OF SIN

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Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992). Word for human connection and joy drops to describe the wounding (e.g., of child rearing) that damage and personal.


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CHAPTER FIVE

BEYOND “THE ADDICT’S EXCUSE”:

SIN, PUBLIC ADDICTION, AND ECCLESIAL RECOVERY

Ched Myers

So the people worked all day and all the next day, gathering the quails; the least anyone gathered was ten homers. But while the meat was still between their teeth, before it was consumed, the anger of God was kindled against the people, and God struck them with a very great plague. So that place was called Kibroh-hattanah (which means, “the graves of craving”).

—Num 11:32-34

The great obstacle is simply this: the conviction that we cannot change because we are dependent upon what is wrong. But that is the addict’s excuse, and we know that it will not do.

—Wendell Berry

“The vocabulary of Christian faith suffers from misunderstanding at every turn, but no one term is as badly understood in both society and church as the little word, "sin,"” writes the Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall. Most modern critics of Christianity would concur. Dour Christian discourses of sin have been favorite targets of the culture of narcissism. For such critics, however, the problem lies in churchly concepts of sin that are too severe, too absolute, and too ubiquitous—in short, too big. Hall’s argument, however, is that the notions of sin circulating in the North American churches persist in being too small.

A fatal mistake is made, Hall contends, whenever the church switches its focus from sin, a matter pertaining to the human condition, to sins, transgressions to be cataloged and controlled. “The individualism fostered by pietistic
and liberal expressions of Protestantism has greatly aggravated the tendency to identity sin with negative qualities (sins)—specifically, negative personal failings.”

Dominant culture Christianity in the United States has indeed domesticated the language of sin. Conservatives tend to focus upon personal morality while equivocating about structural and historical manifestations of human alienation. Such religion continues to prosper in our social context because its essential individualism is congruent with the privatizing culture of late capitalism. Liberals, meanwhile, having assimilated into the optimistic secular myth of progress, tend to be embarrassed by the rhetoric of sin. Exceptions were the “social gospel” and “neo-orthodoxy” movements in this century, which attempted to reassert the public and political character of sin. Both movements remained, however, steeped in theologies of historical entailment, and excluded from their critique not only their own gender, race, and class privileges but also the essential superiority of the American national project.

The problem is that neither privatistic nor positivistic theologies can account for the horrors of the twentieth century. It is not surprising, then, that in the last quarter century it has been Third World liberation theologians, working in contexts of severe human oppression and violence, who have consistently articulated an enlarged discourse of sin. Gustavo Gutierrez, for example, writes: “Sin is evident in oppressive structures, in the exploitation of man by man, in the domination and slavery of peoples, races, and social classes. Sin appears, therefore, as the fundamental alienation, the root of a situation of injustice and exploitation.”

Recently Third World theologians have directed their reflections on sin specifically toward the First World church. The “Road to Damascus” Kairos document, for example, denounces “the sin of idolatry . . . that serves the total war being waged against the people, leading to the death and destruction of our communities.”

But such pointed appeals from the Third World have made relatively little impact upon mainstream churches in the United States. If anything, these churches are increasingly defensive, reflecting the dominant culture’s anxieties as the national dream of ever-expanding political hegemony and ever-increasing economic affluence fades.” Thus while most middle-class people now intuit that they can no longer count on upward mobility for their children, their tendency is to channel their resentment toward the poor rather than trying to understand why the concentration of wealth is intensifying. Indeed, the more social and economic systems are restructured at home and abroad to benefit capital—at the expense of the workplace, the neighborhood, and the home—the more First World churches seem to retreat into an obsession with personal sins.

Despite a growing sense that our exploitation of the earth is unsustainable, there are few serious, popular efforts to curtail the consumption that makes this exploitation both profitable and inevitable. Affluent North Americans are increasingly unable to stop their self-defeating, neurotic responses to a way of life that is out of control. We have become externally reliant upon a socioeconomic system that destroys the land, exhausts its resources, and alienates and exploits human labor. “The steps we have taken to quell the anxiety,” writes Paul Wachtel “have actually exacerbated our sense of insecurity and—by ironic logic fami more of the sam and still further .

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ironic logic familiar to the student of neuroses—have thereby called forth still more of the same kind of efforts and thus still more undermining of security and still further acceleration of a one-sided and self-defeating pattern.

In his classic *Whatever Became of Sin?*, psychologist Karl Menninger caricatured this kind of "American progress":

We gloated; we gloried; we prospered; we preempted; we excised; we extended; we consolidated; we succeeded! We shut our eyes to all that was unpleasant about these words and these processes. We were too busy to discern the misery created everywhere, too smug to see the devastation we were wreaking, too greedy to recognize the waste and the inequity and the ugliness and the immorality... Suddenly we awoke from our pleasant dreams with a fearful realization that something was wrong.¹

What is wrong, says Wendell Berry plainly, is that "we all live by robbing nature, but our standard of living demands that the robbery shall continue."² We are so internally captive to our illusions, excesses, and appetites that we can no longer imagine the world differently—and our little theologies of sin can't explain why. Berry, however, has this suggestion: we are using "the addict's excuse, and we know that it will not do."³

**SIN AS ADDICTION**

If a representative analogue for sin in a Third World context is oppression—the inability to say yes to life because of deprivation and injustice—then a corresponding First World analogue may well be addiction as the inability to say no because of captivity to pathological desires. "Empire," wrote the historian William Appleman Williams, "is the child of an inability or an unwillingness to live within one's own means; empire as a way of life is predicated upon having more than one needs."⁴ An apt biblical metaphor for this condition might well be the alternative account of the manna story found in Num 11. Indeed, addiction is a kind of deadly "too muchness," in which we hoard the gifts of creation and overconsume in defiance of Exodus 16's express instruction to limit consumption based on need and to distribute the goods equitably.⁵ The Numbers version of the manna tale captures perfectly the "plague": in our anxiety over the possibility of scarcity and our lust for gratification, we gorge ourselves to death (Num 11:34). Yet today it is the poor who precede us to the "graves of craving" that our addictions have dug.

There have been three recent notable attempts by North American theologians to reflect on addiction as an analogy for sin. Psychologist Gerald May's *Addiction and Grace* sees addiction as universal in the human experience, and thus as a primary metaphor for alienation: "We succumb because the energy of our desire becomes attached, nailed, to specific behaviors, objects, or people. Attachment, then, is the process that enslaves desire and creates the state of addiction."⁶ May identifies two classes of addiction—the *attractive* (which attaches compulsion) and the *aversive* (which attaches repulsion)—and explores their psychological, neurological, and theological character.
Reformed theologian Cornelius Plantinga, in *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be* acknowledges the condition of addiction as tragic: "Like the falleness of the human race, the chaos of addiction comes out of particular human character and sin but also out of the temptations and disorganizing forces resident in an addict’s home and neighborhood and maybe even in her genes. The serpent is both within and without."  

Catholic moral theologian Patrick McCormick’s *Sin as Addiction* considers the traditional "stain" and "crime" models of sin, and then proposes a "disease" model that allows us to move from punitive to therapeutic strategies of intervention. He defines addiction as "a pathological relationship with a (normally) mood altering substance or process":

[It] promises the "user" a consistent, dependable and repeatable solution to the anxieties and pains of life. ... As the person becomes more and more immersed in and dependent upon this substance or process, he/she experiences himself/herself as less free, more compulsive. At the same time the addictive process begins to produce tangible and painful side-effects or consequences. More of the substance or process is required to kill the pain. ... The solution has become the problem, but continues to be employed as if it were a solution. In order to continue the use of the addiction solution and maintain the addictive belief system the person must now engage in all sorts of denial and deception to ignore its counter-productivity and painfulness. ... The addiction operates as a chronic and progressive disease, disintegrating the physical, spiritual, emotional and psychological life of the person, leading inevitably to insanity and/or death."

McCormick contends that addiction has significant "theological likenesses." It arises from a "denial of creatureliness," our inability/unwillingness to live within limits, seeking instead the omnipotence promised by the delusional attachment. It represents also a denial of the Creator by its idolatrous fixation on the addictive object. Addiction seduces with the promise of liberation from pain, only to deliver progressive enslavement, which it masks through a delusional world of Denial. It is sustained through a web of lies: "The Devil is a murderer from the beginning ... a liar and the father of lies" (Jn 8:44).

There are several compelling reasons why the addiction model can help restore a more comprehensive discourse—and more specifically a political theology—of sin in the North American context. First, personal addiction in North America today is epidemic. One must ask what social forces engender and sustain the current high levels of substance abuse and compulsive behavior among the populace. At the same time, the recovery movement (particularly Twelve-Step programs) is probably the most widespread form of individual and group transformative work current in the culture, cutting across gender, race, and class lines. McCormick points out that the classic models of sin have been defined and adjudicated by professional clerics, judges, and psychologists, whereas the diagnosis of addiction and the practice of recovery has largely been the domain of addicts themselves. The ubiquity of the addiction/recovery phenomena represents a sociocultural gestalt that cries out for theological reflection.

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Second, addiction offers a more complex view of evil than a moral anthropology that presumes that humans make "free" choices. Because the addict in denial cannot "see" her addiction, though surrounded and consumed by it, moral exhortation alone is impotent to change her behavior. Addiction is understood as a captivity, which means the addict is victim as well as victimizer. The recovering addict, consequently, must address both his injury and his culpability. On one hand he must seek to understand how severance from his true self—because of life-texts of abandonment, violation, poverty, and so forth—generated the void that addiction tried to fill. On the other hand addicts must also "confront the damage they have caused, to accept the consequences of their addiction and to shoulder responsibility for all their actions."  

Third, the model of addiction moves beyond behavioral symptomology ("sins") to a radical analysis of dysfunction as a way of life ("sin"). This emphasizes the predatory, lethal, and even demonic nature of sin. Addiction spirals exponentially toward destruction: "No matter how they start, addictions eventually center in distress and in the self-defeating choice of an agent to relieve the distress. In fact, trying to cure distress with the same thing that caused it is typically the mechanism that closes the trap on an addict."  

It has been noted before that the apostle Paul's meditation on the enslaving power of sin in Romans sounds to modern ears like someone wrestling with the advanced stages of addiction: "I am sold under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate...I see in my limbs another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my limbs. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Rom 7:14 f, 23 f). Unlike the "sins" that moral philosophies seek to manage, the wages of addiction are death (Rom. 6:23).

The problem with the addiction model as it is understood by most First World psychological and religious professionals is that it has, like our theologies of sin, been domesticated as a strictly personal pathology. The social implications of the model are rarely addressed. While the role of the addict's family system is acknowledged, the role of the economic or political system is not. But addiction is biologically and socially systemic, both in its genesis and maintenance. Human appetites and deficits, engendered by the society at large, are exploited by addictive substances and relationships, which means that addiction has a complex personal and collective history. The addicted personality is embedded in social networks of complicity, as McCormick recognizes: "The burgeoning data on co-dependence, co-addiction, addictive families and addictive societies provides verifiable evidence concerning the ways in which addiction operates on the personal, familial and societal levels as well as the manner in which addiction is communicated from generation to generation."  

Anne Wilson Schaef has pioneered the application of the addiction model to organizations  and to society as a whole. Her work has spawned other efforts to relate the model to the economy  and to other cultural strata such as education and religion. I agree with this emerging literature that we should view the personal and political dimensions of addiction as ultimately inseparable.
DIAGNOSING PUBLIC ADDICTION

For purposes of the following discussion I will refer to individual pathology as "household addiction," recognizing the essentially domestic locus and often covert nature of the behavior. Collective pathology, on the other hand, I will call "public addiction." This not only underlines its social character, but also acknowledges that the addictive behavior can be engaged in quite publicly—indeed it is often rewarded by the body politic. McCormick names several examples in the First World context of what I am calling "public addiction": consumerism, colonialism, militarism, and sexism. In the United States, individuals and households are relentlessly seduced by the promises and the products of consumer culture. Our desires often become so attached to commodities that we are truly possessed by our possessions—we simply must have the new dress, the nicer home, or the computer upgrade. Many consumer products themselves are manufactured to breed psychological and/or physiological dependence: titillating soap operas, sugar-filled fast food, and the planned obsolescence of virtually everything.27

Huge marketing apparatuses, in turn, both create and sustain the addiction by creating a vast, intense universe of artificial needs. Popular cultural forms such as music, art, and storytelling are put at the service of commercial marketing—a long-standing corporate design, argues Stuart Ewen, to "transform the consciousness of a proletariat into that of a consumeriat." Advertising is a relentless aural and visual onslaught upon our consciousness with objectified texts and alluring subtexts that we cannot help but absorb. "Why ask why?" taunts a popular current beer commercial: the perfect mantra for an addicted consumeriat that passively ingests the aggressive marketing discourses that seek to form us economically, socially, politically and spiritually.29

Capitalism triumphs, warned Herbert Marcuse in One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society, when "people recognize themselves in their commodities": "Free choice among a wide variety of goods and services does not signify freedom if these goods and services sustain social controls over a life of toil and fear—that is, they sustain alienation. And the spontaneous reproduction of superimposed needs by the individual does not establish autonomy; it only testifies to the efficacy of the controls." When the opportunity to choose between twenty varieties of deodorants becomes our working definition of freedom, and we no longer experience cognitive dissonance when Budweiser sponsors spots on "responsible drinking," our identity as a consumeriat has truly been consummated. This collective condition reflects the compulsive and delusional nature of addiction.

Plantinga lists eight dynamics characteristic of the phenomena of addiction (though he cautions against attempting a "neat taxonomy")30. Let us test the culture of consumerism against this list, using brief, suggestive examples from both the household and public spheres:
C ADDICTION

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| Unpleasant aftereffects of  | Struggle to pay for products bought on       | Adjustments in interest rates and money         |
| such behavior, e.g.,        | credit                                      | supplies                                        |
| withdrawal and self-        |                                               | Renewed economic growth will solve all problems |
| reproach                    |                                               | (tax cuts, wage freezes, public subsidy of new  |
| Vows to moderate/quit,      |                                              | development)                                    |
| followed by relapses and    |                                               | Capital flight, erosion of labor codes,         |
| attendant distress          |                                               | corporate domination of local communities      |

| Easeing distress with new  | Working harder to earn more to pay bills and  |
| rounds of same or          | enable more purchases                        |                                                |
| “companion” addictive      |                                               |                                                |

| Deterioration of work and   | Debt mounts, creditors demand payment and     |                                                |
| relationships with         | refuse to admit overextension                |                                                |
| accompanying denial and    | Increasingly desperate efforts to increase    |                                                |
| deception                  | income or restructure credit; money fetishism|

| Compulsivity in addiction; | Inability to reduce material expectations,    |
| will is enforced           | mortgaging of assets                          |                                                |

| Drawing others into web    | Complicity of family, banks, and employers    |
| of addiction =             | with financial demise of consumer addict      |

| CODEPENDENCE                |                                               |                                                |
While these correlations are neither precise nor comprehensive, they do suggest that the addiction model can illumine individual and collective economic behavior.

McCormick identifies a further key dynamic in the destructive spiral of addiction: the pendulum of manic omnipotence in the fixation/attachment phase, and of depressive impotence in the "crash" phase. One can see this same dynamic in the national mood swings that correspond to perceptions concerning the ebb and flow of the economy. Skyrocketing personal salaries for major CEOs and entertainers are watched by a mostly underemployed and undercompensated working class with envious fascination (publicly lionized grandiosity) while those on public assistance or the homeless or immigrants are scapegoated (publicly "split-off" depression). The addiction prevents people from seeing that both manic and depressive manifestations are signs that the system isn't working.

The private and public compulsion of consumerism drives an economy which, as Barbara Brandt has shown, also keeps us addicted to work and to money. A wasteful, growth-dependent economy is unsustainable in the long run, whether the limits are determined by ozone depletion, aquifer contamination, fossil fuel shortages, the trash crisis, or any other combination of ecological indices. The only question is how long this complex addicting and addictive system can perpetuate itself before the organism collapses.

In the meantime, however, not only is this economy slowly but surely destroying the environment it mercilessly utilizes, but also the human societies it purportedly serves, by intensifying the stratification of wealth and the exploitation of human labor. This latter phenomenon is both domestic and international. Writing in the Los Angeles Times, Jeff Gates summarizes the economic polarization in the United States over the last decade:

The financial wealth of the top 1% of Americans now exceeds the combined net worth of the bottom 95%. The wealth of the Forbes 400 richest Americans grew by an average $940 million each over the past two years (topping a combined $1 trillion). That's while the modest net worth of the bottom 40% shrunk by 80% between 1983 and 1995. Eighty-six percent of stock market gains between 1989 and 1997 were harvested by the top 10% of households, while fully 42% flowed to the topmost 1%.

Accompanying this dysfunctional distribution of wealth are a whole array of pathological behaviors, which fetishize not only commodities, but also money itself, whether through the public lionizing of the lifestyles of the rich and famous or through the stunning recent growth in the gambling industry.

In the international political economy, Walden Bello characterizes the First World as draining the Third World: "Draconian policies of debt collection produced a staggering net transfer of financial resources—$155 billion—from the South to the North between 1984 and 1990." This pillage is accomplished primarily through global policies of "structural adjustment" that have been devastating among the havens but not just rhetorical discourse of self-implied a negation.

Standing Temple prophet John was a militant Jew who preached the words of the Lord to you and to yourselves, "Ye shall be saved if ye keep the sabbath day holy.

A discourse of social, economic, and political cultures within the context of the system and the system that grows and by the nineteenth-century liberal Protestant continuity, there may be found:

The Tawhīd is genuinely popular the First World. Pietistic Protestants explain the Tawhīd...
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structural adjustment” that have been devastating for the poor, both at home and abroad. Sin-as-addiction among the have-nots, we must conclude, makes sin-as-oppression inevitable among the have-nots.

CONVERSION AS RECOVERY

What might it mean, wonders Hall, for dominant culture Christians in North American to rediscover “a hamartiology (doctrine of sin) that was truly—and not just rhetorically—biblical”? In the prophetic traditions of the Bible, the discourse of sin and repentance go together. The prophetic call to repent implied a negation of continuity with the historical project of Israel, insofar as this project was predicated upon illusions of a benign national past and an equally benign future (see e.g., Isa 6 and Jer 7).

Standing firmly within this tradition of “harsh love” was the late Second Temple prophet John the Baptist. According to the ancient historian Josephus, John was a militant Jewish nationalist who objected to the Hellenistic alliances of the Judean client-king Herod Antipas. According to the gospels, however, his preaching relentlessly attacked Judean ideologies of entitlement: “Who warned you of the wrath to come? Bear fruits that befit repentance! Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor,’ for I tell you God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham” (Lk 3:7f). This discourse offers a radical analysis of the system: “Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees” (Lk 3:9).

It is not a moral exhortation to “be better” but a historical ultimatum. This challenge is not primarily directed to individuals, but to a people. Our historical project is headed toward destruction, it claims; we must turn around and move in the opposite direction. The synoptic gospels all portray Jesus of Nazareth as taking up this same message of John after the authorities had silenced the Baptist (Mk 1:14f pat).

A discourse of repentance that calls for radical discontinuity with the social, economic, and political order enjoys little hospitality today among the dominant culture churches of the United States. The reason is simple: for those entitled within the system, the greatest social value is continuity. From their perspective the system works: it has no fatal contradictions; it perpetuates itself; it even grows and spreads. This is why conversion—a theme once taken seriously by nineteenth-century Protestantism—is today either wholly marginalized (by liberal Protestants) or wholly spiritualized (by evangelicals). Repentance as discontinuity resonates strongly, however, with those in recovery from addiction. What might we learn from them?

The Twelve-Step movement has emerged over the last half-century as a genuinely popular insurrection against the epidemic of household addiction in the First World. Alcoholics Anonymous was developed in relationship to the pietistic Protestantism of the “Oxford Movement” of the 1930s. These origins explain the Twelve-Step tradition’s oft-noted congruence with the theology of conversion, but also caution us to beware of its limitations.

Because the Twelve-Step tradition has worked within the privatizing religio-psychological paradigms of capitalist modernity, it has tended to give
nonpolitical, personal definitions of recovery. The systemic character of our public addiction, however, warns us against individualistic notions of recovery. If I am liberated from household addiction, but ignore the social and political expressions of, or contributors to, that addiction, I have only learned to function better in a pathological public system. What are needed instead are collective and long-term disciplines of “turning around.”

Still, I believe the Twelve-Step tradition reflects three important insights for a theology of addiction and recovery. First, it is a “conversionist” model. Step One, as essential as it is uncomfortable, is the acknowledgment that the addictive system that controls me is destructive to me and to all those around me. To be liberated from the nihilistic logic of that system I must

appeal to and yield to a “Higher Power” (Two and Three);
accept my culpability in that system and “confess” it to others (Four and Five);
seek to “repent” of those practices (Six and Seven);
make reparation to those I’ve wronged (Eight and Nine).

The Twelve-Step process assumes that because the addictive system cannot be reformed, we must struggle to live in radical discontinuity with it. In this sense it is “apocalyptic”: it seeks to overthrow the dominating system and concedes that the power to do so must come from “outside.”

The aim is, in other words, nothing less than revolutionary transformation. As the recovering addict becomes stronger he invites other family members (as well as other addicts) to join in the insurrection against dysfunctional behavior so that the family system as a whole may be transformed. This insight need only be politicized. As Herbert Marcuse put it in his classic Essay on Liberation: “Voluntary servitude (voluntary insufficiency as it is introjected into the individuals), which justifies the benevolent masters, can be broken only through a political practice which reaches the roots of containment and contentment. ... Such a practice involves a break with the familiar, the routine ways of seeing, hearing, feeling, understanding things so that the organism may become receptive to the potential forms of a nonaggressive, nonexploitive world.”

The second key insight of the Twelve-Step process—particularly for North Americans—is that it begins with our own experience of pain, oppression, culpability, and responsibility. An abstract analysis of the system is impotent; we are the subjects of the struggle for social change. This is crucial if we are to take seriously what Marcuse and other New Left thinkers called the “social psychosis of mass capitalist culture” as it relates to Marx’s theory of alienation. The commodification of life demonstrated the “irresistible tendency toward the universalization of alienation ... turning all human subjects into passive spectators of their own alienated existence.” More recently Michael Lerner has described this as the “surplus powerlessness” of capitalist individualism.
The field of popular education has shown that if people perceive themselves to be powerless, they must be engaged at the level of their own experience if they are going to be animated toward change. This is what popular theater practitioner Augusto Boal calls moving from spectating to “spec-acting.” It is true that in capitalist formations the focus on oneself risks degenerating into subjectivism, a danger we have noted already in both religious and therapeutic culture, including Twelve-Step programs. But we cannot avoid this error by falling into the opposite trap, which concludes that structural problems are so vast and remote that “nothing I can do will make any difference.” We must acknowledge and understand how we are part of the addictive system (complicity) and how it is part of us (internalization). This allows us to recognize the power of the system over us (our addiction) in a way that does not concede impotence or resignation (the addict’s excuse).

The third, and perhaps most important, aspect of the Twelve-Step recovery process is its recognition of the necessity of an ongoing community of accountability and support in sustaining resistance to the addictive system. However, great our internal opposition to recovery may be, the external opposition will be much more formidable, because the status quo always attempts to constrain fundamental changes in the system. In the family system, those who hold power are invariably the ones who, while rhetorically affirming the addict’s quest for recovery, refuse to acknowledge their own complicity. Such “conservatism” is often desperate to maintain the family ideal (how it views itself) and reputation (how it is viewed in the community). As the recovering addict tries to stand her ground while refusing to cooperate with old family patterns, the alternative community of recovery becomes crucial as a place of understanding, identity, and support.

This is, of course, much more difficult in the case of public addiction, because it means breaking with the national “family” and its myths. Moreover, there is no socially constructed “shame” when it comes to consumption-addiction in this culture the way there is with, for example, alcoholism. Because the economic, social, and ideological mechanisms of seduction in the dominant culture are so powerful, and the mechanisms of repression so potentially vicious, a community of resistance and alternative consciousness-formation becomes key to a strategy of recovery from public addiction. If our diagnosis of the sociopolitical pathologies that define life in the United States were clearer, our recovery groups would necessarily become more “politicized” as basic Christian communities in the Third World long ago discovered.

In sum, the traditional bourgeois Protestant notion of sin as moral failure simply cannot explain why it is so difficult for church members to confront public addiction such as consumerism in capitalist culture. Liberals have discovered that people do not “reform their behavior” just because they are so exhorted, even when it is argued that it is in their self-interest to change. Evangelicals have discovered that highly emotive “experiences of salvation” prove to be inadequate for the long-term struggle against the “old self” in a society that rewards pathological behavior. Perhaps then a First World theology of sin
should reconsider the congruence between the old biblical language and the new discourse of the Twelve-Step tradition, in order to explore repentance as a strategy of intervention in an addictive system and conversion as a strategy of recovery.\footnote{The term “conversion” is used here in its original biblical sense, referring to a complete transformation of the soul.}

COMMUNITIES OF RESISTANCE AND RECOVERY

It is probably fair to say that most churches in the United States today have at least one Twelve-Step group meeting in their halls during the week. What might it take for our churches to themselves become communities of discontinuity with public addiction? First we need to name our sinful condition clearly. Consumerism, to take our example, is mildly scolded in our churches on occasion, but hardly considered to be a deadly addiction! To propose it as such would obviously provoke congregational opposition. This would not in most cases be attributable to any deep commitment to consumerist values and practices, however. Rather the objection would be that issues of economic culture are simply too large for regular church folk to deal with. Where, after all, would we begin?

We must recognize this as a socialized response. We have been formed to believe that we cannot make any real “difference” in the economic system unless we are powerful politicians, bankers, or corporate chiefs. Insofar as it concerns the structural imperatives of capitalism regarding profit, production, and power this is, unfortunately, all too true:

When we consider where we experience some degree of freedom, we always find it exists within a broader framework over which we have no control. We are like the little child who is free to run away from home but not free to leave the block. The environment is a conspicuous example. We can recycle paper and other waste materials, but industrial America fouls the environment in ways we seem helpless to restrain. In large measure it is the nature and dynamic of the economic order that controls the framework within which we can make only rather inconsequential decisions.\footnote{This is a critique of the idea that personal choices can significantly impact global environmental issues.}

But this truth strips us of our illusion that we are somehow not entrapped in an addictive system (Step One!).\footnote{The Twelve-Step program is a method for overcoming addiction that involves admitting personal powerlessness over the disease of addiction.} It thus presents us with two, somewhat paradoxical challenges.

On one hand it means that there is no such thing as strictly “personal liberation” from public addiction, a delusion that capitalist culture promotes vigorously. Just as credulous consumers imagine that a racy sports car will “set them free,” so do many disaffected individuals imagine that they can disconnect from the dominant culture by wearing thrift store clothes or by fleeing the city. But private strategies of deflection only strengthen a system whose purpose is to privatize the consciousness of the consumerist. Our practices of recovery must address the public character of the addiction and must therefore include disciplines of collective analysis and action.

On the other hand, we are not absolved of individual responsibility. Just because we cannot personally change a system does not mean we have ceased to exist as moral agents to convince us to live, as isolated participants in an act of total capitulation. Exoneration are both culpability cloth. A comm

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\footnote{The idea of a “counter current” refers to a movement against the prevailing cultural norms.}

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The United States today have at holl during the week. What some communities of discontent name our sinful condition, the addiction to consumerism in our churches. To propose it as opposition. This would not in the new dissent to consumerist values and demands be that issues of economic policy to deal with. Where, after all, we have been formed to serve in the economic system, corporate chief. Insofar as it is regarding profit, production,

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of individual responsibility. Just does not mean we have ceased to exist as moral and political agents. This is precisely the erasure capitalism seeks: to convince us that socioeconomic processes are so complex and cosmic that we, as isolated producers/consumers, are absolved of all obligation to think critically or to act discontinuously. But this reflects the late stages of addiction: total capitulation to the structural imperatives of the system. Privatization and exonerate are the warp and woof of denial in public addiction; to embrace both culpability and responsibility, therefore, is to begin to unravel the whole cloth. A community of recovery reasserts responsibility and repoliticizes it, empowering members to take steps in their political bodies to resist the imperatives and expectations of the addictive body politic in the actual social, political economic spaces of their lives.

This requires us to reimagine the church not as a venue for religious entertainment (in which most attendees are essentially spectators) but as a committed community of recovering addicts (in which each member is a “spectator” struggling for sobriety). A quarter century ago Brazilian theologian Rubem Alvez called for precisely such a restoration of the church: “What the biblical sociology of liberation tells us through the symbol of community is unequivocal: the creative event cuts its way through the social inertia by creating counterculture.” This conviction has in each era of Christendom inspired renewal movements to attempt to disestablish the church and to find ways to live discontinuously from the dominant culture, from the early monastic movement to Franciscanism, and from the Anabaptists to nineteenth-century Christian socialist communarians. In our time it has spawned base community movements throughout the Third World and elsewhere.

Countercultural movements have failed, contended Alvez, whenever they lacked both “communal discipline” and “political practice.” The ancient metaphor for such discipline, Gerald May reminds us, is asceticism (from the Greek askeo, “to exercise”): “Any struggle with addiction is a desert because it involves deprivation,” he writes. “With major addictions . . . the desert can grow to encompass all of life: every habit may be exposed to the searing, purifying sun; every false prop is vulnerable to relinquishment; and one can be left truly dependent upon the grace of God for sustenance.” What “ascetic” disciplines might the church as a community of recovery from public addiction practice and promote?

REVISING THE EVANGELICAL DISCIPLINES

A fruitful beginning place might be to reappropriate the three great “evangelical disciplines” articulated in the old monastic Rule of St. Benedict (490–543 C.E.): poverty, chastity, and obedience. The early monks understood three key things about “civilization”:

1. It is built upon the concentration of wealth and exploitation. If their communities were to repent they must become self-sufficient as possible.
2. The root of wealth-concentration is private property. If they wanted to resist the "temptations of the world" they must renounce exclusive ownership.

3. The exploitation of human labor is the root of all alienation (Marx later rediscovered this). If their communities were to restore human dignity they must practice manual (i.e., unalienated) labor.

For the first monastic communities the vow of "poverty" actually intended to inspire a social model that would eradicate poverty.

Today North Americans "spend $5 billion a year on special diets to lower their caloric consumption, while the world's poorest 400 million people are so undernourished they are likely to suffer stunted growth, mental retardation, or death," writes Alan Durning. The affluent clearly need disciplines different than compulsive diets and obsessive gym workouts, which only mask the addiction to consumerism! The vow of poverty today might represent the equivalent of Steps One through Three in the Twelve-Step tradition. To recognize our public addiction to economic privilege and power means keeping the dysfunctional and deadly disparity of wealth always in view, and daily deciding to "turn over" our economic lives to the alternative reality of the divine "Great Economy" of grace. [9]

Three household disciplines of "economic sobriety" come to mind. The "simple living" movement has been well-documented. As a spiritual discipline, so-called "downward mobility" is necessary but not sufficient, as it too easily can remain a private (and for many, a privileged) strategy. Groups such as the Ministry of Money have developed processes specifically for affluent people, including exposure tours to poor countries and suggestions for personal economic partnerships. Other groups are trying to help individuals and churches invest responsibly, particularly given the need for capital in poor neighborhoods. Building local organizations that promote economic sharing, on the other hand, takes us more into the public struggle. Experiments in alternative economics range from communal common pures to community credit unions. Collectivist living and cohousing arrangements, while difficult to sustain under capitalism, nevertheless encourage the recovery of traditional practices of extended family and hospitality that have atrophied in modern urban culture. Cooperative work strikes at the heart of alienated and alienating wage-labor, as do some of the emerging "green" and socially responsible business practices. Land trusts and agricultural or environmental conservancies represent an alternative to private ownership, and community money systems and the burgeoning Community Supported Agriculture movement address the challenge of "recommunitizing" the marketplace.

An even better discipline of recovery is making ourselves available to the poor. People of privilege should socially relocate to live and work in proximity to disenfranchised people not primarily in order to "help," as in the old missionary model, but in order to view the world from that space. We thus avoid liberal abstractions about poverty and begin to build relationships with poor people. I have found community among the very folk against whom I had been "insulated" by my rooted in such neighborly become our own. Our path to solidarity.

Such disciplines than do those of an traditions for engagement public addiction is hei with it. Lifestyle change sent a political question the distance between and-death struggle of depth of the Refusal." [10]

Behind tradition appreciation of the economic practices, like se humanity. But our approach by the highly sophisticated theory thus also involves fetishism. Rather than we reassert resiliency, the product was made under and so on. [11] This represents the addictive behavior.

In this case, the lack accountability. We make assumptions about private property, only to material things above all, decision making autonomy of the consumer and how we spend up private control. More the expectations of the this, how deeply we are pose of facilitating recovery.

The vow of "obedience"-minded attentiveness the Great Economy. This with the social and economic strategy of engagement is the leap to move into a more collective, the vow of oblivious movement around S.
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The root of all alienation (Marx later articulated) was to restore human dignity they labor.

The “poverty” actually intended to express is a year on special diets to lower one’s body mass index to the lowest 400 million people are so stunted that their growth, mental retardation, or both clearly need disciplines different kinks of the world, which only mask the addiction of the day might represent the equivalent of the dragon. To recognize our power means keeping the dyssavant in view, and daily deciding to native reality of the divine “Great Secret of Sobriety” come to mind. The document. As a spiritual discoursable but not sufficient, as it too privileged strategy. Groups such as ICAN (International Council on Addiction) and some of its suggestions for personal trying to help individuals and the need for capital in poor that promote economic sharing, the struggle. Experiments in alternative practices to community credit arrangements, while difficult to sustain, have atrophied in modern urban and social responsibility business and socially responsible business environmental conservancies represent community money systems and agriculture movement address the issue.

Making oneself available to the cause to live and work in proximity in order to “help,” as in the old world from that space. We thus avoid to build relationships with poor e very folk against whom I had been “insulated” by my suburban, middle-class upbringing. The longer we are rooted in such neighborhoods the more the issues so familiar to the poor become our own. Our work then moves from “aid” to “alliance,” from sympathy to solidarity.

Such disciplines express a “vow of poverty” no more make us poor than do those of an institutionalized monk today. But they do create the conditions for engagement with bigger structural issues, because our awareness of addiction is heightened in direct proportion to our actual discontinuity with it. Lifestyle changes are not a political solution to anything, but can represent a political question to everything. As Marcuse put it: “No matter how great the distance between the middle-class revolt in the metropoles and the life-and-death struggle of the wretched of the earth—common to them is the depth of the Refusal.”

Behind traditional vows of “chastity” lay the early monks’ profound appreciation of the fundamental connection between flesh and spirit. Economic practices, like sexuality, are not inherently evil; they are intrinsic to our humanity. But our culture—economic and sexual—are exploited mercilessly by the highly sophisticated techniques of seduction in capitalist culture. Recovery thus also involves a kind of “consumer celibacy” toward commodity fetishism. Rather than yielding to the promises and obfuscation of marketers, we reassert responsibility for what we buy, investigating what conditions the product was made under, who profits from it, what its environmental impact is, and so on. This represents Steps Four through Seven: the ongoing struggle to remove the addictive behavior from our lives.

In this case, chastity is not a private vow, but a discipline of collective accountability. We middle-class people are hostages to deeply ingrained assumptions about private ownership, freedom, and control. This extends not only to material things but also to use of time, space, vocational options, and above all, decision making. Nothing challenges our socialization into the fictive autonomy of the consumer more viscerally than accountability for how we earn and how we spend, because we actually (not hypothetically) have to give up private control. More accurately, however, we are taking back control from the expectations of the market. Such disciplines are the only way to discover how deeply we are possessed by our possessions, and the most effective means of facilitating recovery.

The vow of “obedience” was understood by the monks to represent single-minded attentiveness to the will of God. Here it means living in fidelity to the Great Economy. This requires both a defensive strategy of noncooperation with the social and economic imperatives of the public addiction, and an offensive strategy of engagement with the political Powers. War tax resistance, for example, is a household spiritual disciple of refusing to cooperate with the political economy of militarism, and an act of citizenship responsibility some of us believe to be more meaningful than voting. Because public addiction is legal, the vow of obedience may often lead to civil disobedience. There is a growing movement around Sabbath-keeping that is trying to reassert the healing
(and subversive) character of regular rhythms of rest and “nonproductivity” for both individuals[6] and for society.  

Offensive strategies require us to move beyond household-based lifestyle changes to political action. This includes promoting economic literacy at the grassroots and organizing consumer education and actions, from boycotts to shareholder protests. A Catholic priest was acquitted by a Chicago jury in 1990 after a campaign of defacing neighborhood billboards advertising alcohol and tobacco products that ravaged the lives of so many in his urban, working-class, black and Latino parish. In South Central Los Angeles churches and community groups organized to prohibit the rebuilding of liquor stores after the 1992 uprising, and ended up fighting a white political establishment “under the influence” of the powerful alcohol lobby.  

Other strategies include participation in labor organizing such as the nationally spreading “Living Wage Campaign,” zoning battles, class-action lawsuits, and of course political lobbying. There are many consumer, public interest, and corporate watchdog organizations that would welcome the support of churches, such as Corporate Watch (www.corpwatch.org) and the Alliance for Democracy (www.igc.org/Alliance). The historic disruption of the World Trade Organization by a broad coalition of grassroots advocacy groups in Seattle in late 1999 served as a hopeful wake-up call for populist struggle for global economic justice in the new millennium.  

Steps Eight and Nine demand reparation, the most demanding discipline of obedience in the economic sphere. For those of the dominant culture, resisting addiction to immediate entitlements does little to deconstruct generations of inheritance upon which privilege is based. Reparation means exploring meaningful ways to redistribute wealth and power in conversation with those who have been dispossessed, in order to create justice in the present and to heal past injustices. Sadly, for all our talk of reconciliation, we First World Christians have not seriously grappled with the tasks of reparative politics. The historical victims of oppression, however, have.  

Many Third World countries, for whom the legacy of colonialism is continued indebtedness, are calling for debt forgiveness. Another example is the National Coalition for Redress/Reparations, a successful decade-long campaign by Japanese Americans to get the U.S. government to apologize for the wartime internment of more than 120,000 Japanese Americans, and to provide symbolic redress to surviving internees: “America had sinned, had been sinning for nearly a century, and the wages of sin is spiritual death,” wrote a survivor Edison Tomimaro Uno. “Racism, economic and political opportunism were the root causes of this crime. . . . The Japanese American heritage is no exception to the experience of all minorities and oppressed people who know the bitter sting and enduring stigma of hate, fear and despair in a land of abundance . . . Justice was trampled upon, and it is a responsibility all Americans must share.”  

The struggle of Japanese Americans gave new impetus to the long-ignored National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America. And the oldest wound on the continent, the dispossession of Native America, is also beginning to be addressed, whether through efforts at the United Nations to catalog treaty violation worldwide[2] or in diverse legacy of Christianity symbolic to some degenerative. In fact, they areparation to be therapeutic best current example of movement, calling for donations (www2000usa.com) reconciliation and recovers. And the longer we opt become. For the sin of I bound inextricably to  

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2. Ibid.  
3. Gustavo Gutiérrez, by Sister Caridad Inda and Joaquin  
of rest and “nonproductivity” for beyond household-based lifestyle noting economic literacy at the 1 and actions, from boycotts to tittered by a Chicago jury in 1990 billboards advertising alcohol and any in his urban, working-class, Angeles churches and commun ing of liquor stores after the 1992 itical establishment “under the her strategies include participa spreading “Living Wage Com mand of course political lobbying, corporate watchdog organizations, such as Corporate Watch is (www.cgiar.org/coalition). The zation by a broad coalition served as a hopeful wake up stice in the new millennium. the most demanding discipline of the dominant culture, resistible to deconstruct generations. Reparation means exploring mer in conversation with those stice in the present and to heal tion, we First World Christians parative politics. The historical legacy of colonialism is connes. Another example is the successful decade-long campaign it to apologize for the wartime is, and to provide symbolic sinned, had been sinning for death,” wrote a survivor Edi political opportunism were the an heritance is no exception to ple who know the bitter sting of a land of abundance... Justice americans must share.”

c new impetus to the long trations in America. And the of Native America, is also at the United Nations to catalog treaty violations against indigenous people by national governments worldwide or in denominational apologies to native peoples for the oppressive legacy of Christian missionaries. While restorative gestures are necessarily symbolic to some degree, this does not mean that they cannot also be substantive. In fact, they must be; psychologists point out that in order for reparation to be therapeutic for the culpable party, it must be felt. Perhaps the best current example of reparative struggle is the worldwide “Jubilee 2000” movement, calling for debt reduction/write-off for the most heavily indebted nations (www.j2000usa.org). Without disciplines of reparation, the rhetoric of reconciliation and recovery among First World churches will remain empty. And the longer we opt for cheap grace, the more costly real forgiveness will become. For the sin of First World addiction and Third World oppression are bound inextricably together in our common history.

The types of new evangelical disciplines just overviewed are hard work, and we are forever reverting rather than converting! We soon learn the truth of Jesus’ parable about casting out one unclean spirit only to have “seven spirits more evil than itself return” (Lk 11:24 f). Recovery is like peeling an onion: each layer of internalized capitalism we remove brings more tears. That is why disciplines of economic celibacy demand both greater pastoral sophistication and contemplative commitments in our faith communities. Neither politics nor piety can substitute for the authentic inward journey here (Step Eleven).

“America is in deep trouble,” writes anthropologist Marvin Harris, “but let no one suppose that our plight cannot get a whole lot worse.” With reactionary politics again on the rise, we who are enticed will face an ever-starker choice between the path of feeding public addiction or breaking it. It is likely that few members of the dominant culture in North America will want to walk the difficult path of recovery, especially when that demands costly reparation. Our churches, on the other hand, with their tradition of repentance, conversion, and the evangelical disciplines, are uniquely situated to shatter the denial, name the addiction, and model the practice of sobriety. Only as we become communities of resistance and recovery can we truly proclaim the good news to both the addicted and the oppressed that “the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set us free from the rule of sin and death” (Rom 8:2).

NOTES


2. Ibid.


10. Ibid.


12. Myers, "God Speed the Year of Jubilee."


17. Ibid., 150 ff.


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32. Plantinga, 1

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48. Walden Bcl
Jubilee: The Biblical Vision of Sabbath

31. For a trenchant critique of the ways in which commodity “fetishism” has colonized our unconscious see Frederic Jameson’s Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991).

32. Plantinga, Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be, 145.

33. McCormick, Sin as Addiction, 152 ff.

34. This pendulum is almost exactly parallel to the “control/release” dynamic identified by Merle A. Fossun and Marilyn J. Mason, Facing Shame: Families in Recovery (New York: Norton, 1986) in their analysis of shame-bound systems (see also Susan L. Nelson’s piece in this book). I have explored the national swing from grandiosity to depression in relation to the Gulf War from the perspective of social psychology (see Myers, Who Will Roll Away the Stone? Discipleship Queries for the First World Christians (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994) 90 ff. Brandt has analyzed the same phenomenon in terms of American “business cycles” over the last century and a half in Whole Life Economics, 62 ff.

35. Brandt, Whole Life Economics, 60 ff.

36. Two of these examples will suffice. The Los Angeles Times reported on 23 February 2000 that “earlier this year, a blue-ribbon panel of climate experts commissioned by the National Academy of Sciences quashed most lingering doubts by calling global warming over the past 100 years ‘undoubtedly real’” (A16). Most of the doubts have been generated by studies funded by the fossil fuel industry. Similarily, the New York Times reported on 6 January 2000, that despite strenuous public subsidy and encouragement, mandatory and voluntary recycling programs are not reducing the volume of trash nearly enough to head off serious crisis in the coming years (“Recyclers Are Saying: ‘But There, Done That,’” A1). For overviews of current global ecological issues, see Donella Meadows, Dennis Meadows, and Jorgen Randers, Beyond the Limits (Post Hills, Vt.: Chelsea Green, 1992); and Bruce Brown, Marx, Freud, and the Critique of Everyday Life: Toward a Permanent Cultural Revolution (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000).


39. Jean Kilbourne has been on the forefront of analyzing the cultural impact of advertising and commodity fetishism, particularly on women. See Kilbourne, Deadly Persuasion: Why Women and Girls Must Fight the Addictive Power of Advertising (New York: Free Press, 1999). Gambling is one of the fastest growing sectors in the U.S. economy, currently estimated to be a sixty-billion-dollar industry. All but a handful of states now have lotteries, while it is estimated that currently some fifteen million people gamble online, with industry analysts predicting that revenues from this sector will grow from one to ten billion dollars over the next three years. The National Gambling Impact Study Commission placed the number of compulsive gamblers at 5.5 million, more than the nation’s rolls of hard-core drug users. Meanwhile, the recent explosion of television game shows such as Do You Want to Be a Millionaire reflect the insatiable public appetite for diversions which, like gambling, essentially play with money with the promise of instant wealth. See Philip Slater, Wealth Addiction (New York: Dutton, 1983).

41. Structural adjustment includes “reducing the state’s role in the economy, lowering barriers to imports, removing restrictions of foreign investment, eliminating subsidies for local industries, reducing spending for social welfare, cutting wages, devaluing currency, and emphasizing production for export rather than for local consumption” (ibid., 37). In other words, it means trying to unleash the manic phase of the economy and severely control the depressive phase. As social, economic, and political conditions have deteriorated among the poor, the predictable result has been massive human displacement on a global scale. Perhaps, writes Bello, it is the homeless, the undocumented migrants, and the political and economic refugees “who most clearly perceive the truth about structural adjustment: it was intended not as a transition to prosperity but as a permanent condition of economic suffering to ensure that the South would never rise again to challenge the North” (ibid., 38).


50. There are of course critics of the addiction/recovery model, from both the left and the right (see Peelle, “Ain’t Misbehavin’: Addiction Has Become an All-Purpose Excuse,” The Science [July–August 1989] 14ff; and Urm Reader, “Are You Addicted to Addiction,” special issue [November–December 1989] 51 ff.). Feminist critiques of the Twelve-Step tradition should in particular be taken into account. Some women have objected to the program’s emphasis upon Divine dependence, calling for “rational recovery.” See Charlotte Davis Kasl, Women, Sex and Addiction: A Search for Love and Power (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990); and Plantinga’s interesting rejoinder in Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be, 142 ff). Others see the codependency movement spreading a “victim mentality” and the “politics of powerlessness.” See Wendy Kaminer, I’m Dysfunctional, You’re Dysfunctional: The Recovery Movement and Others Self-Help Fashions (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1992). Still others are concerned that the model ignores the gendered construction and social context of addiction. See Margarette Balcock and Christine McKay, Challenging Codependency: Feminist Critiques (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995).


52. Except, of course, the choice we make as consumers between products, which is made to be all-important. Even this is an illusion, however: “In the competitive capita-
talist system the consumer is not the master he is made out to be in the paradigm of economic theory and in the ideology of day-to-day politics," writes Jens Harmel. "It is the producer who is sovereign, with the technological structure determining the production plans (in "Bourgeois Idealism and Capitalist Production: Changes in Consumer Behavior—The Way to a Human Society," paper for the Commission on Churches Participation in Development, World Council of Churches, Geneva, 1977, 12). Since we have only the fiction of choice anyway, to stop "choosing" (e.g., refusing brand loyalty and finding alternative markets) becomes the only genuine choice.

53. A classic example of how systemic irresponsibility is transformed into pandemic exoneration can be seen in the design, manufacturing, and deployment of sophisticated nuclear weaponry. Despite its impact on our economy—including our personal tax obligations—most of us not directly involved in this massive national project do not consider ourselves morally culpable. Yet those who are directly involved generally feel no greater sense of agency: not design engineers, nor those working the assembly line, nor those in the military bureaucracy, nor those in the missile silo—not even the policymakers. For a dramatic story of this phenomenon see Barry Siegel, "Showdown at Rocky Flats," Los Angeles Times Magazine, 8 August and 15 August 1993.


57. May, Addiction and Grace, 135.


59. See Myers, Who Will Roll Away the Stone, 168ff. and Myers, "God Speed the Year of Jubilee."


64. See, for instance, the excellent work on youth, identity, and consumerism by Kalle Lasn, Culture Jam: The Uncooling of America (New York: Eagle Brook, 1999); and Kilbourne, Deadly Persuasion.


67. See the recent "Free Time/Free People project, Shalomctr@aol.com.


69. Paul Vallely, Bad Samaritans.


73. Perhaps the most interesting and substantive example has been the United Church of Christ deliberations regarding apologies and reparations to native Hawaiians. See the record compiled by Kaleo Patterson, ed., "Apologies and Resolutions: After 100 Years, Hawaiian Sovereignty (August 1989–May 1994)," Honolulu: Hawaii Ecumenical Coalition, 1993.