morally reclaim and physically occupy such land in order to create new collective food growing spaces,¹⁰⁴ even though this would involve violating private property rights.¹⁰⁵

Suffice it to say that a church that has nothing critical to say about the political economy of food might regard such local and small scale approaches to food poverty to be inadequate because they lack the capacity to produce enough food¹⁰⁶ compared to agri-business which considers itself uniquely placed to accomplish such a task.¹⁰⁷ Such a view would be inaccurate. Research evidence shows that the expansion of agribusiness has resulted in a loss of local food growing capacity and lower crop yields,¹⁰⁸ leading to record food price increases¹⁰⁹ and increasing world hunger¹¹⁰ with over 90 per cent of the world’s hungry being simply too poor to buy enough food while now having no capacity to grow their own.¹¹¹ On the other hand, local, small-scale, and democratic approaches to food growing and distribution have frequently resulted in crop yield increases of up to 400 per cent without causing environmental damage¹¹² and have succeeded in taking countries

¹⁰⁰ Bonny, *The landscape and culture of allotments*, p. 18–19; also Crouch, *The allotment, landscape and locality*, p. 263, who refers to a “culture of mutuality” on allotments which, crucially, also involves “sharing time together.”

¹⁰¹ Crouch, *The allotment, landscape and locality*, p. 21.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 30; see also Thom M. *Cultivating connections: the Urban Agriculture Movement* (Montreal: The Rooftop Garden project; 2007), p. 5–6, who similarly argues that “urban agriculture is an act of resistance against the economic and industrial systems that divide us from the consequences of our actions.”

¹⁰³ See Allen C. *Housing market renewal and social class* (London: Routledge; 2008).

¹⁰⁴ See Bradstock, *Radical religion in Cromwell’s England*, Chapter 3; also Reynolds R. *On guerrilla gardening* (London: Bloomsbury; 2009), p. 65–69.

¹⁰⁵ Holt-Gimenez E. *From food crisis to food sovereignty: the challenge of social movements*. *The Monthly Review* 2009;61(3):142–56 (p. 152–53).

¹⁰⁶ See Ward C. *Radical religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2004), p. 91, who suggests that this has been a longstanding criticism of such approaches to food production and distribution.

¹⁰⁷ See Holt-Gimenez, *From food crisis to food sovereignty*, p. 142.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 143–44.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 149.

such as Cuba and Venezuela from food crisis towards food sovereignty and self-sufficiency.¹¹³ Small-scale and local approaches to food production have been so successful, in fact, that urban agriculture is estimated to supply roughly 15 per cent of world food with an estimated 800 million people involved in urban cultivation and growing.¹¹⁴

Conclusion

In making the argument in this paper, I am not suggesting that the Christian Church enters unknown territory. Conversely, the alternative approaches to food poverty I have highlighted are tried, tested, and successful and merely involve a historical return to radical Christian traditions. It is astonishing that these radical traditions have not been mentioned by any senior church figure in the current debate about foodbanks and food poverty. On the contrary, they have been subjugated and silenced by the discursive noise made by foodbank and social justice theologies within the church. Fortunately, it has not subjugated discussion of these traditions outside church.

Where the church has been silent on its own radical food traditions activist groups, such as “guerrilla gardeners,” have loudly drawn influence from them.¹¹⁵ Guerrilla gardeners have even had enough influence in British towns such as Todmorden that “most residents are [now] getting involved in growing food in public space and sharing the produce and the town plans to be self-sufficient within ten years.”¹¹⁶ It seems that there is a salutary lesson to be learned here. It is not only theologically undesirable to rely on charity or to appeal to the state for a questionable form of social justice. As the Todmorden example demonstrates, and Barrett¹¹⁷ argues below, the church might be better advised to follow the example of Guerrilla gardeners and get on with changing the system by ignoring it and living its own different reality

“The way of Resurrection life [...] [is] a way of living that is able to short-circuit the present social, spiritual, or political order” — that is able to “change the system by ignoring it” [...]. Mother Teresa [is] an embodiment of this different way: “who no more protested against the caste system in Calcutta than she affirmed it. She simply lived a different reality.”

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¹¹³ See Holt-Gimenez, *From food crisis to food sovereignty*; also Premat, *State power, private plots and the greening of Havana's Urban Agriculture Movement*; and S. Koont, *Sustainable urban agriculture in Cuba* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida; 2011).

¹¹⁴ See Thom, *Cultivating connections*, p. 4.

¹¹⁵ Reynolds, *On guerrilla gardening*, p. 20.

¹¹⁶ See *Ibid.*, p. 65–69.

¹¹⁷ Barrett A. *Re-imagining and insurrection: starting from the local*. April 20, 2013. In: *This estate we're in* (Blog) [Internet]. Available from: <http://thisestate.blogspot.co.uk/2013/04/re-imagining-insurrection-starting-from.html>.

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Notes on contributor

Chris Allen was previously a Professor of Sociology in the UK and an academic sociologist for 20 years. He published several books and over 40 papers in peer-reviewed sociology journals during this part of his career. He gave up his Sociology chair in 2011 in order to re-start his career on a new track with theology (and Christian belief) at its heart. This is his first paper in a theology journal and has been written out of a concern at the lack of political theological contributions to the debate about foodbanks in Britain. He is currently working on papers about the relationship between the social sciences and theology, the marginalization of anarchist perspectives within theology, and a book offering a theological analysis of what Frederick Engels referred to as “The Housing Question.”

Correspondence to: Chris Allen, School of Humanities and Social Science, Liverpool John Moores University, John Foster Building 80–98, Mount Pleasant, Liverpool L3 5UZ, UK. Email: c.allen@ljmu.ac.uk