

Is God bankrupt?

A theological response to *Prosperity with a Purpose* ¹

Abstract: *The aim of this response to the new CTBI report on the ethics of affluence, offered by the theological think tank Ekklesia, is to clarify what it says and what it means; to reflect on its approach and how it justifies it; and then to look at how it makes use of theology in articulating principles for engaging market economics. We argue that while the document contains useful analysis and ideas, it is theologically weak in ways that may relate to other inadequacies. But we welcome it as a contribution to an ongoing and important discussion.*

1. Understanding the status, remit, purpose and role of the report ²

1.1 *Prosperity with a Purpose: Christians and the Ethics of Affluence* (hereafter PWAP) is a new pre-general election study and report authorised for publication by the Church Representatives' Meeting of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI), the ecumenical body that helps to coordinate the work of the major Christian denominations (Anglican, Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox and some African and African-Caribbean churches) in England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland.³

1.2 PWAP is the product of a small working party, summarised into a report written by Catholic author and commentator Clifford Longley. The group's nine members comprised of four church officers (Catholic, Church of England, Methodist and Salvation Army), one ecumenical officer (CTBI), a merchant banker, an economist and an international relations specialist.⁴

1.3 It is primarily a discussion document *for* the churches in these islands rather than a policy statement *of* the churches, although it includes the principles, conclusions and recommendations of the study – for the further consideration both of churches and of those in government, business and civil society.⁵

1.4 PWAP's purpose is to enliven and contribute to the debate about how Christians and others might respond to "living in an age of unprecedented increasing wealth, when questions about how prosperity should be understood and used are of the utmost importance."⁶

1.5 The report's starting point is the acknowledgement (in the Foreword by the General Secretary of CTBI) that the churches "are rightly concerned about poverty and have put tremendous effort into working for its eradication." But, he says, "[t]hey have given less attention to prosperity." PWAP aims to correct that imbalance.

¹ *Prosperity with a Purpose: Christians and the Ethics of Affluence* (CTBI, 2005), available for £3.99 plus postage from 01733 325 002.

² This section is offered by way of prior clarification, since the report and its pre-publicity by CTBI contains a number of indicators in different places about its status, remit, purpose and role which are not otherwise brought together.

³ Churches Together in Britain and Ireland is described in the report's back-cover blurb as "the chief ecumenical body in these islands". It sits alongside national ecumenical instruments in England, Scotland, Wales and (with a different, pan-state structure) Ireland, coalescing the ecumenical concerns and activities of its member churches and associated bodies in four nations and two jurisdictions.

⁴ The working group (elsewhere referred to as 'the editorial group') is exclusively male, and predominantly white, English, professional and comprised of persons at or near retirement age. This observation is made not as a criticism, but in order to draw attention to the potential limitations of perspective and experience which the group no doubt sought to mitigate through its wider consultation in the nations and the churches. There is no explicit acknowledgment of this in the report, however.

⁵ This response focuses exclusively on the PWAP report. A collection of essays "by Christian thinkers forming part of the *Prosperity with a Purpose* editorial group" (p59) is also forthcoming, sub-titled *Exploring the Ethics of Affluence*. These, we are told, "explore the questions raised by this topic in more depth and end with far-reaching policy recommendations." They "carry only the authority of the authors", whereas the PWAP report is authorised for discussion among the churches. The precise boundary between availability and authorisation for discussion is not clarified, and is presumably intended to be porous. The last sentence of the first paragraph on p.19 suggests that the collected papers are *not* a "contribution to discussion" authorised by the Church Representatives' Meeting of CTBI, though presumably there is no intention to exclude them, just to give them less weight. However the report itself says that the papers exemplify, detail and extend its arguments. So the situation remains rather confusing.

⁶ Ekklesia's initial response is meant as a constructive contribution to that debate. See also the PWAP online forum: <http://www.ctbi.org.uk/pwap>.

1.6 The PWAP working group's remit was "to take seriously the context of globalization, the persistence of terrible worldwide poverty, and the impact that our new riches have on the environment. They were to encourage widespread participation in their conversation, drawing on the different experiences of the different parts of these islands. They were to listen to differing viewpoints and perceptions. And they were to report in time to contribute to the debate ahead of the next UK General Election."¹

1.7 This is a large brief for a report that, including its summary introduction, is only 55 pages long and has no references. Ekklesia's response² tries to take into account these limitations, while drawing attention to both the major strengths and weaknesses of the document, locating it in the wider debate (something PWAP mainly chooses not to do itself)³ and offering ideas for further study and reflection.

¹ There is no further indication in PWAP report itself as to how these responsibilities were discharged, no list of those consulted, and no indication of the breadth of study involved. These matters can be judged further from the accompanying essay collection (see p.19 of PWAP and footnote 3 of this response), with the caveat that this carries no authority save that of the individual authors.

² Ekklesia is a freestanding theological think tank and Christian news service supported by the Anvil Trust. Its associates include the Anabaptist Network in the UK, the London Mennonite Centre, Workshop (a validated grassroots theological training programme), Urban Expression and SPEAK. Ekklesia encourages theologically rooted discussion about Christian engagement in public life. It works with churches and individuals across the spectrum (evangelical, ecumenical and Catholic) and takes its overall orientation from the radical, dissenting and biblical traditions to be found in each of those streams. It seeks to resource both practical discipleship and open enquiry. This response was written by an Ekklesia research associate who has had no involvement either in the report or the process that produced it. This is an initial response to the report which neither presupposes nor precludes further analysis by Ekklesia.

³ PWAP identifies itself (pp.9-10) as a continuation and development of the tradition of enquiry represented by the 1996 document *The Common Good*, published by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, and the 1997 document *Unemployment and the Future of Work*, published by the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland (renamed CTBI in 1998). On p.19 it also refers to the Salvation Army published reports by the Henley Centre, *The Paradox of Prosperity* and *The Responsibility Gap*, and it draws its own title from the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference report, *Prosperity with a Purpose*. A "wide variety of other inputs" are mentioned as being referenced in the accompanying essay collection (see footnote 3 of this response). The reader, who may or may not be familiar with these sources, is left to judge how and in what way they have been employed: an approach which is "fashionably unmethodical", to draw upon a parallel observation made by Nigel Biggar about *Unemployment and the Future of Work*, writing in *Putting Theology to Work: A theological symposium*, edited by Malcolm Brown and Peter Sedgwick (CCBI and William Temple Foundation, 1998), p.58. We are indebted to Professor Biggar for his observations about theological method in that important collection, under the title 'Is God redundant?'

2. What exactly *is* the churches' "new consensus" on the market economy?

2.1 The substance of PWAP's position is based upon the contention (p.9) that while "the Christian social conscience" in Britain and Ireland "has no single organized voice", there *is* such a voice – presumably a predominant consensus – and that this report "comes closer to that voice than anything previously published." This bold but imprecise claim¹ is "made possible because the thinking of all the mainstream denominations on the socio-economic issues of the day has converged around one key proposition".

2.2 This proposition is "that under the right conditions, economic growth can serve God's purposes."² According to the CTBI press release officially launching the report, this proposition amounts to "the most comprehensive endorsement of a market economy from any Church source in recent years."³

2.3 But what *kind* of endorsement is it for what *kind* of market economy and what *kind* of growth?

2.4 Close attention to the report suggests that the nearest analogue in the wider economic debate to what PWAP is saying is a social market economy based on GDP-based growth regulated by a number of factors at the levels of national government, civil society and regional and international institutions. The role of democratically elected politicians in ensuring moral outcomes from market-driven processes is stressed. And considerable weight is attached to the mediating concept of 'the common good' as a guiding principle for decision-making. (This will be dealt with in more detail when we look at the theology of the report.)

2.5 No specific critique is made of global neoliberalism, the ideology and practice of deregulated corporate-driven marketisation, but it is by direct implication excluded. Those who adhere to views popularly characterised in this way (such as the UK's Institute of Directors, in many of their pronouncements) are likely to respond – if at all – with some circumspection to PWAP's claim that it is some ringing endorsement of market economics.

2.6 They would no doubt point out that almost every endorsement of business, enterprise and markets in PWAP is so hedged in by qualifiers, regulatory proposals and counter-arguments as to make the claim to be saying anything radically different to other church reports on society and economy highly questionable.

2.7 There is a definite difference in emphasis to the famous *Faith in the City* report of the (C of E) Archbishops' Commission on Urban Priority Areas (ACUPA, 1985), to be sure. That had comparatively little to say about the contribution of private wealth to poverty reduction and elimination. But, as PWAP itself concedes, both *The Common Good* (1996) and *Unemployment and the Future of Work* (1997) "recognized the vitality of market economies and their crucial role in wealth creation." (p.10)

¹ As with much in PWAP, it is difficult to know how to handle such large assertions. In this case no indication is given as to how or on what basis the author(s) reached such a conclusion. It is rather like being told that juggernauts are moving towards the use of a new kind of wheel that most closely resembles one specification without being told how, exactly, it distinguishes itself from other product specifications with at least a family resemblance.

² Astonishingly, the extensive debates about the nature and forms of 'growth' are virtually by-passed, reducing the use of the term to little more than a slogan at times.

³ 'Prosperity with a Purpose: Churches' vision of a just society' (CTBI press release, 28 February 2005).

2.8 PWAP claims to take the debate a stage further, “exploring the conditions under which true prosperity can be achieved and how it is defined.” However it soon becomes clear that these conditions involve high levels of intervention from a variety of actors connected to the economic scene (significantly mitigating the claim about “market solutions”) , and that the goal (“a more just and sustainable society”) is what would usually be defined as a social and political – rather than a strictly economic – one.¹

2.9 Specified this way, PWAP’s alleged exceptionalism seems rather less clear, at least in terms of the reports it cites. We make this point not as a matter of disagreement (market economics, as the report says, is inadequate for, and often counter to, social justice when divorced from other means of perceiving and acting in the world). We make it, rather, to raise the issue about whether there is much substance to the pro-market rhetoric and to the claim about “a new consensus” .

2.10 The hidden ‘targets’ of the distinctiveness PWAP attributes to itself are perhaps those statements of the conciliar ecumenical movement (the World Council of Churches, plus confessional bodies such as the World Alliance of Reformed Churches) whose anti-neoliberal and anti-globalization pronouncements have been criticised as naïve and one-sided by more market-friendly Christian social ethicists like John Atherton and Ronald Preston.²

2.11 It is certainly true that conciliar statements on the economy have largely consisted of critique plus regulatory demand (or calls for ‘alternatives to capitalism’), rather than constructive engagement with enterprise. But, in practice, and leaving aside the much more negating and heated rhetoric about inequality and injustice contained in conciliar pronouncements, it is difficult to see how, in practice, PWAP differs substantially from the regulationist approach from which it apparently wishes to distance itself.³

2.12 At the level of rhetoric, PWAP contains a range of indicators concerning market virtues. There is reference to “productive functioning” and “innovation and enterprise” (p.10, p.26); to “entrepreneurship” being “of great service” (p.11, p.28); to “equipping people for prosperity” (p.21); to the “freedom to choose” (p.22); to “wealth creation” as “a service to humanity” and “a way out of poverty” (p.23); to the need for sufficient attention to “the economic dimension of prosperity”(p.24); to “a virtuous circle of wealth creation and public revenue” and the need to avoid “threats to market economies” (p.25); to the benefits of competition (p.30); to “economic rewards” (p.40); to “increasing wealth” through work, goods and services (p.42); to economic incentives (p.43 and *passim*); to the benefits of “productivity” (p.47); to the intimate link between “economic globalization and the elimination of poverty” (p.51); and to “trade liberalization” to help the poor (p.52).

2.13 However, a summary calculation suggests that there are *ten times* as many references in PWAP to the limitations, challenges, problems, distortions, inequities, costs, unfairness, omissions, maladjustments, depletions, degradations, weaknesses, difficulties and fallibilities of market mechanisms unshaped by moral, civic, religious, social and political constraints. And in the vast majority of instances these result in proposals to limit or regulate the market economy.

¹ It would be possible, indeed desirable, to deconstruct and reconstruct the category of the ‘strictly economic’, but the report does not do this, so Ekklesia’s response refers to the way PWAP employs these categories.

² For a recent example of conciliar thinking, see *The Accra Confession: Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth* (World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 2004). See also John Atherton, *Christianity and the Market: Christian social thought for our time* (SPCK, 1992); and Ronald Preston, *Religion and the Ambiguities of Capitalism* (Pilgrim Press, 1993).

³ The World Council of Churches has rightly been criticised for its once complete refusal of ‘constructive engagement’ with institutions like the IMF and the World Bank. But others, like the agency Christian Aid, who have been strongly critical of the impact of unfettered market solutions in the global economy, have taken a different stance – holding to alternative guidelines for action but seeking generally available mechanisms for implementing them ‘in the real world’.

2.14 There is reference to the danger of over-regulating, for sure. We are told that “the attempt to squeeze too much out for socially desirable ends” can threaten the productive functioning of a market economy (p.10, p.26). But this is a fairly small concession to genuinely robust free market theorists. It is also hedged around by reference to the debate and disagreement over where to draw the line between freedom and regulation – and, in short, it is likely to do little to assuage those on the right of politics who will see all the pro-market sentiment in PWAP as little more than window-dressing when they read the actual principles and proposals in the report (summarised on pp. 10-12). Either that or they will ignore the content and go for the spin.

2.15 *We will return to the principles later in this response, connecting them to the theology (or lack thereof) of PWAP.*

2.16 Meanwhile the concrete and general proposals made in PWAP, which may be welcomed as important markers of a humane and sensible approach to the concerns they address, include: a public debate about a “decent minimum income”; a higher tax rate on those earning three or four times the average income; removing those on half the median income from income tax altogether [there is “a reasonable case” for both of these, PWAP says, keeping the door open to dissent]; a government review of company law “to see to what extent shareholders could gain greater control over boardroom pay as well as other aspects of company policy”¹ (p.11, p.29); more responsible media reporting on the “hard choices facing a market economy society”² (p.11, p.30); the renewal of civil society and the constructive engagement of the churches³; a minimum wage based on “ensuring that all forms of work available are worthwhile” (p.11, p.44); a “living wage” for all met jointly by employers and the state; protection from unfair discrimination (for women and others “who shoulder responsibilities”) in matters of “pay, promotion, conditions of work... pension arrangements... or any diminution in professional esteem” (p.11, p.45); restrictions on excessive working hours (“except as a short-term necessity”⁴, p.11, p.46); a proper review of current anti-poverty strategies and a move beyond employment as “the only effective answer” (p.11, p.48); ending the loss of benefit and credit trap for those seeking work and high marginal rates of taxation; a ceiling on rates of interest, especially to the poor, and the encouragement of credit unions; taxation linked to a liveable income and a Minimum Income Standards Agency; restoring the income-link for pensions and ending means-testing; “contributing a greater share of national wealth to the relief of poverty overseas” (p.12, p.52); “urgent investigation” of methods for the regulation of capital flows; and implementation of the Kyoto Treaty and “more equitable sharing of emission costs” (p.12, p.53).⁵

2.17 Many people (though not many enthusiastic free marketeers) would welcome these as sensible policy suggestions. But it is notable that none of them is actually about encouraging enterprise and wealth creation. They are about regulating a market system which manifestly fails to meet social and environmental ends in its own right. Quite how this amounts to a “new Christian consensus” and a “comprehensive endorsement of a market economy”, PWAP does not explain. It simply makes that claim and buttresses it with some sympathetic sounding phrases.

¹ Civil society campaigners for corporate responsibility have recently been making the rather more bold and imaginative proposal that accounting procedures and regulations could be challenged and changed to include social and environmental (as well as fiscal) criteria within a regulative framework for enterprise. At present the interests represented by ‘shareholders’ are very limited.

² There are no concrete suggestions about how to achieve this noble ambition.

³ The question about how civic society receives investment and is sustained is left somewhat open.

⁴ But will there not always be arguments about short-term necessity? Does this qualifier not render the proposal unworkable? Who decides?

⁵ The case for these measures (or their arguability) is generally well made in the report, and we do not need to contest it. However the extent to which they add up to a costed and ‘realistic’ programme of action is another matter. The innocent idea that they are ‘non-partisan’ will also produce wry smiles in some quarters (p.18). We note in passing that the working group is satisfied about the capacity of church leaders to talk to ‘the main three [political] parties’. This seems a cosy, establishment notion. And tough luck if you are a Green. “To those who have, more is given”.

2.18 In fact, what is proposed has far more similarities to, rather than differences from, other church and church-related statements, campaigns and initiatives. Presumably 'churches encouraged to say much the same sort of thing again in a different way' would not be such an appealing headline for the PWAP report as the more dramatic (but thankfully less accurate) "finding faith in money".¹

2.19 So are there any freshly articulated and substantial principles and theologically rooted guidelines for action which might take the churches' conversation further and draw the eyes of the watching world? It is to this foundational question that we now turn.

¹ This is how Christopher Morgan of the *Sunday Times* reflected (or, rather, caricatured) the report's findings on 08.02.2005. His report appears to be based on an interview with author Clifford Longley.

3. Can general theological pieties save God from bankruptcy?

3.1 A reasonable definition of the task of Christian theology in relation to ethics and society would be: to apply rigorous, well-traditioned thought to the task of working out what earthly difference is made by choosing to worship the God of Jesus Christ, by forming the community known as church, by living in the light of Jesus' death and resurrection, by active Christian discipleship, and by expectation of the disturbance of the Holy Spirit.

3.2 If these basic categories of Christian understanding and action have no serious impact upon how Christians perceive, describe and live today (and issue in no call for others to consider seriously the claims of Christian faith as making a 'real life' difference) then Christianity becomes little more than the strange hobby of a curious minority. That being the case, it would not be surprising if Christian language and doctrine turned out to contain nothing of great value that could not be translated into other (perhaps socio-analytic categories), save for a few pieties that could not be specified in terms of their tangible impact on discreet disciplines like economics.

3.3 It is unlikely that any of the members of the PWAP working party would be happy with such a fate for their faith. But it is equally difficult to see how, on the basis of what they have said in this report, such a fate could be avoided.

3.4 This is because none of the policy recommendations, and (other than in the most generously construed sense) none of the core principles deployed in PWAP to justify and reshape a market economy society, are dependent upon the truth or otherwise of central Christian claims. To many this will seem an abdication of intellectual and ecclesial responsibility.

3.5 For historic Christianity it is Christ's death and his being raised by God that focuses an alternative understanding of history, time, matter, humanity, ethics and teleology (redefined by the New Testament as eschatology, the reconstitution of life from 'the beyond' that is God's coming into our midst). Yet these categories are barely hinted at in PWAP.

3.6 This has been a lasting difficulty for recent British (especially English and Protestant) social theology as commissioned by the churches. The theological component of *Faith in the City* was described by some, perhaps a little unfairly, as 'a bolt on'. *Unemployment and the Future of Work* required a separate 'theological symposium' to unpack the Christian underpinnings of its otherwise entirely pragmatic, social democratic analysis.

3.7 PWAP is different, in that it largely eschews biblical and critical theological discourse for a position rooted in the use of the category 'the common good' (mentioned on pp. 10, 11, 15, 16, 19ff., 31, 34-37, 41, 54 and *passim*). This has a long and honourable history within Catholic social teaching, which is an accumulated approach to theology and society that represents probably the most substantial body of material on Christian ethics produced by any major confession in the last 100 years. However, its use by PWAP turns out to be rather emaciated, as we shall see when we have looked at the other 'theological tools' employed.¹

¹ A good earlier treatment of the issues is: Gary J. Dorrien, *Reconstructing the Common Good: Theology and the Social Order* (Orbis, USA, 1992)

3.8 There are a number of references in PWAP to God, creation, divine vocation and 'design', 'the image of God', church, religion, spirituality, 'structures of sin', Jesus, conversion (to the common good, not Christ) and Christian ethics. These are obviously intended to be significant, but when we examine them it becomes clear that they function as little more than a gloss on views that could equally well be sourced elsewhere.

3.9 Maybe this is not a problem for the PWAP enterprise of defending a socially regulated and environmentally tempered market economy. But it certainly ought to be a problem for the churches, because it suggests that (other than as a consoling idea of last resort and periodic comfort) their God is technically bankrupt. There is, at the heart of the divine economy, a void – at least as far as this report is concerned.

3.10 We will now examine the key theological motifs and assertions in PWAP, linking them back as necessary to the seven 'conditions' by which economic growth is held to serve God's purposes (p.9, cf. p12).

3.11 The opening PWAP assertion is that (p.13, first para) "[b]ecause they believe in a transcendent reality, Christians can offer their neighbours a word of genuine hope amidst the uncertain flux of history." That certainly should be the case. But there follows no indication as to the form, character and accessibility of the 'transcendent reality'. Perhaps this formula was preferred to the more contentious 'God' (since the report seems conscious of its need to 'reach out' beyond the churches). But of its own volition it has no content, and provides no basis for "a description of [the] well-ordered society" to which, we are told, Christians wish to contribute (p.13, third para), but which it would be more accurate – if less palatable – to say is provided by mature reflection on the sources of the Christian community in the New Testament.

3.12 We are then told that (p.13, end of fourth para) "Christians believe that those who expect to build a perfect society here on earth will be disappointed." This is necessary and true, since Christians live in the conviction that the perfect society is realised in God and gifted to us in, through and beyond our imperfections – the 'now' and 'not yet' of the kingdom for which Jesus lives, dies and is raised. This being so, God does *far* more than offer us the thin gruel of "encouragement to go on" in the face of "setbacks and disappointments". God offers us tough resources of judgement and redemption. Whatever the shortcomings of "WCC theology", these notes do at least come through in conciliar documents in a way that leaves PWAP sounding distinctly muffled from the outset.

3.13 The next theological marker is the 'option for the poor' (a term which, as PWAP rightly notes, demands a broader biblical and contemporary connotation than destitution) rooted in "a deep conviction that Christ himself commands us to identify and oppose injustice and oppression." This is good as far as it goes. But it falls way short of recognising that Christ does not merely talk about correctives to injustice, he lives and speaks a new reality (that of God's realm) which radically transforms all relationships – so that the last are first, the outsiders are welcomed in, the dumb speak, the weak are exalted, and the procedures of the mighty are dethroned. It was for this upside-down kingdom threatening the powers-that-be (both religious and political) that sent Jesus to the cross, not a call for orderly reform in human affairs.¹

¹ For a far-reaching popular summary of the social, political and economic impact (not mere 'implications') of the Gospel, see: Donald B. Kraybill, *The Upside-Down Kingdom* (Marshall-Pickering, 1985).

3.14 The liberal Protestant (and, it seems, Catholic) reflex to domesticate this very difficult Good News into something manageable within our existing terms begins to create in PWAP an unreality about the true nature of the Gospel's disturbance, which it is probably wrong to think is compensated for by a greater reality about the 'real world' (though that is perhaps what the working party intends).

3.15 This is well illustrated in the treatment of the Gospel parable of 'the rich young man', who, we are told (p.23-4), "was prepared to serve God, but not if he could no longer serve Mammon." Over-attachment to possessions prevents us from passing through the eye of a needle, which "will be too narrow for the camel" in the example Jesus gives. Actually that is not how the Gospel story goes. It says that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich person to enter God's kingdom. "But Jesus concluded his parable by saying 'with God all things are possible'." In which case the question is, what does it mean to be with God?

3.16 PWAP turns this uncomfortable saga into a cosy morality tale whereby, with the added but undefined ingredient of social justice (a concept we are told on p.40 is "deeply controversial") wealth creation is "no longer the pursuit of Mammon, a rival to the true God, but a service to humanity and a way out of poverty into true prospering." This may be so, but it asks us to imagine a world, a set of relations and a God-wardness which is way beyond anything that a market economy can deliver, by PWAP's own admission.

3.17 So the optimism of the amusing cover design, where the camel does indeed pass through the eye of the needle (though only because the needle has been unfeasibly enlarged) begs the question we have to face about the impossible becoming possible with God, which is 'on whose terms?' At the moment we in Britain and Ireland spend far more on luxuries than on aiding the 24,000 people who die of poverty each day. PWAP rightly condemns excessive consumerism, but it nowhere directly acknowledges that transmuting desire into *consumption* is not an unintended by-product of market economics, it is an intrinsic consequence of it. (cf. p.23, second para).

3.18 At this point the report tries to bypass the camel-needle Gospel dilemma altogether by saying that while "previous generations of Church thinkers had seen economic activity as a 'zero-sum' activity, believing that the rich only got richer by making the poor poorer",¹ this need no longer be the case (p.24), partly because technology and cyberspace have removed some of the previous limits to growth.

3.19 This is true in part, but it is also (in another way) a slick evasion – first because the Gospels also highlight the way that wealth chokes us irrespective of how much or how little others have of it,² and second because there are plenty of materially identifiable economic processes which are designed around equations of inequality and injustice which require more than a change of metaphor to eliminate.

3.20 For example, it is not accidental that much prosperity in Britain depends upon unfair trade and demeaning working conditions among cheap labourers in other parts of the world. It is the way the sums add up, and if it wasn't, few would oppose the campaigns to correct the economic imbalance of the transactions involved.³

¹ Quoted from 'Prosperity with a Purpose: Churches' vision of a just society' (CTBI press release, 28 February 2005).

² This is not, of course, to say that the Gospels are unconcerned about the injustice of spectacular consumption in the face of abject poverty, as the parable of Dives and Lazarus makes plain.

³ This is a complex issue, of course. Some have contended that the campaign to get Third World makers of training shoes a living wage was misplaced, because it led the manufacturers to re-source or end certain product lines, thus creating unemployment (no pay instead of fair pay). But that simply illustrates the migration of injustice – and in any case, if it was taken as determinative, would invalidate much of what PWAP rightly has to say about minimum and living wage standards.

3.21 It is important to note here that unrealism about the Gospel (hard though it is) also translates into unrealism about the world as it really is, and a shift towards disconnected pieties about both. The fact that the new fantasies use the totemic language of 'market economics' rather than 'socialism' (as in some Christian economics in the 1970s and 1980s) does not make them any less fantastic when held up to the cold light of day.

3.22 PWAP makes the point (p.15, fourth para) that "[a] purely negative appraisal of economic activity is unacceptable and an injustice to those engaged in it." This is true, though it is not clear who is supposed to hold such an (obviously silly) view. On the other hand to say "[e]conomic activity is instead something to celebrate" is merely to replace one simplism with another, since the report elsewhere makes it quite plain that there are many difficulties and injustices bound up with economic activity.

3.23 The difficulty here is that, while the report is strong on mitigating the problems and undesirable consequences of some economic processes, it does not ask any deep questions about what might constitute just or unjust economic activity *per se*.¹ It is all about amelioration. The worst example of this is in the matter of the environment, where we are told (p.9) that we need "substantial efforts to mitigate the harm caused by pollution" (rather than asking whether we should stop some pollution harming activities). There is also an evasion about earlier Christian ideologies that did indeed justify the ravaging of nature (p.12, cf. p.17 which says that a new perspective is needed, and p.54).

3.24 A certain theological fatalism quite unwarranted by biblical faith also emerges in this context, whereby we are told that although nature has provided the conditions for life to continue, and science can offer no guarantee that this will always be the case, "religion can *only* [emphasis added] offer a warning that it may not". Indeed the best that is suggested to us at this point is the possibility of cultivating "a religious sense of humility and awe towards the natural world." Non-religionists may wonder (not for the first time in PWAP) why getting all religious about nature (in this case) is in any way necessary in order to show the required respect. The traditional Christian, Jewish and Muslim answer would be that it isn't: that it is only revering the God of the universe that creates the relationships and possibilities for flourishing, rather than focussing on ourselves and our environment in spiritual abstraction. Indeed sacralising the earth can lead to all kinds of other problems (such as contempt for science), even as it corrects the tendency toward despoilation.

3.25 Here is a prime example of a certain kind of secular logic obscuring the very theological resources that are needed to render the 'religious' argument coherent and workable. Another obvious place where it happens is in the final flourish of the report (p.54, cf. p.36-7) where the need for "conversion to the common good" is hailed as, effectively, a path of human salvation.² The attractiveness of 'the common good' to the PWAP working group seems overwhelming, not least, perhaps, because "the concept is itself well understood from within other traditions" and from "a secular philosophical viewpoint" and in terms of something very amorphous called "the moral sensibility of humanity as a whole."

¹ On p.25 there is a fulsome quotation from the European Union constitution, which is alleged to demonstrate roundedness in its language about "balanced economic growth, a highly competitive social market economy, aiming at full employment and social progress, and with a high level of protection and improvement of the quality of the environment." These are wonderful words. But this is a political document that can only gain assent by including everyone's ideals. It has no need to demonstrate that they are all realisable together, or to face actual and potential contradictions. But contradictions there are. And the biggest one, which PWAP ignores (despite its later strictures on distorted forms of globalization) is that European prosperity is secured by its concentrated power in a world of massive inequality.

² The word salvation comes from the root *salus*, meaning 'whole'. But in all the pontificating about 'flourishing' in PWAP the specific salvific context and shape of the Christian story is never mentioned.

3.26 The unselfconscious confidence with which such gigantic generalities are deployed is truly breathtaking. Apparently none of the well-rehearsed strictures about the practical difficulties of moral reasoning outside or across particular moral communities (Alasdair MacIntyre *et al*) need apply, perhaps because this would be to call into question a key myth of post-Enlightenment rationality, which is the idea that we can all get on perfectly OK if only we can find ways of boiling our differences down to something less specific and more malleable. The trouble is, human beings just don't live like that; and there is much more at stake in our differences than the psychology of conflict. There are treasures, too.¹

3.27 A better approach might have been to specify more concretely (as both Catholic social teaching and Mennonite theology seeks to do) what particular practices, habits, character-building traits, patterns of thought and patterns of behaviour are available within the Christian community in order to be able to build a vision of 'the good'. This would also include those habits that school us in genuine *desire* (for life, for neighbour, for true selfhood and for God) rather than mere *consumption*. This would point us to practical resources that help us enjoy freedom through acquiring the disciplines needed to make good choices. *The absence of a theology of desire, freedom and choice is, therefore, a large and damaging hole in PWAP.*

¹ Christian faith rooted in the new community made possible through baptism into the death and risen life of Jesus opens up the possibility of seeing differences held in communion (rather than mere descent into conflict or chaos), though you might not know this if you looked at how we are tearing ourselves apart over the issue of human sexuality right now.

4. Putting theology, the church and God's economy to work again

4.1 The point of this critique is not to be 'churchy' (as some will say), but to recognise, both for ourselves and for others, that the new community of equals that Jesus creates and offers us is part of the Good News that we have to offer (we are not 'only' able to 'warn'). The fact that the church, *ekklesia*, often fails to live up to its calling is not an argument against the calling, but a measure of the solidarity-in-brokenness we can still share with those who do not share our faith.

4.2 What we can say, in effect, is "this is the difference made by what we believe to be true about God, people and the world. Now show us the difference made by what you believe, and let's see where we can work together and where we need to go on arguing in order not to sell short the possibilities of a greater good for us all." That actually opens the door to inter-cultural and inter-religious conversation, something wholly overlooked (along with any non-Western, non-white cultural resources) by PWAP.

4.3 Unfortunately, however, PWAP does not speak of 'church' and 'the churches' in those terms. It mostly talks about them as agents and organisms in civil society and public life which are there to give good advice to the governing authorities and to help renew generic civic virtues and structures. We are certainly not saying that these are bad things to do. Far from it. What we are saying is that they are not enough, because the Gospel that created the church is about more than self-improvement and civic virtue. It is about something that radically turns our world, our viewpoint and our priorities upside down.

4.4 Professor Nigel Biggar made the same point with clarity and force in his theological response to *Unemployment and the Future of Work* (UFW, 1997¹):

Christian churches have, as their specific responsibility, the task of declaring that committed belief in God, especially of the Christian kind, is vitally important to human flourishing... [T]hey should be eager... to show or explain why this is so. If this task of theological declaration and explanation is not the defining responsibility of the Christian churches, then I do not know what, specifically, they exist to do; that is, I do not see what distinguishes them from any other social organisation with human intentions. ... Distinctiveness is not the point, authenticity is. But there will be occasions when, in order to be authentic, the churches must become distinctive. So, for example, relative to secularist humanitarians, they are bound to be distinctive in claiming that things like faith in God and hope for eternal life are important, even basic, elements of the human good. And relative to, say, Jewish or Muslim theists, they are bound to be distinctive in claiming that the compassion of God has taken the radical form of incarnate solidarity and of forgiveness instead of retributive punishment.

4.5 Sadly PWAP makes little if any theological progress on UFW, judged in these terms. Its appeals to 'the common good' are too vague and awkwardly moored. Its references to religious and spiritual change are insufficiently connected to the capacity of the church, rightly challenged by its own Gospel, to be a transformative community (though see the hopeful comment about witness on p.16, first para).

¹ Nigel Biggar, 'Is God Redundant?' in (eds.) Malcolm Brown and Peter Sedgwick, *Putting Theology to Work: A theological symposium on Unemployment and the Future of Work* (CCBI and William Temple Foundation, 1998), pp.58-59.

4.6 Meanwhile too much hope is pinned on notions of generalised goodwill. Too much expectation is placed on politicians to ensure the market is kept within the bounds of social and ecological justice, with insufficient regard to the extent to which 'structures of sin' are peopled, and to the extent to which equal votes in parliaments have been displaced by unequal votes in rigged markets. Social justice is given little tradition-specific content. Useful definitions of 'flourishing' and 'prosperity' make no reference to worship as the crucial means to figure out what is really worth-it-ful in life. And Christian ethics is given the purely subsidiary role of needing to "stay in step" (p.20, forth para) with the world's evolving understanding.

4.7 Even where useful theological tools are highlighted, they are deployed in such imprecise and romanticised terms as to lose both meaning and utility. For example, we are told that Christians believe that appropriately delegated authority comes from God (p.33, second para). But what difference does this make? In the absence of explanation (that having our power made relative to the *only truly non-competitive source of power* really changes 'the power agenda') what does it mean? Are not non-believers likely to say, "So what?"¹

4.8 The notion of human beings as made "in the image of God" (p.34, third para, and *passim*) is also wheeled out, inevitably. In this case it is linked to "the intrinsic and equal worth and dignity of each human individual." But this interpretation, which owes everything to post-Enlightenment thought and not very much to the Hebrew Scriptures, is in no way dependent on the doctrine used to ground it.

4.9 To make sense of *imago Dei* we need to understand that it is about divine purpose and destiny, and therefore about *common* (rather than individual) identity. Secular theorists have rightly claimed that 'humanity' is a contestable abstraction; they may not agree with Jews and Christians that it is *participation in God that makes us one*, but they are gratifyingly less willing to be softheaded about "human solidarity" on any other basis. To build on romantic notions of ourselves is to build on sand, and to neglect the true foundations. It is God's economy not ours that comes first.²

4.10 *Imago Dei* is as much about who we are becoming as it is about who we are. Indeed it is a direct challenge to 'biology as destiny' (or 'society' or 'economics' as destiny, for that matter). Faith in markets or in economic planning makes a poor substitute for this. Indeed it falsifies it. The *imago Dei* certainly unleashes potential and co-creativity with God (as PWAP rightly says), but it re-forges these in terms of a new community that transcends the usual boundaries, barriers and forms of ownership we put around people.

4.11 Nigel Biggar again: "[We should] prevent the impression from settling in the minds of non-religious leaders that the notion of being made in God's image is a quaint religious expression for certain qualities of human being that all decent liberal folk take entirely for granted."³

¹ This is a point expounded widely in the thought of the current Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams.

² It would have been good to have some reference in PWAP to the economic traditions and resources of the Christian community, including the challenging ideas of 'Sabbath economics' and 'the great feast' See: Ched Myers, *The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics* (Church of the Saviour, Washington DC, 2002).

³ Biggar, *ibid*.

5. Next steps: debating ethics, purpose, prosperity, poverty and the Gospel

5.1 The overall judgement of this Ekklesia analysis of the *Prosperity with a Purpose* report from Churches Together in Britain and Ireland is that, while it contains some interesting ideas, proposals and pointers, it (thankfully) does not justify its claims to be a wholehearted endorsement of market economics; its generalisations about markets, growth, enterprise and social justice are too imprecise to be serviceable; and, most disappointing of all, its theological grounding is very weak.

5.2 The difficulty in responding to the summary report of a lengthy research and writing process is that it is likely to be received as a negative rather than a positive contribution to the debate. Although this paper does not pull punches about what we see as the weaknesses of PWAP, we offer these comments very much in the spirit of partnership and constructive engagement.

5.3 Ekklesia recognises that its own theological approach questions many of the shibboleths of 'middle axiom' and 'correlative' theological methodology that inform (whether consciously or not) the approach taken in the report. But we would argue that these methodological assumptions are long overdue for questioning. Ecumenical social theology in Britain and Ireland can and should move forward from here, and the discussion around PWAP is a real opportunity to 'turn the corner' and take the traditions of the Gospel (as well as the need for "new forms of wisdom", p.13) with renewed seriousness.

5.4 We note that in the early stages of the PWAP process, the project actually had a different title. It was to be called *Poverty, Prosperity and the Gospel*. In our view it is a shame that this orientation was not preserved. This is not because we dispute the need to focus on 'prosperous societies' in an open and positive (though not uncritical) way. Rather, it is because our key resource for thinking about how we understand human flourishing is the Gospel of Jesus Christ that redeems us, and our key challenge is to face the reality of the majority of the world's citizens – still much nearer to what most of us would call poverty (even destitution) than prosperity.

5.5 PWAP's emphasis on lifting people out of poverty, rather than 'levelling down' in some false version of egalitarianism, is of course correct. But without recognising and confronting the grotesque, massive inequalities and power imbalances that scar our world, the prescriptions we (the affluent) come up with will continue to be inadequate, whatever rhetoric we dress them up in. For the key question we face is not one of 'pure' economy, it is theological: Is every 'I' stuck in being 'me'? Is every 'us' stuck with being a tribal 'we'? Or is there some way in which we can discover a path that offers hope for all of us?¹ The Gospel says that there is, that it is not a product but a gift, that it challenges all our received wisdom about how we organise our lives and our world. It signals a hope at the heart of the world without being limited to it. That provides the possibility of real flourishing for people and planet.

5.7 One last remark. Theological thinking requires hard application and the willingness to familiarise oneself with deep traditions of enquiry. Even in the churches it is unpopular. But the idea that cheap or headline thinking will help us in issues such as those covered by *Prosperity with A Purpose* is an illusion.²

Ekklesia, 28 February 2005

www.ekklesia.co.uk

¹ These questions are adapted from David E. Jenkins, *The Contradiction of Christianity* (SCM Press, 1976). See also his *Market Whys and Wherefores: Thinking again about markets, politics and people* (Cassell, 2000).

² See: 'When did theologians lose interest in theology?' in Nicholas Lash, *The Beginning and the End of Religion* (Cambridge University Press, 1996).