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POVERTY IN NIGERIA AND MARXIAN CLASS THEORY

*Akiti Glory Alamu**

INTRODUCTION

Today, with only nine years in the 21st century, the modern African has become increasingly and excruciatingly aware of this concept of poverty and its implication in terms of social identity and cultural authenticity. In fact, conceptually, poverty is fast becoming a global paradox. By and large, poverty, in places far and near, has assumed the face of a child, man, woman, value, religion, ideology and morality. More than twenty countries in Africa have been lumped up among the poorest in the world. At this threshold of the 21st century, the greatest challenge to the African leaders, particularly Nigeria, apart from the perennial search for socio-political growth and stability, is perhaps the accurate identification and great help to the pauperized and underprivileged societies.

Besides, poverty has economic tonality that distinguishes it from others; and consequently, needs proper Marxian conceptualization so that one can determine with certainty an aspect on which it can be tackled. However, Marx asserted that religion does not solve the problem of human suffering or poverty, but it is a misguided attempt to establish that religion makes poverty more bearable and tolerable by offering a reward for suffering and promising a justified redress for injustice in the kingdom of God. It is in this context, therefore, that I shall attempt to explore poverty in Nigeria and its causes; Marxian treatise on poverty and religion would be treated, and subsequently moral re-appraisal would be tersely made.

THE CONCEPT OF POVERTY

It is widely accepted that poverty is a relative concept, that is, it changes as standards of what is or is not acceptable for human decency alter. Whatever measure is used, it is obvious that poverty is extensive, manifold, complex and increasing. Nevertheless, in *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, Poverty is the state of being poor, the state of existing in amounts that are too small, lack, the state of being inferior, poor quality".¹ Thus, the concept of poverty has some connotations in such words as starvation, destitution, hunger, suffering among others. There is the need to admit that the word "poverty" itself is a form of human suffering. Poverty, in its true sense, is the state of lacking the means to exist adequately.² It is pertinent

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to buttress further that suffering of various kinds can create basis for lack of the means to exist adequately. Hunger, starvation, destitution, illness, lack of socio-economic means to mention but a few, can be basic to reasons that elicit lack of means to live adequately.³ These sufferings are the imports of poverty. In fact, Akanmidu affirms this concept of poverty in the light of our understanding that "the impossibility of denying this point links with the view that to say that somebody or a country is poverty-stricken is clear admission that the person or the country is going through all forms of suffering e.g. inadequate supply of food, lack of good housing system..."⁴ These assertions show real poverty. Having identified some factors, it can also be established that poverty also goes beyond the afore-mentioned factors. Others fall within the determinate context with some visible limited range of some existing and apparent problems and the incapability of the victims to alleviate the problems.⁵ Such hang-up situations are pointers to the fact that "at one time it may be a poor harvest, lack of work or cash to buy food, or payment due to a landlord or a money lender, at another essential or unavoidable expense-funeral, an illness, seeds or tools."⁶

This kind of poverty led us to agree that poverty is dualistic, but both methods have similar effects on the victims. The first kind of poverty is that in which the victims cannot help themselves, even when there is the readiness to do so. The second often times arises from war and refugee situations. Humanly speaking, this prevailing and debilitating circumstance constrains victims and in the process swallows them. From the foregoing, it is obviously clear that the first in which efforts have no influence on the prevailing circumstances, the second form permits some interactions between effort input and the prevailing circumstances. This social interaction does not show any equilibrium between both forces. The victims know and understand that there are problems and that they are in some position to struggle with the situation. Albeit, it can be tersely deduced that the concept of poverty represented in the first form is more acute than the second still, both represent the concept of poverty.⁸

The starvation of the contemporary society can be understood from these two dimensions. There is no doubt that the considerations emphasized above represent some new ways to visualize the current poverty trend in the world nations particularly Nigeria. Meanwhile, we shall attempt to address poverty in Nigeria and its causes.

POVERTY IN NIGERIA

The recent world experience has witnessed permanent stay of poverty and hunger in human situation. Millions of people are constantly hungry, including children who, in fact are the worst affected. Indeed, many people can not afford to feed once in a day and people are grossly affected. As a result, people die every day from the combined effects of malnutrition and infection. This plague makes people to become

scavengers who go about combing out things from the dustbin. This malaise called poverty is a scandalous condition of life that is suggestive of subhuman situation. The scandalous situation of poverty is preposterous to economic detachment and material acquisition.

It is mind-boggling to note that this is happening in Nigeria of great technological potentials and development. As this problem looks ever-increasing, it is held by some that mankind has never had so much technical know-how, and had never had such extensive financial resources for coping with this crisis. Even in the third world ranking, Nigeria would have been a force to reckon with, if it had properly channeled and utilized its resources. Among the ranking or strata, Nigeria occupies the third position while Congo and Cameroon top the group respectively. Thus, millions of people in Nigeria cannot feed properly. It is worrisome that Nigeria remains dwindling in all its facets in which the rich are getting richer and much more powerful while the poor become humiliatingly poorer, helpless and hopeless.⁹ As may be seen, the extent and tenacity of poverty in Nigeria addresses the relationships between rich and poor people who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth. Nigeria is of more than a 100 million population, and when its resources are evenly distributed among the people everybody will heave a sigh of relief. Nigeria has more wealth than any other sub-Saharan African country. The poverty level is dismal with a per capital growth of less than 1 per cent a year in the last two decades. After all, the picture of poverty is glooming as the attendant consequences upon the masses are abysmal and callous.

Nigeria as a nation is faced with ever-with-us all-powerful individuals who acquire, exploit, embezzle, misappropriate and expand to such an elastic limit that even the very idea of the nation becomes a victim of circumstance of their per-capita choices. Here, Nigeria becomes fragmented, its soul goes on break, and its people are left with no option but to wonder and sigh about their present and their future. In this country, we are at such a sorry stage in our historical evolutions as a people. In other words many powerful individuals have hijacked both economic and political power with no option for the masses. This sorry stage we are in is the level of poverty we have been plagued into. Thus, the affluent accumulates more and more through trade and war, and they retain this no matter how great the deprivations of others. This becomes the outcome of divided society: rich and poor, the landed and the landless, free and slave, debt holders and debtors. In which case, there is hardly anything to cheer and hope for.

The problem of poverty is therefore entrenched by the military and civilian ruling class in their successive regime in the nation polity. The military junta contributed more to the present degree of poverty by siphoning the riches of the nation into their personal coffers without considering the welfare of the masses they purportedly said to govern. This conquered situation gave rise to crime, unemployed graduates, beggars in the street who are fit to embark upon any

economic activities in order to eke out a living. The Nigerian economy has been so bastardized that she is yet to recover because of the corrupt-minded individuals at the helm of affairs. In fact, George Ehusani is apposite in this regard when he averred stoutly that,

Our past has been so heavily inundated with the circumstances of a conquered and devastated society that only those with hearts of stone fail to acknowledge the obvious. For even the deaf can hear the ominous quiet of unbearable angst in the land. Even the masses alongside the stinking riches of the 'elect' of the system. Our past has seen a monumental waste in resources and steady flight of human development.¹¹

Flowing from the above, it is expedient to posit that the blind and the deaf can see and as well hear the ominous quiet of unbearable anxiety in the land as a result of the unprecedented level of poverty. Even the military junta helped in the monumental wastes of resources and the people are wallowing in squalor. Nigeria, once a well respected country and a key role player in international bodies has become a pariah nation, having been engulfed and raped by military and civilian parasite from left and right. Ours is a culture of poverty.

When we hurriedly take a critical look at Nigerian experience, spiritual and mental poverty have also emerged in recent time. Thus, spiritual poverty cannot be appreciated and accepted as a value in the religious arena. The dialectics of poverty between the rich and poor are clearly shown in the manners of prayers and singing. While the poor pray that God should change their situation, the rich affirm that God has indeed blessed and smiled at them regardless of the source of their wealth. Corroborating this statement, Nnamani writes:

Do not forget that under the broad category of poverty, there has always been this temptation, in our environment, to consider the poor as not merely those who lack and who may never have in abundance as to chop and remain or even chop and thro-way but also those who are on the wrong side on the creation day. On the strength of fixation of thought, we sometimes try to reduce poverty to our interpretation of one's direct relationship with his God. Said the other way we see our sudden or even gradual rise beyond the subsistence to opulence as reward by God or good relationship with the creator.¹²

Here, we may encounter some ontological problems if we exonerate God from this inequality called poverty. It seems to show that there are those who are on the wrong side on the day of creation. This difference between the rich and the poor would represent the right and wrong sides of the creation day into which people are placed, however not fixated. Evidently, there is in creation abundance and bounty, the promise of a land flowing with milk and honey. Poverty, famine and misery are not part of the creator's intention for the world. Ironically, severe and continuous hardships have a direct connection with the physical, social, spiritual and educational disadvantages suffered by poor families. Yet, in addition to actual material hardship, there is now evidence that the relative differences, that is, the inequalities between sections of the population, add to the disadvantage.¹³

In carrying out the paradox of the state of the poor in the Nigerian society, Sahlins has this to say;

*One-third to one-half of humanity are said to go to bed hungry every night. In the Old Stone Age, the fraction must have been smaller. This is the era of hunger unprecedented.*⁴

Judging from the affirmation of Sahlins, it can be established firmly that majority of the masses go to sleep hungry and those who cannot surmount the hunger either go into begging or become criminals. No wonder today, we hear of crime wave in our society being spearheaded by unemployed graduates both male and female. Poverty to human experience bears thumb-up print on every facet of human endeavours. Poverty has also been linked with population and resources growth in the society which they classify on under-utilization thereby making poverty more pronounced. The stark reality is that the Military and civilian elects of the system plague Nigerians into the situation we are now as a result of exploitation, misappropriation, embezzlement, favouritism, unparallel acquisition of National wealth, absence of the spirit of sharing and kickbacks.

However, the same government had made enormous efforts in combating or confronting poverty in Nigeria. Suffice it to say that Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP) was established to bridge the gap between the poor and the rich, putting smiles into the people's face by bringing them solace and security. It was a laudable project, but it crumbled by the overt actions of the government and her board of trustees. Also, National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) replaced the former. The sole aim was to eradicate or alleviate poverty by giving loans to the poor. Just as the loans were given to the poor so also the government allocated simultaneous increment in price through the designated agencies. Thus all these attempts at eradicating poverty failed woefully, as the culture of poverty has heightened.

THE MARX TREATISE ON CLASS THEORY AND RELIGION

Karl Marx (1818-1883) was a great economist, political philosopher and socialist who used his intellectual pedigree to postulate the social occurrence in the society. Marx's thesis is dualistic in nature. First and foremost, he highlighted the prominence of economic factors in the functional structure of society and its development. Timasheff stated as quoted by Onigu Otite that

*...the organization of production...not only limits but also, in the final analysis, shapes the whole super-structure: political, organization, law, religion, philosophy, art, literature, science and morality itself.*¹⁵

Sequel to the above, Marx postulated the economic substructure of economic system so strong that it affects virtually all the spheres of life on the one hand. On the other hand, economic substructure ensures dangerous orientation and pre-orientation of the society. To him, this economic stronghold is the edifice where

The second postulate relates to change in society through triadic stages: thesis (affirmation), antithesis (negation) and synthesis (reconciliation). This affirms a continuous dialectical process which follows the synthesis.¹⁶ Here, it must be emphasized that Marx parted way with Hegel on the different interpretation of the dialectical synthesis, while Hegel was a bit spiritual and abstract in his interpretation Marx interpreted his synthesis on the social structure of the society.

Interestingly, Marx's class theory hinges on the first postulate with the premise that "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles."¹⁷ No doubt, ever since human society emerged from the dawn of consciousness, it has remained fundamentally divided into classes which clash in the pursuit of class interest. The pivot of capitalist system is the persistence and dichotomy between the exploiters and the exploited; between the bourgeoisie and proletariat; between buyers and sellers of labour power other than functional collaboration. Class interests and the confrontations of power show that they brought in their wake what Marx referred to as "determinant of social and historical process."¹⁸ Thus, this social and historical process in the hitherto existing human society is inherently "conflictual" because "it breeds class consciousness and militant class conflicts which, with time, will destroy the existing social system and lead to a new social order."¹⁹ However, this existing social system rather than abating is waxing stronger daily and the gap between the exploiters and the exploited becomes wider. So far, the new social order postulated by Marx is yet to come into fruition.

Marx argued the mode of production as the economic foundation of any society. Thus, this mode of production is dyadic in nature. The first dimension is the "forces of production" comprising of the technology and the physical aspects of material economic activities. While the other aspect commits the social relations of production.²⁰ This implies the social relations men enter through their environment in economic activities. It is however this mode of production that forms the economic structure which the super-structure rests.²¹

In a nutshell, the mode of production gives rise to bourgeoisie and the proletariat who are the poor weak property less class. In the analysis, the wealthier and more powerful class exploits the relationship between the classes and gets the profits off the labour of the poor. Thus, the workers- the poor class with only their labour sell to the owners of the means of production- receive no rewards commensurate with their labour; they are however kept in a subordinate position.²² To this end, the bourgeoisie employed all types of ideologies; economic, religious and political as strategies to retain their position as they continue to exploit the masses. The bourgeoisie also use their economic power to acquire political power. Supporting this statement, Otite writes:

In this situation, the capitalist, the owner of the means of production, also has access to political resources. He is assumed to be in alliance with political authorities and use of his superior economic position to that of political power; he then exploits the workers.

*imposing his self-made conditions of service. The operation of such a system of work creates conditions of alienation.*²³

Karl Marx was primarily challenged with the problem of alienation of man in capitalist society. According to Lewis Coser,

*Alienation in the domain of work has a fourfold aspect: Man is alienated from the object he produces, from the process of production, from himself, and from the community his fellows.*²⁴

For Marx, man is denied the reward of his creative power, hence resignation to fate becomes the order of the day. The exploiters enjoy their incumbents while the exploited resign to fate. Thus, the proletarians would hide under the guise of religion to seek for solace in fantasy. To Marx, the role of religion comes in in order to sedate or pacify the masses. He emphasized that religion could be a channel of protest, resignation or acceptance of the suffering and miseries of the capitalist exploitation.

Marx is embittered by the social inequality and unfairness in a capitalist society and negates the role religion plays against the interest of proletarians. According to Dzurgha,

*Marx asserts that religion is more common among the people who exploit others. Marx argues that submissiveness to religion by the exploited class is because of their lack of property and of command over the circumstances of their lives. Their faith legitimizes for them the political and economic order which has kept them in subjection and offers them compensation for their deprivations in fantasies of a life after death.*²⁵

Thus, Marx sees religion as an illusion which eases the pain produced by politico-economic exploitation and oppression. In his words, Marx sees religion as a distortion of reality which provides reasons for the deceptions that form the basis of the exploiters, political or economic ideology and a false class consciousness. Therefore, Marx says that

*Religion is the moan of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, the sense of senseless conditions. It is the opium of the people.*²⁷

Religion does not solve the problem of human suffering, but it is simply a misguided attempt to make life more bearable. For Marx, most religious movements originate in oppressed classes whose social conditions of poverty provide the most fertile ground for the growth of new religions.

A handful of religions have oppressive tendency as a religious virtue. Those who bear their deprivations of poverty with patience, fortitude, humility and dignity will be rewarded for their virtue. "For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God (Luke 18: 25). Thus, religion makes poverty more tolerable by offering a reward for suffering and promising a justified redress for injustice in the kingdom of God. Religion discourages the masses from making efforts to change their social situations.

ETHICAL PARADIGM TO POVERTY IN NIGERIA

We have before now enumerated two kinds of poverty. Thus, the first is the form of poverty that came which the victims cannot help themselves even when there is the willingness to do so. Secondly, it can often arise from war and refugee situations. In both cases, they both have prevailing and excruciating effects on the victims. But in Nigeria, some other causes are attributed to poverty. The masses are denied access to material resources which may be similar to the first position and some caused by individuals. It is from these points that it can be said that moral questions arise only because human nature is permissive to some forms of conduct and otherwise to some others. Indicatively, morality exists in concept in order to further human well-being for the better.²⁹ Therefore; any moral concept that does not attend to the welfaristic proportion of man does not merit to be classified under morality. This position accounts for the naked fact that moral concept starts with the individual and reflects on others. This is what gives Kant's supreme formal principle of the "will" which he called "categorical imperative". He said, "Act only according to a maxim by which you can at the same time will that it shall become a general law."³⁰ This is also the golden rule as expounded by Jesus in the Beatitude of 'treat others as you wish to be treated'.

This act also depends on rational principle.³¹ This principle, as it looks, is not alone but to guide action. It is the essential and fundamental principle which guides one's action, but may not guide the action of others. Apparently, maxims have a subjective origin either in the interest and concerns of or in the rationality experienced by, the agents as imposed from outside and enforced by external sanctions.³² Similarly, any will which goes contrary to the moral principles cannot be universalized. He goes further to support this basic principle by applying it numbers of specific duties. In doing this, he divides duties into those, owed to oneself and those owed to others. In all, he identifies four various types of duties, viz: perfect duty to oneself, imperfect duty to oneself, the perfect duty to others e.g. keeping of promises, and finally the imperfect duty to others, e.g. acts of beneficence, such as helping others who need help.³³ The difference that Kant makes between the perfect and imperfect duties is that perfect duties are "duties of virtue" not of law, because one cannot be externally propelled to obey them by legal sanctions.³⁴ Therefore, morality begins with self in the sense of Kant in order to show that consciousness of our existence helps us to know that other things exist outside us.

We should have in our minds that morality can be understood from that vantage position. When this approach is glued together with the concept of poverty and all it stands for, certainly poverty invokes in others the moral needs to respond to the sufferings that are offshoot of poverty.³⁵ One issue which is pivotal to the problem of poverty is the moral sense it builds in individuals. There is the different stand between the one who is in position to be of great help and the one who is himself impoverished. This trend addresses the "ethics of helping people".

This approach allows for arguments of giving help to persons, one to another. Even at a broader sense, this approach has also been and rose from the level of person to person.³⁶ Thus, the state of poverty does not represent one of advantage in life. It is rather one of disadvantage, because poverty attracts negation, hence poverty does not create avenues for the poor man to show wisdom. Therefore, the poor man does not have anything to offer while the rich are the mouthpiece of the people even when their ideas do not tally with the yearning of the people. The intensity of relationship between the master and the poor is a function of both parties playing the role they separately represent. The master is guided by the principle of giving support to the poor, and the poor should also be guided by the "will" to do the master's wishes.³⁷

Having established this moral approach to the problem of poverty with its implications such as hunger, malnutrition, lack of shelters, illiteracy, disease as a bad thing, there should be obligation to help those in abject poverty, which is no less strong than those who can be aided to start off business especially the unemployed youth. The point that Aiken argued for is that the person in need has a moral right to be aided. He says:

*The sufferer has this right against any and all who are in a position to provide the necessary goods and services, since the sufferer's need puts him under obligation to prevent his death.*³⁸

These conditions stated above form the basis on which moral duty can be carried out by the government and the individuals who have the wherewithal to aid the poor.

However, this moral paradigm does not appeal to financial pessimists, anti-levelers, political regimes, the economic right, wealthy radicals, super-spiritual and the its Worse Abroad Brigade³⁹ who stoutly believe that poverty and gross inequalities are fair, worthy, just, extensive and an enduring societal ideology that keep them on the moving track, and cling permanently to means of production and exploit others all the way. Though, for individuals, the claim of moral right and the obligation to be helped are not absolute but *prima facie*. Will Hutton as quoted by Holman stated that "the fight against poverty is not merely a moral injunction: the just society begets the sound economy."⁴⁰

AN ANTIDOTE TO POVERTY IN NIGERIA

Alleviating the poverty and suffering of the masses is the fundamental objective of the millennium goal of this Yar' adua's administration. By and large, it is established that individual in the society has the right to life and so needs enjoyment in all ramification. These rights *per se* are basic and central to the provision of subsistence to make the exercise of others possible. By extension, the right to life provides the weight needed to show how the alleviation of poverty makes an important demand on those who can afford to help.⁴¹ A right in a broader sense involves the right to

lead a meaningful, qualitative and valuable life. This idea of welfarist proportion should be provided by the government to enable it foster the total well-being of the people. In line with the above, Akanmidu advocated that the government should set up "poor commission." This Commission when established would manage resources and allocations targeted towards the even distribution or equal sharing. In this paradigmatic arrangement, both productive and unproductive poor will be taken care of.⁴²

Employment opportunities should be created to enable Nigerians to be fully engaged and preoccupied so as to reduce crime wave in the society. The urchins in the street should be seriously rehabilitated. Perhaps, this should serve as an "over load obligation" on the part of the government so as to sustain their importance and usefulness in the society. The rich also ought to give aid to the poor who are starving. This can happen even though there is no obvious right that the poor have to be aided. The word of Portia in the Merchant of Venice suffices here. According to him:

*The quality of mercy is not strained; it droppeth, as a gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath. It is twice blest, it blesses him that gives and he that takes. It is enthroned in the hearts of Kings. And it is an attribute of God Himself.*⁴³

Attention of the government should be focused mainly on exploitation, misappropriation, embezzlement, favouritism, unparallel acquisition of national wealth, absence of the spirit of sharing and immoral leadership. All these moral questions must be dealt with sincere, committed, dedicated and devoted government.

It is pertinent to note that the misguided guise offered by religion on poverty, as depicted by Karl Marx makes the masses to remain redundant and unproductive to development having been subjected to deprivation and alienation. The implication of this is that the poor will remain perpetually on the defined poverty lines. Not only that, the religious mentality of the masses becomes more of a silent destruction agent to the well-being of humanity. This is pure and arrant ignorance. Therefore, it is advocated that the masses should make frantic effort to change their social situations. Also, they should rise up to occasion and shake-up the dust of poverty as encapsulated in religion. Lazy view should be discarded because religion has offered such palliative measure. To this end, religious adherents should plan socio-economically for their future as if the end is not imminent, and pursue their religious beliefs as if the end is now.

Apparently, it is also observed in the society that some people on the ground of religious belief depend on others as parasite, refusing to be engaged and become hard working. Apostle Paul in his epistle enjoins the contemporary masses to be pre-occupied. (II Thess 3:10-11) says that "For even when we were with you, this we commanded, you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat. For we hear that there are some....working not at all, but are busybodies".⁴⁴ No harvest without sowing, so people are enjoined to cultivate in order to harvest in due season.

CONCLUSION

Our excursion has revealed that the culture of poverty is manifold and ever increasing. To this end, it becomes plausible to note that the blueprint to this excruciating problem does not lie with vibrant economic strategies and intellectual abstractions. Hence Karl Marx advocated for radical restructuring of the socio-economic situation of the society because the affluent are wicked and they hold on to the means of production permanently. They thus use all the means at their disposal to protect their wealth in order to hold on to both economic and political power; and to permanently lock up the poor in their alienation. Ehusani asserts that those who are on the "edge" of existence do not have time for, or appreciate abstract ideas. Abstract ideas only appeal to the privileged. The poor are interested in practical socio-political and economic transformations that will better their lot in life. Societal structures which breed hunger, poverty, power-abuse, tribalism, "son-soilism", bribery, corruption...for thousands, if not millions of Nigerians⁴⁵ must be completely removed so as to restore the hope of the poor.

In addition, Nigerian nation should borrow a leaf from Asian countries like South Korea, India and among others to develop their country. About thirty years ago, the economy of South Korea was ravaged by war, its people were impoverished with low education, and health amenities were rare. Today, the tables have been turned. The nation has developed its resources with back breaking work by its people which provides the labour as far as Middle East to earn foreign exchange and its exports have outclassed many established nations in the world market.⁴⁶ India adopted green revolution which helped them. India today has surplus food supplies, rising exports and enjoys a consumer boom of locally made goods despite its population in recent times.⁴⁷

In sum, there are the indices of national development which Nigerian government must follow if and only if Nigerian leaders and the "elect" of the system can adopt the method and reverse to the old system that made Nigeria to function at a time in the past. They include:

*Health and buoyant economy, well fed population,...availability and affordability of essential goods and services, high GDP and income per capita, stable polity, security of life and property, food security, viable employment opportunities, and of course functional and qualitative educational system.*⁴⁸

Moreover, tax and fiscal policies can as well lead to a fairer distribution of income and wealth. State policies to boost employment cannot only take workers off the dole, but also can put them in a position where their work and spending contributes to the strong economy and the common good.⁴⁹ This will do for a start.

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