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The 'Undeserving Poor' Today: The Rhetoric and Theological Development of a Problematic Category

Hannah Swithinbank

Introduction

What is poverty? Why do people find themselves living in poverty? What does it mean to be living in poverty and to be deserving or undeserving of support from your neighbours and fellow citizens – or to be thought to be so? Do we think of and talk about people as being the 'undeserving poor' today, and what does this kind of labelling do to our understanding of poverty and of people living in poverty – and what does it do to our society? These are all big questions, probably too big for one essay.

In this essay, I shall explore the way that we currently talk about poverty and the people who live in it, looking at one recent political debate to provide focus. I shall suggest that we do indeed have a concept of deserving and undeserving poor, one in which the ability to work is fundamental within an understanding of society that sees it as unfair for those who contribute to have to support those who do not. I shall then explore some of the consequences of this rhetoric in a world where poverty is complex and briefly suggest that the story of the Bible presents the church with an alternative perspective to which it could give a constructive public voice in our contemporary conversations about helping people out of poverty.

Definitions

To begin, it is worth briefly offering some definitions. First, *poverty*. We must begin by saying that it is probably impossible to define poverty simply, for the moment that any simple definition comes into contact with the experiences of those living in poverty, its inadequacy becomes clear and we start to feel the need to adjust it to encompass what we see and what people tell us about their lives. We may perhaps best describe poverty as *lack*. But lack of *what*? Here is a non-comprehensive list: money, food and water, housing, education, health, freedom, independence, dignity, community, power,

hope.¹ A lack of any of the above – either absolute or relative to those among whom you live – may contribute to impoverishment. Tearfund, for whom I work, describe poverty in the following terms:

Poverty is holistic: it is not just economic or physical but is also social, environmental and spiritual. It is complex and multi-faceted. The root cause of poverty is broken relationships which entered the world as a result of humanity's rebellion against God. At this time, we moved from a life of wholeness, living in perfect relationship with God, creation, ourselves and each other, into a life of broken relationships, broken off from God, family and community, broken off from others further removed from us (different communities, cultures or countries) – and even from ourselves, as a result of false images of identity and self-worth.²

In this, too, poverty is a *lack*, with the spiritual aspect of this lack clearly and specifically identified as the fundamental loss of relationship with a loving Creator God.

What might it mean to deserve to be poor?

To start with the above theological understanding of poverty, it might mean thinking that we all *deserve* some kind of poverty. If all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, then perhaps we all deserve to live with the lack of that relationship and with the poverty that follows, in any or all of its aspects as they afflict us. Biblically, I suggest this is not quite the whole picture: the narrative in the Bible presents poverty as the consequence of the broken relations arising from human sin and the fall, and that this affects the whole of creation, separating us from God and damaging the way that we live together. We see this begin in Gen. 3.16-19, where God's pronouncement over Adam and Eve as he sends them out of the garden describes a brokenness in their relationships with God, each other and with the earth that will make it impossible to flourish as God intended. The world becomes a place where brother kills brother (Genesis 4) and where, as God says, 'The poor will be with you always' (Deut. 15.11).

Yet the narrative arc of the Bible presents God as a God on a mission to redeem his creation, reaching out to humanity and the wider creation which he loves in order to overcome the fall. We see this in the calling of Abraham (Genesis 12) and the establishment of the Israelites as God's people, and in the promise, the coming and the life, death and resurrection of Christ, which makes restoration to God possible.³ That

¹ Helpful reflections on the nature of poverty include Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor . . . and Yourself* (Chicago: Moody, 2014), 51–68; Bryant Myers, 'Progressive Pentecostalism, Development, and Christian Development NGOs: a Challenge and an Opportunity', *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 39.3 (2015) 115–20.

² Tearfund, 'Overcoming Poverty Together' (internal document, 2012).

³ See, e.g., Isa. 53, where verse 5 describes the Messiah as the restorer of *shalom*; Jn 1.1-14 and 14.6, which describe Jesus as coming to show humanity the way to the Father; and Eph. 2.1-10, in which Paul describes our salvation in Christ. For fuller discussion, see Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006), 53–5, 62–6; N. T. Wright, *The New Testament*

God desires his people to flourish, free from oppression and injustice, can be seen in the exodus from Egypt and the final (long-delayed) establishment of the nation of Israel. What this should look like can be seen in the laws of Israel, particularly the Jubilee laws and the voices of the prophets, which call Israel to live in ways in which their love for the Lord their God goes hand in hand with their love for their neighbours.⁴ In the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus declares himself as the one who will bring this Jubilee and open the way to the Father through his death and resurrection.⁵ He comes 'to reconcile to himself all things whether things on earth or things in heaven,'⁶ an act that will cumulate in the new heaven and new earth (Revelation 21).

Poverty may be a consequence of sin, but regardless of whether we really deserve to be poor or to be redeemed and lifted out of this situation or not, the Bible tells us that this is what God is doing.

In the day-to-day, however, defining poverty as *lack* means that to deserve poverty is to lack through some fault of one's own. This fault or failing, whatever it is, is then taken to mean that a person is undeserving of support because it would be a misuse of resources that would very likely go to waste. This assumes that people, fundamentally, do not change and have forfeited trust through their failure. The removal of support might be from government and taxpayers, from civil society bodies such as charities or churches, and even from immediate neighbours, friends and family.

However, *what* constitutes this kind of fault? What is considered a great enough personal failure to make a person undeserving? In their work *The Myth of the Undeserving Poor*, Martin Charlesworth and Natalie Williams discuss the evolution of the categorization of the poor in Victorian England through the administration of the Poor Laws: children, the aged and infirm, and the genuinely unemployed were to be given opportunities and relief, while the work-shy were to be given harsh corrective treatment in order to encourage them to change their wilful idleness.⁷ Ideas have staying power – and the authors argue that this idea of an undeserving poor has never fully gone away. But what does this category look like now?

The rhetoric

In order to try and focus my discussion in what is a very large body of discourse about people living in poverty, both nationally and internationally, I have chosen to look

and the People of God (London: SPCK, 2013), 139–43; Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture* (London: SPCK, 2014); and Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), who uses the metaphor of a drama in a number of acts to illuminate this.

⁴ Leviticus 25 lays out the jubilee land laws. The fact that the jubilee is declared on the Day of Atonement connects Israel's restored relationship with God to the essential importance of restoring relationships with each other and with the land in which they live by allowing it to rest. See also Isa. 56.1 and 58 on the importance of pursuing justice; and Jeremiah 34, which explicitly references how, in a Jubilee year, the Hebrew aristocracy freed their slaves but then promptly re-enslaved them. The prophet directly connects the fall of Jerusalem and the exile in Babylon to Israel's failure to uphold the Jubilee and seek justice as the Lord had commanded.

⁵ Lk. 4.14–22; Jn 3.13–18; 5.24–27; 6.44–59.

⁶ Col. 1.20.

⁷ Martin Charlesworth and Natalie Williams, *The Myth of the Undeserving Poor: A Christian Response to Poverty in Britain Today* (London: Grosvenor House, 2014). section 2.1.

primarily at the discourse that surrounds the ongoing passage of the Welfare Reform and Work Bill through the UK Parliament in 2015. Of course, the joy of doing this is that the debate is ongoing and the proposals in question may change during it, and continue to do so after a paper is drafted or presented! However, as my focus is primarily on the rhetoric about the people and society affected by the proposals rather than on the proposals themselves, I hope that my analysis still holds.

The debate is still large – but I have tried to look at both the parliamentary debate (through *Hansard*) and the way both politicians and news media (especially print) have talked about the bill to the general public and electorate, and to look at a cross section.

I hope to draw out some of the key ideas that underpin the discussion about people who live in poverty. What this will reveal, I think, is a common framing in which some deserve support and some do not, and in which the arbiter of this status is whether or not a person contributes to society and whether, if they do not, this is through a genuine inability to do so, or not. Whether this understanding emerged with politicians, media or the general public is something of a chicken-and-egg question (and perhaps worthy of a hefty historical discourse analysis), but it currently seems to be seen by the majority of politicians and media as either undesirable or unproductive to challenge.

The debate has focused on the importance of ending in-work poverty and of work as the best way out of poverty. The key ambition (and catchphrase) for the current government is that Britain should become a 'high-wage, lower-tax, lower-welfare country'. This is a phrase used by Iain Duncan Smith in the parliamentary debates,⁸ by the then-Prime Minister David Cameron in a speech in July, and it is the strong implication of George Osborne's comment piece in *The Guardian* on 19 July.⁹ This is Duncan Smith's argument:

In conclusion, ours is an approach that continues to provide a generous safety net and support for those who need it and expects people to face the same choices as those in work and not on benefits. At its heart, it is about moving from a low-wage, high-tax, high-welfare country, to a high-wage, lower-tax, lower-welfare country.¹⁰

There are certain ideological assumptions in this statement, specifically: earning more is good, paying more tax is bad, having a high welfare bill is bad. I do not want to get into an assessment of the ideology here – but I want to note its existence, as I think it has an effect on the way we talk about poverty and who deserves and does not deserve our support. There is, for example, a distinction made, as George Osborne did in a

⁸ 'Welfare Reform and Work Bill: First Reading,' 9 July 2015 (<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmhansrd/cm150709/debtext/150709-0002.htm#15070957000011>, accessed February 2018); 'Welfare Reform and Work Bill: Second Reading,' 20 July 2015 http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmhansrd/cm150720/debtext/150720-0002.htm#column_1256, accessed February 2018).

⁹ Dan Bloom, 'Fears over Cameron's Tax Credits Raid That Would "Consign Workers to Poverty"', *Daily Mirror*, 22 June 2015; George Osborne, 'Calling All Progressives: Help Us Reform the Welfare State', *The Guardian*, 19 July 2015.

¹⁰ 'Welfare Reform and Work Bill: First Reading,' section 491.

piece for the *Guardian* in July, between *public services* (such as the NHS or schools) and *welfare* (i.e. benefits) which makes ideological claims about the role of the state, the support it should give and to whom. As he wrote, 'Furthermore, anyone who cares about well-funded public services such as the NHS and schools knows we have to control the costs of a welfare system that has become unsustainable and risks crowding out other areas of government spending.'¹¹

Working or not?

In terms of who among people living in poverty is deserving and undeserving of government support, the primary divide is clearly between people working or actively seeking work and people not working. There is a general consensus that work is good and the best route out of poverty. This is Iain Duncan Smith in the child poverty debate: 'I believe work is the best route out of poverty. It provides purpose, responsibility and role models for our children.'¹² In the second reading of the Welfare Reform and Work Bill, the Labour MP Stephen Timms said, 'We stand for the right to work and the responsibility to work.'¹³

Connected with this is the idea that wages should be sufficient for those in work to live on – and acknowledgement of the fact that they are not is a factor in people remaining in unemployment (probably not an argument many would dispute). Thus, George Osborne: 'We are saying to working people: our new national living wage will ensure you get a decent day's pay, but there are going to be fewer taxpayer-funded benefits.'¹⁴ Similarly, Iain Duncan Smith: 'Work is the best route out of poverty, and being in work should always pay more than being on benefits,'¹⁵ and Stephen Timms, in a continuation of the statement quoted above: 'We believe in making work pay so that people are always better off in work . . . work is the best route out of poverty.'¹⁶

Deserving or not?

Despite this divide, there are categories of people who are acknowledged as not working for valid reasons, and it is assumed and argued that these people deserve our support. As George Osborne wrote, 'We will protect the most vulnerable – disabled people, pensioners, who cannot change their circumstances, and those most in need.'¹⁷ Similarly Iain Duncan Smith argues, 'Spending on the main disability benefits . . . will be higher in every single year to 2020 compared with 2010. Our commitment to protecting the most vulnerable is why we have protections in place on policies such

¹¹ Osborne, 'Calling All Progressives'.

¹² 'Child Poverty Debate', *Publications.Parliament.Uk*, 1 July 2015 (http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmhansrd/cm150701/debtext/150701-0002.htm#column_1505, accessed February 2018). He continued to talk about the importance of education as preparation for work by providing skills for employment.

¹³ 'Welfare Reform and Work Bill: Second Reading'.

¹⁴ Osborne, 'Calling All Progressives'.

¹⁵ 'Welfare Reform and Work Bill: Second Reading'.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Osborne, 'Calling All Progressives'.

as the benefit cap.¹⁸ Children are also on the list of those worthy of support, and ways of ending child poverty – including understanding what this looks like and how we measure it – have a debate of their own.

So, among the deserving are children, pensioners and those who are unable to work because of disability or chronic ill-health. One might categorize those who are 'deserving' as those experiencing personal misfortune, be it inevitable (age) or accidental (disability) – or more politely, those who do not have the capability to work. And the undeserving? Those who could work, but do not.

Fair or not?

Let us turn back to Osborne's argument for higher wages and fewer benefits: it includes an implicit argument that it is 'ridiculous' for those not in work to receive more income in benefits than someone in work does from their wage – it is not fair.¹⁹ He is not alone – and fairness is a major theme in the discussion about supporting people living in poverty. Thus, Stephen Timms: 'We believe in controlling the costs of social security so that it is fair on the working people who pay for it and so that it is there for people who need it because they cannot work or earn enough to live.'²⁰ Or this passage from a column in the *Daily Express* in June that focuses in particular on the question of immigration in relation to benefits:

But in its quest to cut £12 billion from the welfare budget the government should start with an even more absurd use of British taxpayers' money: paying child benefit and child tax credits to children who do not even live in Britain . . . Fair enough, if you are settled in Britain and have been *paying taxes* here for several years, the benefits system should not discriminate against you on the grounds that you are Polish.²¹

Here is Iain Duncan Smith during the first reading of the Welfare Reform Bill:

For some time I have believed that the way tax credits operated distorted the system, so that there were far too many families not in work, living in bigger and bigger houses and getting larger while being subsidized by the state, while many others – the vast majority of families in Britain – made decisions about how many children they could have and the houses they could live in. Getting that balance back is about getting *fairness* back into the system. It is not fair to have somebody living in a house that they cannot afford to pay for if they go back to work, as it means that they do not enter the work zone and their children grow up with no sense of work as a way out of poverty.²²

¹⁸ 'Welfare Reform and Work Bill: First Reading.'

¹⁹ Osborne, 'Calling All Progressives'. Osborne does not explicitly argue that to achieve balance we must take measures to make sure that those not in work are *worse off*, for example, by reducing their benefits, but this is a logical extension of his point.

²⁰ 'Welfare Reform and Work Bill: Second Reading.'

²¹ Ross Clark, 'Why Must We Pay for Children Who Do Not Live in Britain?', *The Express*, 23 June 2015.

²² 'Welfare Reform and Work Bill: First Reading.'

Implicitly, it is also unfair to those who work and make decisions about houses and families without relying on state subsidies.

Here we see an argument that effectively says that people who do not work do not deserve to have the same standard of life as those who do – and this implication is at an extreme end of the trope. Nevertheless, most people have an innate sense of what seems fair or not. Julia Hartley Brewer, writing in the *Daily Mirror*, expresses concern that the ‘wrong people’ are being hit by the bill – these being those with ill-health or a disability those who have been sanctioned because they missed a job centre appointment, and pensioners. However, she acknowledges,

I’m one of the people who supports the principle behind the . . . welfare reforms. I think it’s right that people who go out to work every day shouldn’t be worse off than people who don’t work, that people claiming Job Seeker’s Allowance long-term should have to do more than fill out a form every fortnight to get their benefits. And I don’t see why people living in social housing should be entitled to have a spare room when many hard-working people struggle to keep a roof over their family’s heads.²³

In other words, because it’s not fair. Fairness is certainly not an argument to dismiss as we approach the details of social policy – but I think it is worth acknowledging that our instinct towards fairness means that we are all susceptible to the suggestion that some of those living in poverty are more deserving of support than others.

Contributing or not?

Key to the argument about fairness is the idea of making a contribution: if you do not contribute to society then, the rhetoric goes, you do not deserve support – because it’s not fair. Those who do work should not be expected to subsidise those who do not, not without good reason.

Thus, Iain Duncan Smith: ‘Spending on welfare should be sustainable and fair to the taxpayer while protecting the most vulnerable’;²⁴ or George Osborne, ‘For our social contract to work, we need to retain the consent of the taxpayer, not just the welfare recipient’;²⁵ or Alan Mak, the Conservative MP for Havant: ‘Will he [Chris Leslie MP] confirm that if a Labour government were ever to return to power, they would increase tax credits, and if so, which taxes on working people would they raise to pay for that increase?’²⁶ Here we see an argument that those who do not pay tax, who do not contribute, do not necessarily deserve to be supported.

At the same time, those who do earn deserve to keep more of the money they earn. For example, Frank Field MP argued, ‘In the long build-up to the election, as well as during and after it, we heard that the one groups of people about which the

²³ Julia Hartley-Brewer, ‘Iain Duncan Smith Is a Convenient Welfare Reform Bogyman’, *Daily Mirror*, 16 Aug 2014.

²⁴ ‘Welfare Reform and Work Bill: Second Reading’.

²⁵ Osborne, ‘Calling All Progressives’.

²⁶ ‘Welfare Reform and Work Bill: First Reading’.

Conservatives, as a party and as a government, cared for most were the strivers, yet it is the strivers who will feel the worst effects of the Bill. People who have responded to the government's plea to become strivers, who are in work . . . will find themselves much worse off as a result of the Budget.²⁷ Seeing the likely consequences of the bill differently, but sharing the same understanding of the importance of rewarding those who work and contribute, the *Daily Express* commented, 'The current government has emerged as the true supporter of working people . . . While the government seeks to end the dependency culture Osborne has also ensured that working people will be allowed to keep more of the cash they earn.'²⁸

Making the right choices

The last idea I want to examine is the idea of choice, as people 'making the right choices' about their lives is an important element of deserving support. For example, one of Iain Duncan Smith's principles for the bill is that, 'People on benefit should face the same choices as those in work and those not on benefits.'²⁹ Here, he is arguing that people being supported by the state should make choices about homes and families – especially children – and about spending as those earning their own income.

Here we have a debate about children, lifestyle – and choice. So, Dr Eilidh Whiteford, a Scottish Nationalist MP, said, 'We need to recognize that bringing up children is expensive . . . but children are not some sort of luxury lifestyle accessory. Having children and encouraging family life is an essential, necessary and natural part of the human life cycle', followed by Pauline Latham, a Conservative MP:

I am also disappointed. . . . I found it astonishing that she should be advocating that people on benefits should be allowed to have – encouraged to have – more than two children. Completely responsible people who recognize that children are expensive to bring up and cannot afford to because they are not on benefits subsidize those who the Hon. Lady would like to have three, four or five children. That is completely mad.³⁰

In his *Guardian* piece, Osborne also questions government support of those who have more than two children (if they cannot afford them by working to earn income) and of single parents who do not go to work when their child turns three and is eligible for free childcare. Going (back) to work is also a choice here – one that the government needs to make it easier for people to make, by ensuring that systems for childcare are in place and that wages are enough for people to live on.

The argument is that those who make the 'wrong' choices ought to live with the consequences: they should not expect and do not deserve to be supported if their choices take them beyond their financial means. These people, by implication,

²⁷ 'Welfare Reform and Work Bill: Second Reading'.

²⁸ Leo McKinstry, 'Osborne Shows the Way to National Prosperity', *Daily Express*, 9 July 2015.

²⁹ 'Welfare Reform and Work Bill: Second Reading'.

³⁰ 'Welfare Reform and Work Bill: First Reading'.

are ‘undeserving’ of support: they have made their choices and must live with the consequences. More brutally, Richard Littlejohn in the *Daily Mail* writes about those, ‘Who would rather spend their benefits on booze, drugs and big-screen televisions’³¹ – those whose choices render them undeserving of our support.

A general consensus?

There is not a lot of debate about the question of whether or not we should be seeking to reduce our welfare bill: all the British political parties would like to spend less in this area. The British people would too, it seems. The 2014 British Attitudes Survey noted that the economic downturn had not reduced the general public view that benefits are too high:

British Social Attitudes has previously reported that public support for welfare spending has been in long-term decline (Clery, 2012). In 1989, 61% agreed that ‘government should spend more money on welfare benefits’. By 2009, this figure was just 27%. But since then not only have benefits been cut, but for at least three years the country continued to experience the depressing effects of the financial crisis on economic growth – both considerations that might have been expected to instigate an increase in support for welfare. Yet in 2014 support for more spending on welfare remained just 30%.³²

The major argument against the Welfare Bill is not that we should not be seeking to reduce our welfare budget, but that this should not be done by cuts that will put people in greater poverty.

There is a sense that those in poverty deserve support – and at the same time, this is discussed in language that explains why they deserve support – continuing to buy in to the idea that there are some who do not. Much criticism of the bill focuses on arguments which claim that the ‘wrong people’ will be penalized by the cuts it makes. We have already seen Frank Field commenting that the ‘strivers’ will be worse off. Jeremy Corbyn, MP, opposed the Welfare Reform and Work Bill, saying, ‘I am voting against the government on the Welfare Bill tonight because I believe it will increase child poverty.’³³ Children do not deserve to be poor. And Tim Farron, then leader of the Liberal Democrats, while taking issue with the practical implications of the legislation, said, ‘The Liberal Democrats will stand up for families, whether they are hard-working or just desperate to be hard-working’,³⁴ leaving us with the suspicion, at least, that there are some families who are neither, who may not be deserving of our support.

³¹ Richard Littlejohn, ‘Ocado-Style Food Bank? I’ll Have the Lobster’, *Daily Mail*, 11 September 2015.

³² NatCen Social Research, *British Social Attitudes 32*, *Bsa.Natcen.ac.uk*, 2015; Charlesworth and Williams, *The Myth of the Undeserving Poor*, section 2.2.

³³ Jon Stone, ‘Welfare Cuts Vote: Labour Leadership Contender Andy Burnham Says He Won’t Vote against Government’, *The Independent*, 10 July 2015.

³⁴ ‘Welfare Reform and Work Bill: Second Reading’.

Consequences

But what does this idea do within our society? The idea that for some poverty is a result of choice in this narrative has created an understanding of living on benefits as a lifestyle or a culture. As Michael Tomlinson, Conservative MP for Mid-Dorset and North Poole, commented, 'Does my Hon. Friend agree that, while the most vulnerable must be protected, welfare must be a safety net rather than a lifestyle choice?'³⁵ Or the *Daily Mail*: 'Britain's welfare bill alone is £220 billion. Work and Pensions Secretary Iain Duncan Smith's assault on the benefit culture has paid huge dividends in getting the idle into work but there is much more to do.'³⁶ Welfare is for those who deserve it, because they need it, because they do not currently have the capability to earn. It is not for those who do not choose to work.

The *Daily Telegraph* has referred critically to a "Something-for-nothing" culture that has underpinned the benefits system.³⁷ Writing in the *Guardian*, Zoe Williams more bitterly claimed, 'Citizenship, in modern British rhetoric, is conditional upon the money you bring in. The moment you are not economically productive, you are not just a non-citizen but a drain on other citizens.'³⁸

There is a playground rhyme, 'Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me.' Even as children, we would like to believe this was true, but we really know better. The words and arguments we use to describe each other and the assumptions we make about people do have an impact on the way they view themselves and subsequently on the choices they make and the way they live. Many thinkers have discussed the way that rhetoric and discourse have a major role in the reproduction and reinforcement of societal values and systems.³⁹ Further, as Katie Harrison points out her essay in this book, fatalism and people's disbelief in their own agency is one reason why they struggle to get out of poverty.⁴⁰ Rhetoric about an 'undeserving poor' does not lessen this problem. Those who are told they do not deserve support from their society are unlikely to develop high self-esteem or to trust the world to give them an opportunity if they do go looking for it. People do not easily leave a culture that they feel understand them for one that they feel condemns them.

³⁵ 'Welfare Reform and Work Bill: Second Reading.'

³⁶ Daily Mail Comment, 'Osborne's Chance to Transform Britain', *Daily Mail*, 4 July 2015.

³⁷ Telegraph View, 'Welfare Reforms are Sensible and Right', *Daily Telegraph*, 24 August 2015.

³⁸ Zoe Williams, 'Immigration: The Big Issue that the Left Just Can't Get Right', *The Guardian*, 31 March 2015.

³⁹ E. Laclau and C. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Social Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985); A. Giddens, *Profiles and Critiques in Social Theory* (London: Macmillan, 1982); J. G. A. Pocock, *Politics, Language, and Time: Essays on Political Thought and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989); Michel Foucault, 'The Order of Discourse. Inaugural Lecture at the College De France, Given 2nd December 1970', in *Untying the Text: a Post-Structuralist Reader*, ed. R. Young (London: Young, 1981), 48–78; Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge* (Oxford: Routledge, 2013).

⁴⁰ That the World Bank's Development Report of 2015 was entitled *Mind, Society and Behaviour* recognizes that some of the most crucial keys to unlocking people's potential are in the mind.

This is a cultural matter, but culture and associated lifestyles are not choices we easily enter and exit at will. Extricating ourselves from our cultural norms is difficult, even where we do not like the culture we are in. It cannot be done with one simple choice and action.

The assumption that people are deserving or undeserving of living in poverty or of being given support also assumes that personal responsibility is a key element in both falling into and getting out of poverty. As we have seen, 'bad choices' leave you in poverty, and 'good choices' – to work, to live with your means, will lift you out. Age or misfortune, such as ill-health or disability, might prevent this – but if it does, you will be deserving of support.

In this way, rhetoric about the 'undeserving poor' can lead people to ignore systemic factors that make poverty more or less likely for certain groups of people and that make it harder for them to work their way out of poverty. However, we know that there are systemic reasons why people struggle to live without welfare. Some of them have been mentioned already in the course of this book. On the other hand, it is important to recognize that there is a danger that emphasizing systemic factors while trying to avoid judging people living in poverty as deserving or undeserving of support, can lead people to overlook the importance of personal agency in well-being and its potential to play a role in getting out of poverty. It may lead us to talk about and treat people as powerless cogs in the machine.

A dominating rhetoric in which one's choices regarding welfare and work make one deserving or undeserving of support (assuming capability) in case of poverty within a situation where systemic and cultural issues are also at play leads to frustration, as we struggle back and forth between 'Why aren't you/they doing anything?' and 'What do you expect me/them to do?' This ultimately leads to alienation between the two, over time.⁴¹ As Charlesworth and Williams point out, rhetoric that paints some people as deserving and some as underserving creates a conflictual frame of reference between those in work and those out of work,⁴² between those who pay taxes and therefore deserve certain things in return and those who do not.

Not only that, our problems increase as rhetoric about dealing with poverty is entwined with ideological questions about the size of the state, the role of the government and our responsibilities as individuals and to each other as citizens of a society. The rhetoric about the 'undeserving poor' makes assumptions about the answers all of these questions, while we often do not raise them at all. I suspect that it will be hard to break free of this rhetoric and the stigma that it carries with it, without questioning those assumptions.

⁴¹ It is equally possible, I should note, to see the opposite situation being created, in which a rhetorical focus on the systemic problems and a determination *not* to blame people for living in poverty or to describe them as undeserving of support, fails to acknowledge the potential that individuals do have to change their circumstances and can lead to people feeling disempowered or remaining static because they are not given the encouragement – the carrot rather than the stick – to embrace this potential.

⁴² Charlesworth and Williams, *The Myth of the Undeserving Poor*, §2.2.

Conclusions

I have touched on the way that making choice and capability to work markers of the deserving or undeserving poor creates tensions as, despite best intentions, we struggle to think, talk about and enable responsibility and agency alongside engaging systemic issues in responding to those living in poverty. I suggest, as a point for further discussion, that the Bible offers the church a framework for understanding and navigating this tension, as it provides a picture of a world in which there are systemic problems and yet within which personal agency and responsibility matter. The Bible situates this current world in between a good creation and a promised good new creation, and offers individuals and the world the possibility of a change of status – through forgiveness and redemption – that our rhetoric about the undeserving poor (who, once fallen, do not deserve social support) lacks. That is, it offers salvation by grace and not by works.

We see, in the fall, the breaking of the harmony of God's good creation as sin enters the story, leading to pain and injustice, the division of humans from creation, each other and God. Poverty is one of the consequences of this state of the world. Nevertheless, we see throughout the Bible, individuals and communities being called upon by God to make a difference to this situation, given models (through the laws of Israel and the life of Jesus) for how to live and live together, allowing for personal agency and responsibility and for justice within a broken world. It is a picture of the world in which all have the capacity to act – and to change, in which all who are blessed are called to share that blessing with their communities and in which all have value and deserve their society's care – and all are offered love and freedom by Christ. I suggest that this understanding of the world could – and should – have an impact on the way that the church thinks about, talks about and engages with poverty and the people living in both, as well as with our society as a whole.