

Spring 2020

# Reflections

Y A L E D I V I N I T Y S C H O O L

a magazine of theological and ethical inquiry

## Hard Times, Gospel Values



## A NOTE TO OUR READERS

It is our privilege to produce *Reflections* twice a year for a readership of Yale Divinity School alumni/ae and other subscribers who seek theological insights into the debates and challenges of our time. Over the course of five decades, we've released and mailed *Reflections* as a print publication free to our 17,000 subscribers.

For economic and environmental reasons, we've decided to move *Reflections* from its traditional print format to a reader-friendly online version, starting with the Fall 2020 issue. We will produce the same award-winning quality and enhance the content through online features not possible with print.

Look for the next issue in October 2020 in your email inbox and at [reflections.yale.edu](https://reflections.yale.edu). Please make sure you update your email information at the *Reflections* site.

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## Credits

# From the Dean's Desk



Gregory E. Sterling  
The Reverend Henry L. Slack  
Dean of Yale Divinity School  
& Lillian Claus Professor  
of New Testament

When we planned this issue more than a year ago, we did so out of a concern about the growing economic gap in American society. There are many studies that demonstrate the rapid growth in wealth among the 1 percent and the decrease in wealth of the lower 90 percent. A number of essays here – e.g., Marilyn Kendrix’s article and the sidebar – point to various findings. As a Christian and a New Testament scholar by training, my motives were biblically based (see John Collins’ article). My concern was that our nation had struck a Faustian deal that privileged the accumulation of wealth over the concern for human beings. Simply put, I could not square the contrasting beatitude and woe in Luke (“Blessed are the poor ... Woe to you who are rich”) with what I saw occurring in American society.

These concerns have taken on a much greater sense of urgency with the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of the articles in this issue had been submitted before this pandemic became world news and certainly before it became a pressing concern in

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**If your barber or hairdresser needs to close shop, please send them a check for a haircut even though they cannot give you one. If you have a favorite restaurant or two, send them a check for a meal, even though you will not eat it.**

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America. Now we are faced with the largest week of unemployment claims on record. If this has not yet affected your own family, it probably will; it has already affected ours. Similarly and even more poignantly, we are deeply concerned about the health-care system and about who will have access to it. As I write these words I am keenly aware that we are still on the upswing of the challenges, not on

the downswing. They will only grow more intense. Healthcare and the economy are the two most critical issues at present, but there are others posed or exacerbated by the pandemic, e.g., immigration.

Though many of these articles do not directly address the current situation (and by the time you read these lines, the circumstances will have changed again), the principles that they speak to should help us think through the challenges ahead.

We need to address the current situation structurally. It will not be enough to address it individually. We need to be advocates for just policies that support all equitably. I am hoping that our political representatives craft legislation to support our economy that will protect jobs and not permit corporations to use tax dollars to enrich stockholders. We need to find ways to expand our health system to care for the avalanche of sick that now seems certain to come. There should not be a distinction between those who can pay and those who cannot. Care should be predicated on human need. We need to make certain that those who live on the margins have food to eat. The logistics required by each of these statements are staggering, but we have to find some ways to address these issues as a society.

We also need to do what we can individually. Those of us fortunate enough to have an income during this crisis need to do all that we can to assist others. We might start with our families and make sure that when someone loses a job, we can help. We should think of those in the service industry who are forced to shut down. For example, if your barber or hairdresser needs to close their shop, please send them a check for a haircut even though they cannot give you one. If you have a favorite restaurant or two, send them a check for a meal, even though you will not eat it. If you pull your children from daycare, think about sending them a check. There are many local charities who will serve the marginal. Now is a time to be generous to them. We need to organize local systems to help people who live alone. Enforced isolation can create serious challenges of depression for those who already feel lonely. Emails and phone calls can be lifelines at times like these.

I write these lines because I believe that these are the values that we as Christians embrace. I speak as a Christian, but do not think that these are exclusively Christian values; people of other faiths and people of good will share them as well. I speak as the dean of a divinity school who grew up as a

minister's child. My parents consistently cared for people who fell between the cracks of the social systems of support. We often had other people living with us, sometimes for extended periods (while we cannot invite people into our homes right now, we can serve them).

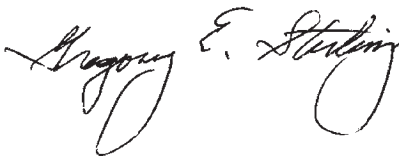
When I was young, my father once asked me to accompany him to help some people whose car had broken down. When we arrived, it was clear that the car needed major repairs. The family consisted of a woman with four children. My father invited them to come home with us and then stopped at a pay

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**I am hoping our political representatives craft legislation to support our economy that will protect jobs and not permit corporations to use tax dollars to enrich stockholders.**

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phone to call my mother (no cell phones in those days). I will never forget the scene when we pulled into the driveway. My mother was standing on the front porch with a glass of ice tea in her hand and a towel over her arm. She offered the woman the tea and said: "I am sure that you are exhausted. Please come in and relax while I bathe your boys. When I am finished you can take a shower while I get dinner on the table." My parents never said anything to me, my brother, or sister. It was simply what they did as Christians. I hope that I can live up to the example that they set. They followed the words of Christ: "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." May we all do the same.



Gregory E. Sterling, Dean

**Spirit of All Creation:**

**May our faith in you and one another guide us as we cannot yet see our way through this time of crisis.**

**May our hope in you and the goodness of our neighbors strengthen us as we endure our discomforts and fears.**

**Give comfort to all who are emotionally, physically, and spiritually distressed.**

**Bless our healthcare providers and all who are taking care of those who are ill.**

**Grant wisdom and discernment to those who are researching and searching for medicines to combat our diseases, the coronavirus, and other illnesses.**

**Help us to reassure and comfort our children and protect them from harm and danger.**

**Grant, O God, those who lead our governments, institutions, hospitals, our schools and local organizations, safety and emergency services, and us, wisdom beyond our own wisdom to contain the coronavirus; faith beyond our own faith to help us to fight our fears and strength beyond our own strength to be resilient and sustain all of our vital institutions through this time of turmoil.**

**Although we are physically separated from one another help us, Eternal One, to maintain our social connection to one another by our creatively and ethically using social media.**

**Help each of us to know that there is something in us stronger than fear. Birth in us a new sense of hope that will help us to rise above the clouds of despair.**

**Grant, Eternal Love, that we emerge from this time of crisis a more loving people who are more committed to the welfare of all and the earth that sustains us.**

**Amen**

*By the Rev. Frederick J. Streets '75 M.Div., Senior Pastor,  
Dixwell Congregational Church, New Haven, CT.*

# Reflections

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*Willie Jennings is Associate Professor of Systematic Theology and Africana Studies at YDS. His book *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (Yale, 2010) won an American Academy of Religion*

*Award of Excellence and the Grawemeyer Award in Religion. His commentary *Acts* (Westminster John Knox, 2017) received the Reference Book of the Year Award from The Academy of Parish Clergy in 2018. His upcoming book, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Eerdmans), explores problems of theological education within Western education. A Baptist minister, he is also at work on *Unfolding the World: Recasting a Christian Doctrine of Creation and finishing a volume of poetry called The Time of Possession. He spoke to Reflections early this year.**

**REFLECTIONS:** *Should Christians “interrupt” the economic discussion and join in?*

**WILLIE JENNINGS:** We’ve allowed ourselves to think that a kind of magic is in control of the economy. This has intensified in the last 50 years. The rise of the discipline of economics in response to the complexities of the modern economy makes all non-specialists look like intruders who have no business asking questions about the values that guide economic decisions. A Christian who might want to speak about systemic problems of finance or fiscal policy becomes reluctant to “interfere” or say anything.

A lot of churches have resources and are trying to do good. That’s a direct response to the call of discipleship, and it should be applauded wherever it’s happening. But a pervasive attitude contradicts

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This moment is reminding us that there is a larger reality that the market itself is embedded in: the fragile world of social relations both local and global.

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that fine work, the attitude that we should leave economic matters to the state. A popular interpretation of Romans 13 has created a strange disconnection. Romans 13:1 says, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God.” That allows the state its authority, but many today extend that authority to the economic realm and to corporations. The result is a moral constipation, a fear of speaking to the political realities of the economy or questioning how it works and who it benefits.

In the West, a number of Christians have benefited mightily from these status quo conditions of economic inequality, and they’ve formed theologies to legitimate it. One example is the rise of the prosperity gospel, in which an investment-dividend principle is applied to God. Give financial resources to God, and God will give it back to you with interest. It’s a painfully fiducial way of imagining our relations with God.

**REFLECTIONS:** *How do congregations begin to envision reforms?*

**JENNINGS:** Imagining alternative systems of exchange – in real estate, in the marketplace – is not an easy thing for congregations to initiate. We lack an exposé sensibility to find out what banks and stockbrokers actually do, how decisions are made, how the incredible power of financial institutions works, how debt is structured and exacted. I’d like churches to ask detailed questions about the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund and all the ways money flows through and around us.

Churches are great at storytelling. One way to start this conversation about the economy is to invite people to speak who are in debt. Hear their stories of how it happened. Hear from neighbors from other countries to learn how debt works there. Study the global history of indebtedness, a history that is tied to colonialism. Invite businesspeople to speak who are guided by their Christian faith. It’s time to apply a serious moral calculus to this issue – how moral considerations are made not only in small businesses but in large corporations. Invite them in and ask how they do this work.

**REFLECTIONS:** *Aren’t we tempted to give up on the vast issue of the economy and conclude, “It is what it is”?*

**JENNINGS:** Economic conditions can be altered. Nothing creaturely or created has to be the way it is. We Christians are called to a shared economy. We can learn to talk about that. The difficulty is we’re all caught up in a sophisticated practice of consumerism and hoarding, and we’ve been conditioned to it for so long that we can’t imagine other possibilities. We’re up against enormous energies of advertisement that are employed every day to convince us of the need of things we don’t need.

But accumulation and hoarding are built out of fear, fed by a terrible anxiety around questions like: *Do I have enough? Will I ever have enough?* There must be ways to break the power of this fear. The history of colonialism shows how consumerism turned need against itself. That is, merchants learned to intercept the community’s discernment of its own need and reduced need to an individualized



pursuit and definition. If a consumer had a wider vision of need, based on the priorities of a whole community, then merchants would have to take that into account. If a community decided what it needed – whether particular foods, medicines, networks of support – then it might decide that market prices are too high on certain goods and particular services are of no use, and the community could exert its power in the market in that way.

But the market wants to keep our habits individuated. We are so fragmented and geographically unaware and adrift that it's hard even to conceive where we might begin on the ground to think communally about our needs. We could start by imag-

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**For our part, too many Christians haven't been schooled on how to handle the fear of death so that we are not controlled by that fear.**

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ining a three-mile radius and asking, What do we and our neighbors need together? Surely churches could play a role in getting people together to start thinking together.

Our creative energies are turned in the wrong direction if all our creativity is given over to an individual consumer identity, to the aesthetics of capitalism. Our imaginations can't be captured by the consumer horizon. We have other creative impulses. They emerge out of a sense of calling, a desire to do good in the world. These things can be aligned with profit, but they can't be reduced to the logic of the consumption of goods and services only. We need activists and poets and prophets to help us dream beyond consumption dreams.

**REFLECTIONS:** *It's now spring 2020, and the pandemic is rampaging. How do you make sense of the moment?*

**JENNINGS:** This is part of a tragic stream of viruses that have struck us over the two last decades. The mass production of food and the way animals are handled are contributing factors because of our hyper meat-consumption habits. And we are so connected now. It's a terrible irony that our connectivity has not yielded a shared ethic of community. We're suffering from a combination of connectedness and a lack of community or more precisely an ability to sense the suffering of communities in any dense sense of connection.

I'm deeply worried about the number of vulnerable people – immigrants and others – when the virus hits their countries. We have so many people trapped at borders hoping for entry, exposed to the elements, vulnerable to violence, and fighting off

despair. We have an economic system that isn't doing life together. Inevitably we have leaders who will say by their policies, If you die, too bad. But we know that we can't overcome this virus by imagining you can section off one part of a population, the part that has good health insurance, and let the other suffer. The virus doesn't care about class or race or borders or policy.

For centuries now we've imagined that our lives are played out inside the market as that larger reality that binds us together socially and functionally. But this moment is reminding us that there is a larger reality that the market itself is embedded in: the fragile world of social relations both local and global.

There's another aspect to this – our attitude toward death. We're habituated to think that we can live without death keeping us in its sights. But death is always trying to reach into life. It crouches at the door of poverty, illness, and violence. Millions of people elsewhere know the menacing reality of death. They live with illnesses that could be cured, with the social fabric of life being torn to shreds by weapons, and with their countries marred in debt to rich countries, and nothing changing at the hands of inept governments. They understand that death is indeed the enemy. This virus is a reminder that death is waiting there.

For our part, too many Christians haven't been schooled on how to handle the fear of death so that we are not controlled by that fear. That's clearly behind the panicked buying of everything from toilet paper to guns, as well as behind our border policies to enhance our sense of security at the cost of others.

The issue is not, *Why did God visit this virus on us?*, but *What is God intending to do in the midst of us and our suffering?* We learn from the life of Jesus that God's first response to suffering is to come be with us, and join us. The great mystery is that we exist at all – we're creatures created out of nothing. So we are weak and fragile and could be destroyed at a moment's notice. It's not sin. It's our condition, and in Jesus, God joined us in our condition, never forgetting the weakness of our flesh. We must remember that we serve a God who went among lepers. That legacy can't be denied. In fact, it must shape our thinking as these next several months unfold.

Regardless of what happens over the next few months, social distancing will continue to make sense. But we'll have to think about the ramifications of that, because the larger ethical arc of our lives cannot be sustained if we seal ourselves off from others. I hope isolationism will not become the new normal for people who already bend toward singularity in how they imagine the good life.



## TUESDAY SOUP

By Alberto Ríos

In Monday's soup, you put in  
What you have –

Leftovers from Sunday,  
Chicken, red rice, cilantro.

On Tuesday, you put in  
What you have

Even less of now,  
The one leftover piece of dark chicken

Nobody wanted, the suspect  
Rice with the black-rim

Stain from something, something  
That got dropped, or from a spoon

Dipped into something else first  
Then used in the rice, a stain

Growing darker by the hour,  
Darker and bigger.

On Tuesday, dinner skates  
At the edge of the ice.

Wednesday is something safe,  
Starting over with fresh beans,

A trip to the grocery store, *jícama*,  
Bananas and chilies, all fresh, all new.

Thursday survives by luck,  
Living on the enthusiasms of Wednesday,

The small piece of pork that was on sale,  
The other extras, the olives,

The big sack of soft avocados  
Too ripe to wait, which is why they were so cheap.

Friday begins the weekend,  
Three days that take care of themselves in the world.

But Tuesday, Tuesday is what people remember,  
Like it or not, Tuesday, so easy to forget

Otherwise. Tuesday, always circumstance and luck,  
A day in which gamblers sit at the dinner table,

Unfortunate and miserable. But in the quiet attempt  
Whoever cooks dinner makes,

Tuesday is the day  
All great discoveries are made.



The capitalism of today shapes people in profound ways that rival the influence of religion on them. Religion has the capacity to direct life conduct in a thoroughgoing manner and thereby establish a whole way of living. Religious beliefs, for example, are meant not just to be believed but to be lived, to orient behavior, attitudes, and actions toward oneself and others in person-defining ways that affect every dimension and time of life.

But increasingly capitalism fulfills such functions. Indeed, for profit-maximizing purposes, capitalism now targets not just one's work life or purchasing habits, but one's entire person, one's fundamental

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**Divine grace lessens the focus on individual achievement altogether: One makes progress by God's power rather than one's own.**

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self-conception as it shapes the character of one's entire life. One is to see oneself as capitalism does by assuming a fundamentally economic relationship with oneself: One should think of one's very person, for instance, as capital to be put to maximally profitable use. According to such a self-conception, one must manage the assets of one's life in the most profitable way possible, making the most of all available opportunities, showing the resourcefulness to make do oneself with what one has rather than depending on others to make one's way in the world, and so on. In *Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism*, I argue that life projects like these, enforced by the current organization of capitalism, are dehumanizing but can be countered by renewed spiritual projects of similar depth and scope whereby one strives to orient one's life to God.

Today's finance-dominated capitalist system preoccupies itself with various person-shaping capacities, especially those concerning fundamental forms of time consciousness – how one relates, that is, to past, present, and future. Debt-strapped individuals see the past as an ineluctable burden; overworked employees experience the present as an all-consuming preoccupation; those trying to capitalize on the vagaries of markets find themselves tempted to think of the future as a matter of predictable calculation. The effect of all this is an inability to step back and take a critical perspective on the current economic system. Because of the way time is approached, one cannot imagine a fundamentally different future; one is led to believe that all one can expect is more of the same.

Christianity, by virtue of the way it relates the individual to God, has the ability to break open these restrictive forms of time consciousness. The experience of conversion breaks the hold of the past; in some strong sense one needn't be the person one was before, trapped in one's prior sins and failings. And the future, by way of the radically transformative capacities of divine grace, becomes something that cannot be anticipated or predicted by way of generalizations about one's past performance.

Under the rubric of its work ethic, contemporary capitalism singles out individuals in a highly moralizing fashion for either praise or blame and forces them into competitive relationships with one another. Economic success or failure becomes one's individual responsibility. The effect is to reduce a person's identity to one's financial triumphs or defeats. Cast in such intensely individual terms, success or failure becomes a function of competitive struggle; one doesn't succeed or fail along with others but over against them.

Once again, Christianity might shape, in countervailing ways, the manner in which persons relate to themselves and others here; it does so by virtue of the contrary characteristics of religious achievement. Because of the way it is propelled by divine grace, spiritual striving is not a competitive contest singling out individuals for praise or blame. Divine grace lessens the focus on individual achievement altogether: One makes progress by God's power rather than one's own. And the shared character

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**Spiritual striving is not a competitive contest singling out individuals for praise or blame.**

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of that grace does nothing to lessen the impact of it for one's own life. The ideal, fully enacted by God's grace in the end, is a community of persons all equally manifesting the same grace in lives transformed for the good.

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*Kathryn Tanner '79 B.A., '82 M.A., '85 Ph.D. is the Frederick Marquand Professor of Systematic Theology at YDS. Her books include Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology (Fortress, 2001), Economy of Grace (Fortress, 2005), Christ the Key (Cambridge, 2010), and Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism (Yale, 2019). She is a member of the Theology Committee that advises the Episcopal Church's House of Bishops, and she delivered the Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh in 2015-16.*

**By Tony Hoagland**

and hope moving from one location to another like the holy ghost that it is.



Neighbors comforting each other in a low-income apartment, Seattle, 1991

Photo by Chien-Chi Chang

© Chien-Chi Chang/Magnum Photos

# Repairing This “Era of Abandonment”



By Liz Theoharis

*Fifty-five years after civil rights activists marched across the Edmund Pettus Bridge and awoke the nation to their struggle, the city of Selma is quietly dying along the banks of the Alabama River. Good paying jobs have all but disappeared, whole blocks of houses and roads are in disrepair, healthcare is a luxury because Medicaid expansion has been blocked by the state, and generations of local boys and girls have disappeared into a knotty web of jails and prisons.*

Perhaps most stunning, for those who know the hallowed history of this place, is that residents have fewer voting rights today than they did after the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Callie Greer is known around Selma for her cooking and her affinity for telling the truth. Mother to five and grandmother to eight, she has lost two children: Mercury to gun violence and Venus to preventable complications due to breast cancer. Venus suffered a hard and slow death, blocked at every turn from receiving what would have been life-saving care because she could not afford health

care. 140 million poor and low-income people living in the richest country in the history of the world. Just three men hold more wealth than the bottom half of the country; 43 percent of the population is poor or just one emergency away from poverty. In past centuries, poverty may have been unavoidable, but the same is not true today. At a time when 3D printers can construct entire houses, we have, maybe for the first time in modern history, the technology and the material resources to abolish poverty. We live in what could rightly be called the era of abandonment, in the midst of abundance.

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**In a crisis such as this pandemic, when no person is safe or immune, we must come to see that the cost of not providing for people's basic needs far outweighs the cost of providing them.**

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insurance; her breasts rotted while state of the art mammogram machines sat idle and inaccessible. In a city whose neglect has lethal consequences for its residents, Callie has emerged through the unimaginable as a beloved community leader, healer, and voice for change.

All across the US, there are thousands of communities like Selma and countless leaders like Callie who are sounding the alarm of a nation in political, economic, and spiritual crisis. Today, there are

## **Moral Arc of the Universe**

For 40 years, while a wealthy few have advanced a cascade of neoliberal reforms that have flattened wages, heightened inequality, and expanded poverty, a dominant narrative has blamed the poor for their miserable conditions. This ethos is baked so deeply into our institutions – from schools, to houses of worship, workplaces, media, government, and the military – that many of us simply take it as a matter of fact. In this telling of the moral arc of the universe, people are poor at worst because they are lazy and immoral or at best because they don't have the right job training or role models. The antidote in either case is for the poor to complain less, act better, work harder, and pray more. This narrative is critical for those who would prefer to cast poverty as an aberration in an otherwise healthy society, rather than

as structured into the core of our present political and economic order.

It is in these circumstances that poor and impacted organizers, advocates, moral and religious leaders, and many more have come together under the banner of the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival. This initiative, of which I am the co-chair alongside the Rev. Dr. William Barber, understands that we are living in a *kairos* moment – a time of great change and transformation, when the old ways of the world are ending, and

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**In the neoliberal narrative, the antidote is to tell the poor to complain less, act better, work harder, and pray more.**

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new ones are being born. From our study of history, we know that these moments appear sparingly and carry both profound danger and real possibility. We also know that during *kairos* moments in the past, from Reconstruction to the 1960s, broad fusion movements led by those most impacted have been necessary to protect and advance our most precious moral, religious, and constitutional values. These movements were concerned not just with tinkering around the system or a finite policy change, but with a moral revolution of values that could transform political will and imagination.

### **Soul Sickness**

When we raise the demands of the Poor People's Campaign, we are always told to be practical. We are instructed that the nation cannot afford the cost of universal healthcare or living wages and free public education by the same people who subsidize and write blank bail-out checks to Wall Street, the fossil fuel industry, and military contractors. Last year, we released a Moral Budget which demonstrates that if America spent less on war, and if those who can afford to paid even modestly more toward the common good, we could invest in transformative programs of social uplift, end homelessness and poverty, and strengthen our democracy for generations.

As I write this, we are threatened by an unfolding public health crisis caused by the coronavirus. The virus will hurt the poor disproportionately, and then, because poverty acts as a multiplier in a public health emergency, everyone else is put at greater risk. In an emergency such as this, when no person is safe or immune, we must come to see that the cost of not providing for people's basic needs far outweighs the cost of providing them. Just as we attend to the sick in moments of heightened emer-

gency, so too must we turn our attention to a nation that is soul sick – that is, as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "approaching spiritual death."

Last summer, the Poor People's Campaign presented our Moral Budget before the US House of Representatives Committee on the Budget. The six of us who testified represented a growing fusion movement: Alongside Rev. Barber and me was Kenia Alcocer, an undocumented community organizer from Los Angeles; Chris Overfelt, an Iraq war veteran from Kansas; Savannah Kinsey, a low-wage worker and organizer from central Pennsylvania; and Callie Greer from Selma. Testimony after testimony, we offered a different way forward, with clear demands and a vision for what is possible when the poor and impacted take action together. In response, we heard familiar and tired talking points about poverty from members of Congress. Some spoke about the failure of the War on Poverty as evidence that programs of social uplift don't work, while ignoring the dramatic attacks that politicians have made to undercut that initiative. Others replied with tales of their own success rising out of economic hardship and argued that it is bootstrap individualism and Christian charity that alleviates poverty.

The walls of the congressional committee echoed with empty words that distort what the Bible says about the poor. For someone less familiar with the arguments of regressive politicians, it might have been surprising to hear so many seek refuge under theological cover. As a biblical scholar and a student of social movement history, I have written extensively on how our religious texts instruct nations to care for the poor and dispossessed. As a long-time organizer, I have learned that with very little else to stand on, those in power desperately seek to distort the liberating power of our religious and faith traditions. If we are to fight back, we must contest the moral terrain of our nation. In this *kairos* moment, we must build a fusion movement that can break through that which divides us and revive that which gives us all life. Please join us. We need everyone who sees the need to revive our impoverished democracy to join in. All are welcome in the Poor People's Campaign. Come to Washington, DC, on June 20 for a Mass Poor People's Assembly and Moral March on Washington.

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*The Rev. Liz Theoharis is co-chair of the Poor People's Campaign and director of the Kairos Center for Religions, Rights, and Social Justice at Union Theological Seminary. She is the author of *Always with Us?: What Jesus Really Said about the Poor* (Eerdmans, 2017) and co-author of *Revive Us Again: Vision and Action in Moral Organizing* (Beacon, 2018). She is ordained in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).*



# “That the Strong Might Not Oppress the Weak”: The Old Testament Vision



By John J. Collins

*“Ah you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land!” (Isa 5:8). So spoke the prophet Isaiah in the late-eighth-century BCE. The problem was evidently endemic in Israel and Judah in the period of the monarchy. Tenant farmers could easily fall into debt if there was a bad harvest. The king’s taxes had to be paid anyway. If the tenants could not pay their taxes they could be forced into slavery. First they might sell their children, or wives, then themselves, and lose their land in the process.*

In tribal Israel of an earlier time each family had its ancestral plot of land as a heritage, but the tribal system largely broke down under the monarchy. The resultant plight of the poor evoked some of the most powerful prophetic denunciations. Amos, a slightly earlier contemporary of Isaiah, railed against those who would buy the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals (Amos 8:6).

## **“We are Powerless”**

The problem persisted in the postexilic period. In the fifth-century BCE people complained to Nehemiah: “‘We are having to pledge our fields, our vineyards, and our houses in order to get grain during the famine.’ And there were those who said, ‘We are having to borrow money on our fields and vineyards

have been ravished; we are powerless, and our fields and vineyards now belong to others’” (Neh 5:4).

The idea of justice is older than the Bible. Some 500 years before Moses, Hammurabi declared that the gods had chosen him “to cause justice to prevail in the land ... in order that the strong might not oppress the weak, that justice might be dealt to the orphan and the widow.”<sup>1</sup> This ideal was also embraced by the kings of Israel and Judah, who were supposed to “defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy and crush the oppressor” (Ps 72:4).

## **Trampled in the Dust**

In biblical law, the concern for the widow and the orphan was extended also to the alien, a distinctive biblical note that is especially resonant in our time (see e.g. Deut 10:18; 27:19). Throughout the ancient world, justice was understood to entail the protection of the poor and vulnerable from those who would exploit them. Neither biblical law nor the prophets demanded equal distribution of resources, or sought to abolish all distinction between rich and poor. It is assumed that “there will never cease to be people in need on the earth” (Deut 15:11). The problem for the prophets was that the poor were deprived of the necessities of life and degraded to

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**Arguably the fundamental issue that divides American politics is precisely whether the better-off members of society have responsibility for the poor.**

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to pay the king’s tax. Now our flesh is the same as that of our kindred; our children are the same as their children; and yet we are forcing our sons and daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters

a subhuman condition. The rich “trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth and push the afflicted out of the way” (Amos 2:7). There is always a question as to what the threshold is, what should be deemed sufficient for the poor. But the examples cited by Amos and the other prophets seem clear enough. If people have to sell themselves into slavery to cover their debts, or get food to eat, that is surely unacceptable.

But it is also a problem when the gap between rich and poor becomes disproportionate. Amos rails against

*those who are at ease in Zion,  
and those who feel secure on Mt. Samaria ...  
those who lie on beds of ivory,  
and lounge on their couches,  
and eat lambs from the flock,  
and calves from the stall,  
who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp,  
and like David improvise on musical instruments,  
who drink wine from bowls,  
and anoint themselves with the finest oils,  
but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph. (Amos 6:1-6)*

The point here is not necessarily that beds of ivory and bowls of wine are bad in themselves, but that they make a painful contrast with the “ruin of Joseph,” or the poverty of Israelite peasants. The prophets see society organically, and the fact that the balance of society is out of joint is what brings it to ruin.

### Unconscionable Economics

While concern for justice is enshrined in the biblical law codes, the outrage of the prophets is not necessarily caused by legal violations. Some of the conduct condemned by the prophets involves breaking laws (e.g. dishonest trading in Amos), but some does not. Even if the rich of Judah were acting quite

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**In biblical law, concern for the widow and the orphan was extended also to the alien, a distinctive biblical note that is especially resonant in our time.**

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legally in adding house to house and field to field, their actions were unconscionable in the face of the poverty of their compatriots.

In this view of justice, social equilibrium is definitely a consideration. It rests not so much on positive covenantal law as on an intuition into the order of nature, or of creation. This is also true of some of the best-known stories illustrating the problem of injustice in the Hebrew Bible. Take for example 2 Samuel 11, where the prophet Nathan confronts King David for having Uriah the Hittite killed and

In the last three decades, a racial wealth divide has dramatically widened in this country, according to various reports.

The net worth of a median white family has been estimated at \$171,000. Median Latinx family wealth is \$20,700. The median black family net worth is about \$17,600, according to a Center for American Progress report.

“Several key factors exacerbate this vicious cycle of wealth inequality,” the Center’s “Systematic Inequality” report said in 2018. “Black households, for example, have far less access to tax-advantaged forms of savings, due in part to a long history of employment discrimination and other discriminatory practices. A well-documented history of mortgage market discrimination means that blacks are significantly less likely to be homeowners than whites, which means they have less access to the savings and tax benefits that come with owning a home. Persistent labor market discrimination and segregation also force blacks into fewer and less advantageous employment opportunities than their white counterparts.”

The gap between white and black wealth is reinforced by patterns of wealth inheritance. On average, white families receive far greater inheritances and intergenerational transfers than do black families, according to a 2020 Brookings Institution report called “Examining the Black-White Wealth Gap.”

How to narrow the wealth gap? One solution receiving attention is baby bonds. In a version of the plan promoted by Sen. Cory Booker, every new child would receive \$1,000 at birth, then payments of up to \$2,000 a year depending on family income until the child is 18. The money would be funded by the federal government and placed in a US Treasury account. Account holders could withdraw the money when they turn 18 – spending the funds only on education, home ownership, or retirement. To supporters, this plan is more politically feasible than direct reparations.

According to a Duke University study, the average baby bond account for black Americans would amount to about \$29,000 at age 18. An equivalent white baby bond account would be about \$15,800. “Currently, black America has nine cents to every dollar of wealth that white America possesses: Booker’s proposal would increase that proportion to twenty-three cents on the dollar,” said the Duke study, called “Baby Bonds: A Universal Path to Ensure the Next Generation has Capital to Thrive.”

*Sources: Center for American Progress, Brookings Institution, the Samuel Dubois Cook Center on Social Equity at Duke University*

taking his wife Bathsheba. Nathan famously tells the king a story about a rich man who took a poor man's little ewe lamb to make a meal for his guest, although that was all the poor man had. David is outraged, not because a law had been violated but because the action was patently unjust. The prophet is then able to entrap the king, by telling him "you are the man." Equally, in the story of Naboth's vineyard, in 1 Kings 21, Elijah's condemnation of King Ahab is not a technical judgment on a legal case but outrage at an action that was obviously unjust because of the abuse of royal power.

The view that justice lies in the right order of creation is characteristic of wisdom books such as Proverbs rather than of the prophets. The prophets are not engaged in articulating a theory of justice, but only in protesting egregious abuses. If there is a theory implicit in their protests, it is first of all that everyone should have enough to live a satisfying life, each with their own vine and fig tree, with none to make them afraid (Micah 4:4). But also, the discrepancies in wealth should not be too great. Great discrepancies invariably arise from exploitative practices, and they give rise to resentment and tensions that disrupt the peace of society.

### A Biblical Mandate

The problem of economic inequality is not articulated as forcefully in the New Testament as in the Old, but it is certainly present. "Woe to you who are rich," says Jesus in the Lukan beatitudes, "for you have received your consolation" (Luke 6:24; compare James 5). The story of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) does not suggest that the rich man had caused the poverty of Lazarus, or behaved illegally, but he is held accountable nonetheless.

**If there is a theory implicit in the prophets' protests, it is first of all that everyone should have enough to live a satisfying life, each with their own vine and fig tree, with none to make them afraid.**

less. In the biblical worldview, we are our brother's keeper and bear responsibility for the less fortunate members of society. The point is made decisively in the judgment scene in Matt 25:31-46. The spread of Christianity was facilitated in no small part by the priority Christians gave to caring for the poor and the vulnerable.

It is arguable that the fundamental issue that divides American politics in the 21st century is precisely whether the better-off members of society

have responsibility for the poor. Any illusion that opposition to social programs was grounded in fiscal responsibility was dispelled by the Trump-era tax cuts. It is ironic, then, that the policies of the current government are supported enthusiastically by many evangelical Christians. In this, at least, they cannot claim to be guided even remotely by biblical values.

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*John J. Collins, the Holmes Professor of Old Testament Criticism and Interpretation at YDS, has taught at Yale since 2000. He has published widely on apocalypticism, wisdom, Hellenistic Judaism, and the Dead Sea Scrolls. His many books include The Dead Sea Scrolls: A Biography (Princeton, 2013), Introduction to the Hebrew Bible (Fortress, third edition, 2018), and Does the Bible Justify Violence? (Augsburg, 2004). He is general editor of the Yale Anchor Bible series and has served as president of both the Catholic Biblical Association and the Society of Biblical Literature.*

### Note

- 1 The Code of Hammurabi, cited in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament, Third Edition with Supplement*, edited by James B. Pritchard (Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 164, 178.

### Further Reading

John J. Collins, *What are Biblical Values? What the Bible Says on Key Ethical Issues* (Yale University Press, 2019).  
 Jeremiah Untermann, *Justice for All: How the Jewish Bible Revolutionized Ethics* (Jewish Publication Society, 2017).

## POEM IN WHICH HER MORTGAGE COMES DUE

By C.D. Wright

the folds of a dark brown dress  
 the knuckles of a hand spent in dishwater  
 the jars of rhubarb  
 the folios of poetry  
 the suitcase filled with worthless notes  
 the fiery fields  
 the fields on fire



Athens, Greece, March 2020  
Photo by Enri Canaj  
© Enri Canaj/Magnum Photos

## CONVENIENCE

By W.S. Merwin

We were not made in its image  
but from the beginning we believed in it  
not for the pure appeasement of hunger  
but for its availability  
it could command our devotion  
beyond question and without our consent  
and by whatever name we have called it  
in its name love has been set aside  
unmeasured time has been devoted to it  
forests have been erased and rivers poisoned  
and truth has been relegated for it  
wars have been sanctified by it  
we believe that we have a right to it  
even though it belongs to no one  
we carry a way back to it everywhere  
we are sure that it is saving something  
we consider it our personal savior  
all we have to pay for it is ourselves



Outside the New York Stock Exchange, New York City, 1987

Photo by Susan Meiselas

© Susan Meiselas/Magnum Photos



## THE CLASS VISIT

By Bob Hicok

How many of you have seen a hawk?  
One hand raised. Who's gone  
to Disney World? No hands raised.  
How many of you own a dog? Four hands.  
Has anyone ever made a snowman? Two hands.  
Ever seen the Big Dipper?  
On my grandma's farm, one kid said,  
his hand up, fingers wiggling.  
Who knows someone who was shot  
and killed? Every hand went up. Faster  
than thought. More certain than rain.  
If you know someone else  
who was killed, raise your other hand.  
Had you happened by just then,  
you'd wonder why so many kids  
were signaling touchdown, both arms  
thrown high, or why that class  
was pretending to be on a roller coaster,  
arms tossed at the sun  
as they dropped over the edge  
of their fake demise,  
and smile. An actual smile  
or just a bit of joy  
you'd carry on your face  
down the hall,  
to wherever you were going,  
making the mood  
of the next room you entered  
a little better,  
even if you didn't know it.  
I think the pleasure  
has to do with their hands  
being so little  
yet wanting to hold as much  
as anyone has ever wanted to hold.  
Hands are good at that. Holding.  
Hands are good at almost everything  
we ask them to do.



Juvenile jail, maximum security, San Francisco, 1989

Photo by Jim Goldberg

© Jim Goldberg/Magnum Photos

# Getting Political in the Pulpit about Poverty



By Marilyn Baugh Kendrix '13 M.Div.

*In my second year at YDS, I took a class called “Jesus and Paul on Poverty.” For that course I read *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander (New Press, 2012). The book changed my life.*

Until that time, I had no real understanding of the criminal justice system in America and certainly did not think very deeply about the link between incarceration and poverty. Much has changed since then. My views on incarceration, poverty, and the people affected by both have taken a turn toward Jesus, whose ministry said much about the poor and our obligations toward those in our society who suffer the most.

I remember being asked, as a first-year divinity student, what I thought about liberation theology. At the time, I didn't know too much about it, but that did not stop me from answering that the only kind of theology I find in scripture is liberation

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**The pandemic is shining a spotlight on the economic disparities in our nation. Salaried employees will work from home and continue to receive a paycheck, week after week as this crisis drags on. Hourly workers often cannot.**

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theology. That the Bible from start to finish speaks to a preferential option for the poor seemed obvious to me, even before finishing my first class in biblical studies. Nothing that I have subsequently learned has changed my mind.

## **An Unbiblical Notion**

Since graduation and ordination, I have pastored a church and served in other United Church of Christ positions. And yet, during all this time, I have not been able to stop worrying about the poor in our nation. One of the blessings and challenges of Con-

ference Ministry is that I hear from church pastors about the restrictions that many of their congregations try to put on them concerning “politics in the pulpit.” The notion that Christian preachers should steer clear of politics in their sermons is a particularly unbiblical one. So much of the Bible is focused on concern for the “least of these,” (Matthew 25:40) those experiencing food insecurity, those who have no access to clean water, those strangers – dare I say immigrants – among us hoping for a better, safer life, those with too little cash to properly dress themselves and their children, those who are sick and cannot access affordable healthcare, those imprisoned for crimes small and great and non-existent. These are the folks whom Jesus would have us care for. It's right there in Matthew, and yet preaching about them can cause some pastors to lose their jobs. Jesus was nothing if not political. Indeed, his preaching about injustice in his day took him to the cross.

Despite the claim by some that we live in a Christian nation, I see scant evidence that our society is overly concerned about those who are living on next to nothing, as authors Kathryn Edin and Luke Shaefer write about so compellingly in their book, *\$2.00 a Day: Living on Almost Nothing in America* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015). There was a time when we were a nation led by those who were concerned about the poor. President Lyndon Johnson declared war on poverty. This may have been derailed by the expensive quagmire in Vietnam but at least he was concerned enough about income inequity in America to initiate what he saw as a path to a Great Society. That government is responsible for the welfare of its citizens is biblical as well. In the

Genesis story of Joseph, who was sold into slavery in Egypt by his brothers and subsequently became the right hand of Pharaoh, we find the government setting aside grain during the fat years in order to provide for all its citizens during the lean years. (Genesis 41) Today, many of our leaders don't even pretend concern for those who struggle to eat, who struggle to find a place to live (read *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* by Matthew Desmond), who die 10 to 15 years earlier than the rest of the country (read "The Gross Inequality of Death in America" by Roge Karma in *New Republic*, the May 10, 2019, edition). It is impossible to live on a minimum wage job, yet our government gives huge tax cuts to rich individuals, some of whose wealth ranks higher than 65 of the world's nations.

Many good Christians are more than willing to stock food pantries and organize diaper drives, yet some of these same congregants complain if their pastor brings up "political" issues regarding policies that make food pantries necessary. Many Christians are very satisfied to recite the Nicene Creed written in the Fourth Century, a creed that relegates the

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### **Why? Why has our society moved so far from caring concern for the least and the lost of our cities and towns?**

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entire ministry of Jesus to a comma. UCC minister Robin Meyers argues: "'... Born of the Virgin Mary, comma, suffered under Pontius Pilate ...' And there you have it: the entire life of Jesus, all of his teachings, the parables, his interaction with the poor, his healings – whether metaphorical or literal – all reduced to a comma."<sup>1</sup>

During the first years after Christ, the first churches of Jesus followers were a collection of people who were unapologetically countercultural. They remembered the example of Jesus and his ministry. They were overwhelmingly made up of people from the servant classes. They welcomed all. We are told in the Acts of the Apostles, that "the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common." (Acts 4:32) We've come a long way since then: In the past century our nation has moved farther away from this notion of shared responsibility and caring for one another.

One has to ask, Why? Why has our society moved so far from caring concern for the least, the last, and the lost of our cities and towns? Why have

so many Christians today forgotten the teachings of their professed leader, Jesus Christ? That almost seems like a dangerous question to ask, one that invites truth-telling in an era when truth has become hard to find. I would suggest that we have become a nation of idolaters. (There, I've said it!) And what is the god that we worship above all other gods? Money, wealth, and celebrity. We have become a nation that celebrates the amassing of great fortunes. We have as a society somehow decided that having uncountable liquid assets confers *goodness* on those who possess them.

### **Who Defines Christianity?**

The consequence of such idolatry is to believe the corollary – that the poor must then by definition be bad. We feel free to think of them as lazy, indolent grifters looking to take what we have. Defining poor people this way gives us cover to turn the other way when our leaders openly work to shrink the social safety net down to almost nothing. Society has come to a place where it feels now like America gets to decide what kind of Christians we are. Or will we follow Jesus in feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, giving drink to the thirsty, visiting the imprisoned, healing the sick?

In many congregations, I believe we have gotten far away from the kind of church that the Apostle Paul was planting all over Asia Minor back in the first years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Those early churches were based on a radical kind of love that had them caring for society's outcasts and least powerful folk. The churches that Paul planted were full of women – and make no mistake, in first-century Israel women were at the bottom of the power heap. The churches that Paul planted were full of servants and slaves, folks whose lives were a struggle for survival. They were attracted to the gospel because of that radical kind of love and caring that each of them had for one another.

### **Social Distance**

As I sit writing this, I am participating in "social distancing," sheltering-in-place to avoid the COVID-19 pandemic that is holding the world hostage. I am working from home, participating in the effort to lower the curve of infection so that our hospitals will be able to manage. But this notion that we can just work from home is shining a spotlight on the economic disparities in our nation. Salaried employees will work from home and continue to receive a paycheck, week after week as this crisis drags on. Hourly workers often cannot work from home and are being laid off by the thousands. Unable to pay

the rent, many may find themselves losing their homes. Their children's schools are closed and their children are missing not only their lessons, but often their breakfast and lunch as well. People in our nation's prisons are unable to distance themselves from others, creating an environment where the new coronavirus will be able to strike and possibly kill obscene numbers of them. And our fellow citizens who are living with homelessness have a choice between living out in the cold or living cheek by jowl in a homeless shelter, passing the virus from one person to the next.

### Some Good News

The good news is that these grim facts have invaded the consciousness of many good people who are working to find ways to feed the school children, provide rent relief for tenants, put cash in the hands of people who will not survive without it. It has

### This is a time when more and more people are working to make God's love and justice real.

created a fertile ground for Christians to live into the Gospel of Jesus Christ, to answer Jesus' call to love our neighbors and care for the strangers. This is a time when more and more people are working to make God's love and justice real.

Making God's love and justice real is the underlying motivation for creating the new Southern New England Conference of the United Church of Christ. Ten years from now, we hope people will look around southern New England and ask one another, What happened that this has become such a just and loving place? And others will answer, it's because of the work of the Southern New England Conference of the UCC. Maybe it will have begun in response to a microbe that has brutally caused the world to stop and look around in love at one another. May it be so.

*The Rev. Marilyn Baugh Kendrix is a Bridge Conference Minister in the newly established Southern New England Conference of the UCC. She has also served as Conference Minister of the Rhode Island Conference of the UCC.*

### Note

1. Robin Meyers, quoted in *Living the Questions: The Wisdom of Progressive Christianity* by David M. Felten and Jeff Proctor-Murphy (HarperOne, 2012), p. 181.

**Economic inequality – what's the cause, what's the solution?** Republicans and Democrats see things differently, says a Pew Research Center report.

Most Republicans say a person's life choices contribute a great deal to economic inequality. That compares to 27 percent of Democrats. Republicans are more likely than Democrats (48 percent vs. 22 percent) to say that some people working harder than others accounts for inequality, Pew reported. Half of Democrats believe racial discrimination contributes a great deal to inequality; 11 percent of Republicans say that.

Some 60 percent of Americans say there's too much economic inequality, though most of those say some inequality is acceptable.

As for remedies, most who say there's too much economic inequality think the government should raise taxes on the richest Americans. Majorities in both parties say this – Democrats (91 percent) and Republicans (65 percent).

However, across all income levels, 86 percent of Americans who say there's too much economic inequality say the government should *not* raise their own taxes, Pew reported.

About 50 percent say it would greatly reduce economic inequality to make college tuition free at public two-year colleges, expand Medicare, and increase the minimum wage.

Other findings in the report:

- Income inequality in the US has been increasing since 1980. The gap is greater than in other G7 countries such as the UK and France.
- The wealth divide between upper-income households and middle- and lower-income families is rising. In this century, partly because of two recessions, middle-income families' net worth (the value of assets such as a house or savings account, minus debt) fell by 20 percent. Lower-income household wealth shrank by 45 percent. Upper-income families increased their wealth by 33 percent. "The wealth gap between America's richest and poorer families more than doubled from 1989 to 2016," Pew reports.
- The middle class has been shrinking for 50 years. The number of US adults with middle-incomes fell from 61 percent in 1971 to 51 percent in 2019. Some moved to upper-income levels. Others moved down. "On balance, there was more movement up the income ladder than down the income ladder," Pew states.

*Source: "Most Americans Say There Is Too Much Economic Inequality in the US, but Fewer Than Half Call It a Top Priority," Pew Research Center, Jan. 9, 2020. See [pewsocialtrends.org](https://pewsocialtrends.org).*

# Economic Complexity and the Priesthood of the Believer



By George Bauer

*To confront our society's economic inequities, it is helpful to recall the way wealth is created in our economic system. All wealth comes from the development and production of goods and services or from the assets that underlie that process ... but only if the revenue exceeds the expenditures.*

This happens at an institutional and corporate level because society delegates that role to them: Every corporation must receive a charter from the state. It happens of course at an individual level as well. (And we are all familiar with spending more than we make ... with no wealth creation).

This sounds terribly simple in light of such a complex, multifaceted, sometimes mysterious system (mysterious because it involves human behavior), but I think it is a fundamental way to get at the problem. I would urge readers to test this assumption.

## **The Best System, So Far**

Perhaps Winston Churchill's description of democracy will give us some insight here. To paraphrase him: Democracy is a fragile system with many shortcomings, but it just happens to be the best system we have invented so far to govern ourselves. The same could be said about our economy: Our market-driven free enterprise system is a fragile system with many shortcomings, but it just happens to be the best system we have invented so far to carry on our economic affairs.

Here I want to identify five key components that should be part of the escalating discussion about economic inequities and how to reduce them.

- **Opportunities for employee equity ownership.** Our system is built on private capital and thus has some inequity built into it. Yet it has been pointed out that more than half of the equity of the Fortune 500 companies is held by pension funds, mutual funds, and private equity investors – thus ownership

is held by a broad section of our population. Most people who have a corporate retirement plan or a 401 retirement plan are probably holders of equity in a corporation (stock shares). I myself am a great believer that equity ownership by employees has great value. I often say I am a “Marxist” to the extent that I believe every worker should own some part of the productive capacity from which he or she draws a livelihood. US tax law is extremely favorable to such plans, but unfortunately most companies don't take advantage of it. When I acquire a company I usually set aside 20 to 25 percent of the ownership for the employees. This kind of corporate ownership is a good start for dealing with economic disparity. Unfortunately it is not yet a widespread practice.

- **Our education system.** Historically there has always been economic disparity, but arguably it is now intensifying at an unsustainable rate that

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**People in the pews should regard themselves as ministers to workplaces and corporations in our unpredictable economy.**

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threatens the system itself. What is happening? For one thing, the production of goods that creates wealth is becoming less labor-intensive because of the technologies involved. This is requiring greater workplace education and sophistication. So one of the fundamental levers to combat inequity is improved education of the workforce. We will have to put a full-court press on this, probably rethinking



our entire education system and making it more responsive to the new order. Ray Dalio, founder of Bridgeport Associates, recently announced he is giving \$100 million to the Connecticut Department of Education (to be matched by \$100 million from other philanthropists and \$100 million from the state) in order to train a new generation of workers.

- **Our tax system.** We are seeing a generational dimension to the concentration of capital, and this is causing some of the inequity. I have no problem with the inheritance tax allowing for an exemption for carrying on the family farm upon one's death, but to suggest the CEO of Amazon with a net worth north of \$50 billion shouldn't pay more than what is now required when he dies is questionable. There is little doubt that reform of our tax system can go a long way toward relieving some of the economic inequity.

- **The organized labor component.** A classic way of relieving inequity is labor organizing to get more of the wealth through the expenditure side of the production of goods and services. Unfortunately, union membership is decreasing, partly because unions in many cases have not met the needs of the workers they represent. If they are going to play a more active role in the creation of wealth, and secure a greater piece of that pie for employees, some

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### **I am a "Marxist" to the extent that I believe every worker should own some part of a company's productive capacity.**

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new approaches will be necessary. My father-in-law, a former president of the IBEW Local 1 (International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers), was one such leader – an enlightened labor representative with a strong Christian faith who brought a guild mentality to the union fellowship. I have recently met with some young leaders who hold out hope for the movement.

- **Corporate duty to stakeholders, not just capital shareholders.** Another trend will likely bear increasingly on the inequity issue – the notion that there is more than one bottom line for a corporation. The corporation has responsibilities to society other than the creation of wealth in strictly monetary terms. There are stakeholders other than capital shareholders to serve – employees, neighborhoods, the environment. The Business Roundtable has recently challenged its members to look at multiple bottom lines that "generate long-term value for shareholders," including employee compensation, training, and local community support.

All of this leaves the question: What is the role of seminaries and churches in these economic matters? Robert Greenleaf, a former AT&T executive and the founder of the servant leadership movement, has encouraged seminaries to develop a theology of institutions rather than just individuals. Some years ago, such an effort was initiated at Andover Newton Theological School by the late theologian Gabe Fackre and by the late Richard Broholm, director of Andover's Center for the Ministry of the Laity, working with the Calvinist concept of the three-fold office of Christ – prophet, priest, and king – and applying it to the various tasks of institutions, whether financial practices, ethical relations with employees, or prophetic mission to the larger world.

As for the church, it possesses perhaps the most powerful resource known to humanity (and God) – the people in its pews every Sunday who should regard themselves as ministers to our society and specifically to workplaces and corporations, where most church members spend eight or more hours a day of their lives. The professional clergy must take care to translate the magnificent values of the New Testament to these lay "pew ministers." To do this, the clergy themselves, as well as seminary students and faculty, need a better understanding of the economic system and how it might be reformed. Through small groups, retreats, and other efforts, laypeople could discuss their own workplace challenges, their power to influence, and in many cases make the production of goods and services serve more stakeholders and make the results more equitable.

The lay ministers of our congregations – the priesthood of believers – are essential to this work. In the life of our complex, fragile economy, the church objective would be not to separate or compartmentalize Sunday from Monday but rather to make a Sunday-Monday connection that brings the values of the New Testament to the daily world of commerce.

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*George Bauer, a member of the YDS Dean's Advisory Council, spent a career at IBM in executive positions in marketing, finance and business systems. After retiring in 1987, he founded GPB Group Ltd., an investment banking firm. He remains active in business and philanthropic causes, serves on the board of Princeton University's Faith at Work Initiative, and is a former member of the Board of Andover Newton Theological School. The Bauer Family Foundation supports education and healthcare causes internationally.*



Dentists working a temporary clinic under a canopy for some 2,500 people who can't afford healthcare, Wise County, Virginia, 2007

Photo by Larry Towell

© Larry Towell/Magnum Photos



*Keri L. Day '04 M.A.R. is associate professor of constructive theology and African-American religion at Princeton Theological Seminary. Her scholarly interests include womanist/feminist theologies, social critical theory, cultural studies, economics, and Afro-Pentecostalism. She is the author of *Unfinished Business: Black Women, The Black Church, and the Struggle to Thrive in America* (Orbis, 2012) and *Religious Resistance to Neoliberalism: Womanist and Black Feminist Perspectives* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). Her next book will focus on the Azusa Street Revival of 1906 and how it can shape the religious and democratic imagination. She has been a radio and TV guest commentator on issues related to faith and politics, and has written for The Feminist Wire, Sojourners, Christian Century, and other publications.*

**REFLECTIONS:** *Are economic values dominating religious values these days?*

**KERI DAY:** Yes, there is a sense in which market values attempt to provide the basic moral terms of our existence. Market values have seeped into everything we do. Consider how the dating world has been commodified. It's interesting to see how all those apps and sites match people up with data, treating individuals like commodities based on variables related to zip codes, income, beauty ratings. Love itself becomes deeply informed by marketing and analytics.

Individual competition has become a moral value. Survival of the fittest structures our world. Competition tells us we have to take care of our-

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It's hard for educated middle-class folk to have this conversation. We have to acknowledge that we are beneficiaries of this system.

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selves if we are going to succeed. And if we achieve something individually we give ourselves the credit and refuse to think we received any help along the way. Unfortunately, this kind of atomistic anthropology credits the well-to-do as responsible for their success and blames the poor for their poverty and deprivation, without asking how broader social structures impact people's possibilities.

The truth is, it's hard for educated middle-class folk to have this conversation. We have to acknowledge that we are beneficiaries of this system. In my case, I'm part of one of the wealthiest institutions in the nation, and slavery helped build it. I'm a ben-

eficiary of economic and racial capitalism, and yet I write about black poverty. Every day I see blue-collar workers who maintain the buildings and I have to think about the profound gap between what they get paid and what I get paid. The problem is how to expose the abuses of market capitalism while recognizing that so many of us benefit from it – and acknowledge that reforms will require a measure of sacrifice by us. Those are really difficult conversations that await us.

**REFLECTIONS:** *Are there practical steps a congregation can take?*

**DAY:** Churches should reread the Gospels and Acts keeping in mind what Jesus and others were actually doing from day to day, attending to the spiritual and physical needs of people. Realize that the question of survival is a daily constant for people who are in economic distress – people are facing the daily absence of a living wage, child care options, health-care. In that spirit, churches can create ministries of social justice and appoint church members such as deacons and elders to address deprivation in their cities and neighborhoods. Expand the work that various congregations are already doing – such as creating credit unions and lobbying efforts in response to the payday loan industry and its astronomical interest rates. And study books about the economy. I think of two authors who've been important to me – Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum.<sup>\*\*\*</sup> In their own ways they argue that economic achievement has to be defined as something more than a measure of the GDP. Economic justice is not the same as economic growth. Economic reform requires a holistic moral vision that takes everyone's capabilities into consideration. Change begins when churches understand themselves to be *participants* in a particular story that we see in the Gospels and Acts, a story about the Reign of God – not simply as readers of the texts to attain a certain historical knowledge about Jesus and the early church but as participants in the unfolding news of God's reign. When we do that, then we realize that our mandate as Christians is to respond to the dignity of the whole human person. That's what we see in Jesus and the early church – not just a focus on matters of the heart

<sup>\*\*\*</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum teaches philosophy at the University of Chicago. Her books include *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach* (Harvard, 2011), *The Monarchy of Fear: A Philosopher Looks at Our Political Crisis* (Simon & Schuster, 2018), and *The Cosmopolitan Tradition: A Noble but Flawed Ideal* (Harvard, 2019). Amartya Sen, a Harvard economist and Nobel Prize winner, is the author of *Inequality Reexamined* (Harvard, 1992), *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (Norton, 2006), and *The Idea of Justice* (Harvard, 2009).

but a response to what's happening in the lives of the most vulnerable in society. Look at the parable in Luke – Lazarus and the rich man, the rich man who finds himself looking up from hell because he did not attend to the matter of the poor!

**REFLECTIONS:** *Can churches communicate a moral vision within economic life?*

**DAY:** Near the end of his life, Martin Luther King Jr. was fully advocating a broader vision of economic justice. He saw how racism intersected with capitalism. He was saying, What good is it to have won a seat at the lunch counter if you can't afford a meal? He was now in the habit of listening to those who had insight into the economic problems of vulnerable people – especially important to him were Ella Baker and Marian Wright Edelman. He was a powerful person who realized he didn't know everything. To me, this symbolizes the humility of the church to recognize that we must seek out voices who can enlighten us and give us clarity about the pain suffered in the real world. Listen to social movements

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Expand the work that various congregations are already doing – such as creating credit unions in response to the payday loan industry.

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for economic justice – such as the living wage movement and Black Lives Matter – that are attempting to ask questions about economic inequality.

This is our challenge: to foster intellectual and spiritual humility and realize there's a world of people to connect with. That's an uncomfortable thing to do – to listen to people's stories and not just gather statistics. But Jesus embedded himself in people's lives in the moment. We have to become incarnated people. We can't do that if we remain in our homogenized communities. We need a vision of our own, a moral foundation – for friendship, for relationships – that isn't overwhelmed by what the market dictates.

## DATA RAIN

By Tony Hoagland

The information dam had broken in the hills,  
the town was flooded with information.  
All autumn the data rains had fallen heavy,  
making a violent rattle on roofs and windowpanes.

It had been a very heavy information season.  
Then in winter information continued to swell the streams;  
the memory reservoirs were full;

and it seemed strange that no candidate was running on the  
Less-Information platform,  
suggesting that too much could make you sick  
if you no longer understood it,

if you ingested it without question  
because you were trying to get through it  
before tomorrow's storm of information.

Is that what you felt?  
Is that why you began covering your ears and mouth,  
and keeping even your mind tightly closed?

Because you were trying to preserve  
what it meant to be private  
even as you were being

carried more and more swiftly  
downstream?

# Healing Society, Anchored in Faith



By Alison Cunningham '84 M.Div.

*While staying in the local homeless shelter, Joe was eager to find work, hoping to save enough money to move out within a few weeks. The cause of his homelessness was a familiar one to others at the emergency shelter: He lost his job and didn't have enough savings to see him through the gap in income. Even with his last job, he was living hand to mouth, barely making enough to rent a room in New Haven.*

Food stamps helped with the overall cost burden of his basic needs, but he often found himself at the soup kitchen for dinner during the week, taking advantage of a free meal and an occasional bag of groceries.

## **Difficult Commute**

After a month in the shelter, Joe found another job, this time in Stratford at a chain supermarket. It was part-time to start, paying the minimum wage of

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**After six months of this four-hour round-trip trek for a part-time job paying minimum wage with no benefits, Joe was feeling a little hopeless.**

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\$10.10 an hour. From the shelter in New Haven, Joe rode his bike to the train station, where he caught the 9:50 a.m. to Stratford. From the station there, he took a bus to the supermarket, arriving just in time to start his noon to 4 p.m. shift. At the end of the shift, he made the return trip, arriving back at the shelter for a saved dinner plate. After six months of this four-hour round-trip trek for a part-time job paying minimum wage with no benefits, Joe was feeling worn down and a little hopeless. The prospects of moving out of homelessness by getting a place of his own were growing dim.

Recent news has drawn attention to the reduction in the numbers of people experiencing home-

lessness over the past decade in New Haven and across the state.

Homeless service and housing providers have focused on particular sub-populations, providing housing subsidies and case management services to get people housed and help them remain housed. They have reached functional zero for chronically homeless adults and veterans, making sweeping changes to the system of care to meet needs more efficiently, advocating successfully to create a fund of housing subsidies, and moving the needle on political will across Connecticut to focus on homelessness issues. In the annual Point in Time Count in 2019, 34 people in New Haven identified as chronically homeless, down from 80 in 2018, and only 35 veterans were counted among them, down by four people from the year before.

## **Progress and Peril**

During my tenure as CEO of Columbus House, our vision was to one day end homelessness, so I celebrate these successes and still marvel at the advances we have made along with our colleagues statewide. Through massive system changes, we have come closer to the day when we can say that we have ended this crisis of homelessness. But when I think about Joe and the hundreds of people like him in the New Haven emergency shelters, enormous challenges remain before we can realize that vision.

New Haven is seeing a housing boom unlike anything in Connecticut. By mid-year 2019, the city



had issued 277 new housing permits. Most of those units are new apartments going up in and around downtown, with fair market rents that range from \$1,049 a month for a studio up to \$2,000 a month or more for a four-bedroom. If Joe could get a full-time job at the supermarket, still at minimum wage of \$10.10/hour, he would need to work 81 hours a week to afford a one-bedroom apartment that rents for \$1,163 per month. Joe would actually need to

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**Let's turn attention to those in abject poverty for which every extra, unplanned expense could lead to a crisis – the 20 percent who live so close to the edge of financial disaster.**

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make \$22.37/hour to afford that apartment and still have enough to cover the rest of his basic needs. In reality, at minimum wage, he could afford to pay only \$525 a month for rent.

#### **A Struggle for Basic Needs**

In New Haven, 51 percent of those who rent apartments are cost burdened, meaning that they spend more than 30 percent of their income on housing costs. A reported 29 percent are severely cost burdened by paying more than 50 percent of their income.<sup>1</sup> This trend is likely not to improve, since local job growth is dominated by the service industry where wages are well under the affordable housing wage.

A deeper local analysis shows that 48 percent of people of all ages are identified as “low income.” Among children up to age 17, that number is 63 percent.<sup>2</sup> Across the region, according to the ALICE report in 2018, 46 percent of households struggle each month to meet the cost of their basic needs, including housing, healthcare, childcare, and transportation.<sup>3</sup> These are households where at least one adult is employed. The low wage rate leaves the household living at or near the poverty line with severe financial challenges.<sup>4</sup>

Joe is in the bottom 20 percent of householder earners, with an income well below the official poverty level of \$17,240 for a two-person household. While Joe was in the shelter, he was connected to an employment specialist who helped him get ready for his job search, conducting mock interviews, creating a resume and finding the right clothes for his job interview. Recently it paid off – Joe finally did land a full-time job closer to New Haven. That \$13.05 an hour job, however, still falls far short of lifting Joe up and out of poverty.

They are “proud traitors to their class” – millionaires who want to pay more taxes.

They call themselves the Patriotic Millionaires – about 200 American business leaders and investors with large net worth and deep worry that concentrated wealth is threatening American democracy.

They are just a tiny remnant, however, since the US is home to about 12 million millionaires these days, according to various sources.

But the Patriotic Millionaires organization has been steadily stirring support for its causes, including an increase of the federal minimum wage, as well as efforts to preserve estate taxes and abolish hedge-fund tax loopholes.

They applaud states' efforts to raise local minimum wages above the current federal \$7.25/hour minimum. At least 26 states have increased wages beyond the “measly” federal minimum. It's an ethical imperative that all citizens who work full time should be able to afford their basic needs, the organization argues. Raising the spending power of workers is a simple way to boost the economy.

“Despite what you may have heard, wealthy folks like myself aren't the kind of consumers that drive our economy – we invest our excess money in portfolios and savings accounts,” says Morris Pearl, Patriotic Millionaires chairperson.

“Our economic system is driven by consumers, so when someone buys a cart full of groceries or enjoys a night out with their friends, they invest in their local economy and we all benefit.”

Patriotic Millionaires says taxes paid by wealthy individuals and corporations should be a greater proportion of federal revenue. Since 1980, the earnings of the affluent have skyrocketed while their taxes have fallen. The income of the top 0.1 percent has shot up to more than 300 percent in 40 years. In that same period, worker hourly compensation has risen by 24 percent, according to [inequality.org](http://inequality.org).

In a recent *New Yorker* profile, Disney heiress Abigail Disney said she joined Patriotic Millionaires because she had become uneasy about her wealth, including the family Boeing 737 for her personal use. She felt shame about retreating into her abundance from the problems of the rest of the world.

At [patrioticmillionaires.org](http://patrioticmillionaires.org), recent blogs include: “Why are Unpaid Internships Legal?”, “Tax Cuts Enrich Members of Congress Who Wrote Them,” and “Just Pay Your Taxes, Mr. Bezos.”

– Ray Waddle



In the conversations about income inequality today, we must turn our attention to those who live in abject poverty for which every extra, unplanned expense could lead to a crisis. The adage “we’re all just one paycheck away from homelessness” is none truer than for the 20 percent who live so close to the edge of financial disaster. What will it take to prevent people from falling off that cliff into homelessness? How to move to a more just society? The answer lies

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**I believe people of faith could press for more ambitious solutions by partnering with activists who work every day to eliminate income inequality, homelessness, food insecurity, racial bias, and other social ills.**

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in several areas: equal access to quality education, including job skills training; criminal justice reform; affordable and accessible healthcare; transportation overhaul; an increase in safe, affordable housing; an increase in the minimum wage to a livable wage. These deep systemic changes will open avenues for independence and economic security for all of us, lifting people up and out of deep poverty so that they can flourish.

Heeding the call to work toward healing society, congregations provide meals at shelters and soup kitchens, tutor students in public schools, welcome refugees, and so much more. Besides providing these critical services, people of faith can, I believe, press harder for bigger, more ambitious solutions. Congregations can partner with organizations and activists who work every day to eliminate income inequality, homelessness, food insecurity, racial bias, gun violence, and other social ills. Anchored in faith and pursuing a deep knowledge of the issues, our faith communities can help turn the tide of political indifference or hostility. There is no more demanding time for such action than now.

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*Alison Cunningham ’84 M.Div. joined the YDS staff last year as Director of Professional Formation, which focuses on training students who seek vocational direction in nonprofit service. For 20 years she was CEO of Columbus House, a New Haven organization that serves people who experience homelessness or are at risk. In 2018, YDS honored her with the William Sloane Coffin ’56 Award for Peace and Justice.*

## Notes

- 1 Mark Abraham and Camille Seaberry (lead authors), *Greater New Haven Community Index 2019* (DataHaven, 2019), p. 48. Available at [ctdatahaven.org](http://ctdatahaven.org).
- 2 Abraham and Seaberry, p. 43.
- 3 *ALICE: A Study of Financial Hardship in Connecticut* (Connecticut United Ways, 2018). See [alice.ctunitedway.org](http://alice.ctunitedway.org). ALICE is an acronym for Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed.
- 4 Abraham and Seaberry, p. 29.

## BEATIFIC By Tracy K. Smith

I watch him bob across the intersection,  
Squat legs bowed in black sweatpants.

I watch him smile at nobody, at our traffic  
Stopped to accommodate his slow going.

His arms churn the air. His comic jog  
Carries him nowhere. But it is as if he hears

A voice in our idling engines, calling him  
*Lithe, Swift, Prince of Creation.* Every least leaf

Shivers in the sun, while we sit, bothered,  
Late, captive to this thing commanding

*Wait for this man. Wait for him.*



A holding cell for undocumented female detainees, El Cajon, CA, 1989

Photo by Susan Meiselas

© Susan Meiselas/Magnum Photos

## OUR PRESENT HELP

We pray guided by the words of Psalm 46:

Compassionate, Comforting, Empowering God, you are our refuge and strength, a very present help in times of trouble. Amid the turmoil in the world, your love is steadfast and your strength never fails.

We pray for those infected and all of us who are affected by COVID-19. We remember especially healthcare workers, first responders, persons in isolation and those who grieve the loss of their loved ones.

**Your love is steadfast and your strength never fails.**

Merciful God, grant order to the chaos of our racing minds and our pounding hearts. We remember especially those who are overwhelmed by the uncertainty, in particular those most vulnerable because of preexisting health conditions, and those who have lost, or will lose, their jobs.

**Your love is steadfast and your strength never fails.**

Compassionate God, grant courage and hope in the wake of this unprecedented path as we navigate and re-navigate our lives in this global crisis. We remember especially elected government officials, educational administrators, religious leaders and all policy-makers who are expected to offer decisive leadership in this time of crisis. We remember the medical scientists and researchers who are working assiduously to develop a vaccine or treatment.

**Your love is steadfast and your strength never fails.**

Empower us to be open to your unfolding purposes even as the waters around us roar and foam. Reassure us of your divine presence and peace with us, now and always.

Amen!

*By Deonie Duncan '20 M.A.R., an ordained Baptist minister from Jamaica.*



Union organizer and civil rights leader Cesar Chavez, California grape strike, 1966

Photo by Paul Fusco

© Paul Fusco/Magnum Photos

# A Group Effort Against Bitter Inequality



By Russell Jeung

*Our neighbor Jan has become such a close sister in Christ that she's joined our family holiday dinners. We see her more than our relatives, and she knows us well enough to check in about our son's basketball games and our vacation plans. Her chatty, newsy personality and broad smile make this grandmother easy to get to know.*

What makes our relationship uneasy for me, though, is Jan's housing circumstances. She's one of the 4,000 unhoused persons in Oakland, CA, a number that has risen 47 percent in the past two years. By comparison, the tech industry here has boomed such that 25,000 households in the Bay Area have more than \$5 million in investable assets.

My family doesn't possess that kind of wealth, but we do have an extra bedroom. So you can imagine my guilt when Jan stops by on a cold, rainy night, and, this time, all I do is lend her a few dollars –

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**The Letter of James declares we don't have authentic faith if we do nothing about the physical needs of those without clothes or food.**

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not nearly enough for a hotel room. She's been assaulted at night before, and I fear for her safety. As she's gotten older, she's become more wan and sickly. Wandering outside all night has made her more incomprehensible, more on edge.

I grapple with how much responsibility I should assume for her.

Because of my church background, which taught me to take Scriptures seriously, and my Asian heritage, through which I was socialized to put family first, I've come to prize loyalty to my church family, Jan included.

Yet national discourse about the "undeserving" poor, especially when coupled with the notion of

America's open "land of opportunity," suggests that I need not be responsible for Jan – she doesn't merit help.

To what extent am I my brothers' and sisters' keeper in our current national condition of staggering inequality?

To address my dissonance and seek a deeper wisdom around these questions, I turned to Jan and two other African-American neighbors from our church – two women in their late 50s and early 60s, Kara and Shauna, who've known homelessness in their lives. Their experiences reveal the starkly different America that is often endured by women of color. They expose the unfair, simplistic assumptions that fuel hostility toward those who struggle economically.

## Is Society Fair?

The baby of her family, Kara smilingly reminisces about how her dad sat her on his lap daily and asked her to read the newspaper. Already by kindergarten, she recognized quite a few words. Kara continued to do well through middle school, but in high school her boyfriend died and her parents broke up.

In other circumstances, Kara might have been able to cope and graduate. But in Oakland at that time, high schools weren't institutions of mobility but "dropout factories" where less than 60 percent of the students graduated. Even with her sharp mind, Kara lacked supportive teachers and strong friendships to keep her in school. Along with many of her peers, she dropped out.

With few decent paying jobs available, Kara turned to the only neighborhood occupation paying a living wage – dealing drugs. Although whites have used drugs at the same rates as blacks, the War on Drugs that ramped up in the early 1980s focused on inner cities like Oakland. Not surprisingly then, Kara became one of the African Americans who were six times more likely than whites to be jailed for drugs.

These two roadblocks – pushed out from school and into jail – destined Kara and most of my neighbors to chronic underemployment or unemployment. When Kara's godmother asked her to leave her home because she needed to raise rents, Kara resorted to living in a tent under a freeway underpass.

When she luckily got into one of the few shelters in our city, Kara took advantage of every resource available. On Wednesdays, she dutifully made the five-mile trip to the shelter's office to access a free lunch, medical care, therapy, and referrals for housing and work.

Tragically, about four months into her shelter stay, one of her close friends died of an overdose. That shook Kara to the core, and she prayed for

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**God calls us to acknowledge our interdependence, mutual need, and duty to one another. Like the early church, we can be countercultural in the depth of our radical sharing with others.**

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deliverance from her own crack addiction. Soon, miraculously, she claimed her “tongue lost its taste for drugs, and instead is only used to praise our Lord!”

Today, despite becoming sober and saving money for a deposit, Kara can't find anything in Oakland's hot housing market. Shelter staff push her to find her own apartment, but the search is futile. Her income – a monthly SSI benefit of \$900 – isn't enough. The cheapest rent for a studio in Oakland is \$1,400 a month.

**Shouldn't Individuals be Self-Sufficient?**

Proverbs 20:23 states that “God detests differing weights, and dishonest scales do not please him.” In the same vein, God must abhor America's racialized stratification that places undue burdens on individuals like Kara, even though she's turned her life around. As members of this society, are we not complicit in this corporate sin? And should not our repentance be to address our broken system?

In a nation now so hyper-individualistic that we pursue our personal autonomy above everything,

we lose sight that every one of us needs uplift from others.

All my unhoused neighbors take personal responsibility for their mistakes and their own actions. Yet those who get out of homelessness do not necessarily credit self-sufficiency as the reason. Instead, they learn to rely *more* on others and the support networks available to them as they take care of themselves.

I first got to know Shauna when she walked through our church doors one morning, and according to her, “heard the voice of God and never left.” A generous, stately woman who grew up in Oakland, Shauna quickly began to lead our church outreach that offered hot showers to those living in nearby tent encampments.

Ironically, Shauna and her partner became homeless themselves when they got evicted from their hotel. They spent their days scouring for vacant units and their nights riding the bus to stay warm.

After a few weeks on the streets and in a shelter, they finally found a cheap apartment. Shauna described getting out of homelessness as a “group effort.” She got subsidized rent from one agency, counseling from another, and healthcare from a third. One church provided her bus passes and apartment referrals. Her partner made sure she ate well, took her medications, and slept soundly.

Even though Shauna received a rent voucher through a city program, she couldn't meet the rental stipulation requiring income that is 2.5 times the rent. For a \$1,000 unit, she needed \$2,500 a month. Only through additional paid work from my congregation, New Hope Covenant Church, and co-signing of the lease by church members, was she able to move in.

God calls us to acknowledge our interdependence, mutual need, and duty to one another. First Corinthians says, “We were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body – whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free” – or housed and unhoused. Since we are one body which needs all its parts, we “should have equal concern for one another. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it ...” Shauna and I are both parts of the same body. When she suffers, I suffer too.

**Does It Hurt the Poor to “Help the Poor”?**

I'm conscious that those on the streets, as well as those in my own home, deride me for helping out Jan with spare cash so often. They say lending to Jan is simply pouring money down a drain. They believe I'm being used and conned.

Twice I've loaded up my car and helped Jan move into an apartment. The first time, she yelled giddily to her friends, "I've got an address!", which is a big deal to those on the streets. After having to leave her second home, though, she's had to couch surf or sleep in cars.

Despite our congregation's efforts to hold her accountable, she's often broken boundaries and asks constantly for handouts. Quite a few times, she's banged my door in the middle of the night – after getting over an iron gate – pleading for bus fare or

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**Shelter staff push her to find her own apartment, but the search is futile. Her income – a monthly SSI benefit of \$900 – isn't enough.**

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a McDonald's meal. Many of Jan's supporters have cut ties with her because she doesn't take concrete steps towards self-sufficiency.

Jan admits she sabotages herself by making poor decisions, such as spending half her income to stay in a hotel room for two or three nights. However, even those choices are understandable. "It's really tiring to be out all night, and sometimes I just want to get some sleep!" she explains. "So I binge and get a room." When she runs out of money, she has to get handouts on the street in order to pay friends who let her sleep on their sofas.

My fear of "being used" doesn't compare with Jan's anger at being routinely vulnerable and ignored. "When the lights are on and I see people in

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**My fear of "being used" doesn't compare with Jan's anger at being routinely vulnerable and ignored.**

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their homes, I *am* angry," she laments. "My friends know I've got nowhere to go, but they don't answer my calls. I wonder if I even should exist!"

In Acts, the early church didn't hold to the capitalist idea of private property. Instead, "they sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need." The Letter of James challenges us, declaring that we don't have authentic faith if we do nothing about the physical needs of those without clothes or food.

The church that Jesus established radically broke down dividing walls of race, gender, and class. Paul explicitly taught the Corinthians that when we take communion, we are to examine whether we honor this unity, especially in how we share with others.

Jan has finally signed up for a long-term, transitional shelter where Kara resides, and we continue to pray that they can both find permanent, affordable housing. In the meantime, I'm grateful that I have them in my church family to teach me Jesus' way of hospitality and justice, of radical sharing and faithful love.

As the numbers of those without housing increase, the church has the great opportunity to bear witness to Jesus' life and work. Like the early church, we can be countercultural in the depth of our compassion for others, and in our radical sharing with others. May we, like Jesus, assume responsibility for our family and become one, so that we are for and with one another.

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*Gary Dorrien teaches as the Reinhold Niebuhr Professor of Social Ethics at Union Theological Seminary and Professor of Religion at Columbia University. An Episcopal priest, he is the author of many*

*books on modern theology and ethics, including Kantian Reason and Hegelian Spirit (2012), which won the PROSE Award, and the three-volume The Making of American Liberal Theology. His recent books include The New Abolition: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Black Social Gospel (2015), which won the Grawemeyer Award; Breaking White Supremacy: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Black Social Gospel (2017), which won the Choice Award; and the forthcoming American Democratic Socialism: History, Politics, Religion, and Theory, all published by Yale University Press.*

**REFLECTIONS:** *Can Christian values tame capitalism? Have they ever?*

**GARY DORRIEN:** The ministers who founded the social gospel movement in the 1880s said the answers were “yes” and “not yet.” They belonged to churches that claimed to take no side in the fight between labor and capital while siding constantly with the owner class. Union organizers said the churches had no record of caring about the poor and oppressed. The social gospel founders burned with

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Community organizing is inherently limited, it has trouble scaling up, and it burns people out. But it builds personal relationships across racial, ethnic, religious and class lines. It empowers marginalized communities.

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shame at this accusation, admitting it was true. They argued that churches could be mobilized to support struggles for social justice.

The only evidence they had for claiming that churches could do it was the abolitionist movement. The founders of the white social gospel focused mostly on economic injustice and the founders of the black social gospel had no choice but to focus on what a new abolitionism would be. Washington Gladden, Richard Ely, Vida Scudder, Walter Rauschenbusch, Reverdy Ransom, and Richard Wright Jr. said the church was indefensible if it didn’t try to live up to Isaiah 58, Luke 4, and Matthew 25.

The “taming” metaphor, however, marks a significant distinction within the social gospel. Gladden, Ely and Wright spoke the language of “taming”

and progressive reform. Scudder, Rauschenbusch, and Ransom said that capitalism was too predatory and corrupting to be tamed with select reforms. The system itself had to be changed fundamentally. There had to be a way to reward cooperation and leave nobody behind.

American capitalism subsequently sprawled to global dimensions that dwarfed what Rauschenbusch opposed. I support economic democracy strategies that expand the cooperative sector, democratize corporate boards, and build institutions that don’t belong wholly to the market or the state. Economic democracy is fundamentally a bottom-up strategy. But I am not dogmatic about bottom-up, because I believe in the principle of subsidiarity – social problems should be solved by the least centralized authority that is competent to solve them. In a world hurtling toward eco-apocalypse, there is going to be a role for international organizations and public ownership.

**REFLECTIONS:** *Is Social Darwinism overpowering the gospel story from week to week?*

**DORRIEN:** Any attempt to live out the biblical ethic of justice has to contend with the American worship of power and success and its flipside contempt for the poor and weak. The social gospel was explicitly a critique of Social Darwinism. The first major social gospel institution, the American Economic Association, declared at its founding in 1885 that everything was at stake in fighting off Social Darwinism. The founders didn’t know where to draw the line between Darwinian biology and Social Darwinism, and some of them conceded too much. They prized their own social standing and were intimidated by the intellectual prestige and cultural popularity of Social Darwinism. Intellectually, the founders were outgunned through the 1880s and 1890s. They had to rely on a Christian ethical conviction: Social Darwinism could not be true because it is morally repugnant. Meanwhile they lost the argument in the American Economic Association they founded.

Ever since, Americans have debated two contrasting visions of what kind of country we should want to be. The first provides unrestricted liberty to acquire wealth, lifts the right to property above the right to self-government, and denies that government should be a steward of the common good. The second calls for a realized democracy in which the people control the government and economy, self-government is superior to property, and no group dominates any other.

Mild versions of the second idea undergird many policy statements of the ecumenical churches, and

the same churches have otherwise tried to broker the differences between the two ideas. The ecumenical churches have never risked too much for social justice. But they have to negotiate the fact that many church members consider vision one to be normative and vision two to be ridiculous.

**REFLECTIONS:** *What witness can churches give to these issues?*

**DORRIEN:** Congregations have an important role to play in supporting struggles for social justice, and many have done so over the past century. But congregations have never played the leading role. In the religious sphere, the crucial social justice organizations are ecumenical and interfaith networks, followed by the denominational peace and justice ministries. Interfaith Worker Justice is an important example of the former – a Chicago-based network of Christian, Jewish, Islamic, and other religious communities. It focuses on wage theft, corporate abuse, immigration reform, raising the federal minimum wage, unemployment, and the right to organize.

Community organizing is another important vehicle of ecumenical activism. The Industrial Areas Foundation works on anti-poverty and housing issues, building coalitions to create power, understood as the ability to change society. Gamaliel, a national organization based in Chicago, focuses on immigration, healthcare, and combating racism.

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If the next Depression comes, I hope the current generation will be as creative as was the generation that invented the New Deal, the Congress of Industrial Organizations, and the United Nations.

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Faith in Action, formerly called PICO, employs a congregation-community model that builds relationships and networks sharing social justice values. DART (the Direct Action and Research Training Center) trains community organizers to attack the problem of powerlessness, not symptoms.

Community organizing is inherently limited, it has trouble scaling up, and it burns people out. But it builds personal relationships across racial, ethnic, religious and class lines. It empowers marginalized communities. And it does these things better than any kind of social justice activism that I know. Religious activists are big on faithfulness, stubborn in holding out for face-to-face meetings, committed to building relationships, and geared to movement-building.

I have spent most of my career speaking to small groups in church meeting rooms, and I am for al-

most anything that helps progressive congregations hold on against a hostile dominant culture. Ministry is hard work, with a lot of loneliness. Many congregations are just beginning to interrogate their complicity in white supremacy and the urgency of the ecological crisis. Moreover, the denominational agencies that formerly supported congregations are seriously depleted. I spend a lot of time thanking pastors and church leaders for keeping alive the social witness of the church. Hang in there!

**REFLECTIONS:** *The pandemic is suddenly challenging everything we took for granted. Will this crisis redraw our economic patterns?*

**DORRIEN:** My paternal grandfather was a dockworker in Michigan's Upper Peninsula who got his family through frozen winters and the Depression by taking odd jobs across the U.P. He was a singular figure to me because I didn't know anyone else who talked about the world in worldview terms, or about democratic socialism. My grandfather was a Norman Thomas Socialist, he married a Native American woman in an area that was hostile to Native Americans, and he was marked for the rest of his life by the searing experience of being a young father through the Depression. Often he began a sentence by saying, "When the next Depression comes ..." The Depression made him acutely aware that there are really-existing social structures that can be made to work on behalf of humanity or for the sake of a privileged elite. I didn't know anyone else who talked like that. It made him strange in the world of my lower-class 1950s youth. But I think he was right. If the next Depression is coming, I hope the current generation will be as creative as was the generation that invented the New Deal, the Congress of Industrial Organizations, and the United Nations.



United Farm Workers picketing, Imperial Valley, CA, 1968

Photo by Paul Fusco

© Paul Fusco/Magnum Photos

# The Christian Case for Union Organizing



By Ben Crosby '21 M.Div.

- *A huddle of nervous hotel workers, mostly Latina women, meet in a Roman Catholic church basement to discuss forming a union.*
- *A Lutheran minister spends a few hours walking the picket line with striking food service workers and gives a benediction through a bullhorn on a freezing morning.*
- *A Pentecostal minister submits to arrest as part of a civil disobedience to push an employer to recognize a union.*

Such stories of church cooperation with labor are real, yet they no longer have the place in the mainline church's imagination that they had 40 or 50 years ago. Nevertheless, nearly every labor move-

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## Our comfortably white middle-class mainline churches have largely forgotten what unions are and how they work.

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ment veteran I know has stories of how Christian churches have made a difference in workers' struggles for justice. Those three happen to be mine.

As a former union organizer and (God willing!) a future priest, it is my firm belief that Christian solidarity with labor is vital as we seek the welfare of the earthly city and witness to that coming redeemed life that is based not on competition but on the love of God.

### Supporting Each Other

With our comfortable white middle-class social base, we in the mainline churches have largely forgotten what unions are and how they work. The popular narratives of union fat cats and bureaucratic red tape miss the most important element of a union. Crucial to a union is not a contract or a disciplinary system or even legal recognition. What makes a union is workers deciding to have each other's backs, no matter what.

It's easy to dismiss this as naïve romanticism better suited to old union anthems than pragmatic contemporary labor policy. But this was exactly my experience when I was working as a hotel restaurant server after college and helped to lead a union drive at my workplace. The staff organizers supporting us made it crystal clear that what was most important for us wasn't trying to convince employees that their jobs were bad; everyone knew that. And we absolutely weren't going around spooking people by talking about unions at all right away. Rather, it was first and foremost about building community in a workplace that was set up to make that difficult.

### Strength in Numbers

Whether it's service industry jobs segregated by race, gender, and ethnicity – and it's an old hotel industry trick to assign housekeepers who speak different languages to work together, to make it harder for them to organize – or the rising gig economy where you often don't even see your coworkers, the modern economy is one which atomizes and isolates. So our job was to build a workplace culture where we helped each other out, where we were involved in each other's lives, where we were honest and vulnerable with each other.

And we did: The work of organizing turns out to be less about chanting on the picket line and more about putting together post-work drinks, rounding up assistance for coworkers going through hard

times, and supporting each other even when the jobs get stressful. This is what makes a union strong: not expensive lawyers or union officials, but workers who care about each other and so are willing to go together and talk to the boss when someone's hours get cut or when the company isn't taking sexual harassment seriously, even at the risk of their own jobs.

### **Class Conflict**

But what does any of this have to do with the church? We Christians cannot build the Kingdom of God by our own efforts, but we are called to work for a society as consonant with Christianity as possible, making it easier (although never *easy*) to follow Jesus. And this is where we must find ourselves in opposition to an economic system built on antagonism between employers who seek to get the most work for the least cost and workers who need to sell their labor to survive.

This, not the labor militancy which makes a certain sort of white liberal uncomfortable, is the basic class conflict that structures modern society. Of course, the conflict is often masked by employment contracts or a corporate cultural veneer of human warmth, which can make the modern workplace seem like an association between equals freely choosing to buy and sell labor. But this is a false peace. No matter how genuinely kind a manager may be, in the end the imperatives of capital accumulation push the company to drive us always to do more for less even while we depend on those wages to live.

### **A Peaceable Kingdom**

Here is where a Christian critique of capitalism that looks towards the coming peaceable kingdom must be rooted. The problem is not individual bad actors in need of restraint, but rather the fundamental ways in which our common life fosters sinful affections and behaviors. Capitalism encourages the dark passions of greed and resentment – it even dares to name them virtues. And so it casts as natural, and even good, a social order grounded in sin rather than love. This is something that we Christians who follow the Prince of Peace cannot abide.

This means that ultimately we Christians must work towards a social order not structured by class antagonism. However, a new way of being together that better reflects the love to which God calls us need not be consigned to a hazy post-capitalist future. Quite the opposite: Where workers decide to risk their jobs watching out for each other, we see, in germ, a society oriented not around antagonism but around cooperation, even mutual sacrifice. Here we find a different kind of moral formation, one

which teaches the generous love for neighbor and the disciplining of selfishness rather than capitalism's fostering of selfishness and disciplining of generosity. The point is not that union workers are necessarily more sanctified than the rest of us, but rather that the institution of the union can, at its best, shape us towards virtue even within a broadly deformed social order. This is what leading a union drive taught me.

Now, there are plenty of reasons to support the labor movement. Anyone concerned about the explosion of inequality in the US would be well-served to attend to the correlation between inequality and the calculated destruction of unions over the last 40 years. The protections which unions offer are particularly vital for women, people of color, LGBTQ people, and immigrants; unions do vital work to combat harassment and discrimination on the job and win equal pay for equal work. But for Christians, perhaps the best reason is that the labor movement points us to a society oriented around love rather than hate, a society that serves as a better witness (though only a witness, and not the thing itself) to the coming Kingdom of God.

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*Ben Crosby '21 M.Div. is pursuing ordination in the Episcopal Church. Before arriving at YDS, he worked in the hotel industry in Boston, where he helped lead a union drive at his workplace.*

## **HOW TO THINK**

*Romans 12*

By Jerry Robbins '61 B.D.

With mind renewed  
Not by science or philosophy  
But a different discipline  
That tempers cognition –

With sober judgment guiding me,  
No talk of logic here,  
Only reasons of the heart,  
Not the cranial sphere.

Think not of self but those around  
The Body that unites the many.  
Although a member distinct  
You are one of a community.

Think what you can contribute,  
Not how you can be served.  
This reasoning makes no sense  
It strikes us as absurd.

But this is the mind we must shape,  
Our learning thrown for a loss.  
Pin your reason not to facts  
But a most unreasonable cross.





Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn once wrote, “... The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either – but right through every human heart – and through all human hearts. This line shifts.”<sup>1</sup>

Maybe this line shifts in us more than we think. When I read the Scriptures, I like to see myself in the Good Samaritan and not in the busy priest. But when I do that, the line inside moves a little into darkness. Too many times I don’t make the U-turn to help the stalled car. Instead, I just argue with Jesus until I am too far down the road.

But neither self-condemnation nor moral smugness will help us minister to the poor. We say the problem is greed, but the line of greed runs through capitalism, through socialism, and through us. I think the solution starts in us, obeying the crazy compassion of Christ and embracing our life assignments for hurting people.

After pastoring for 40 years, I know the “rest of my life” assignment is restoring the dignity of fatherhood in my city, Medellin, Colombia. I think the inequality of everything is rooted in the inequality of having fathers. The Old Testament ends with the mysterious promise, “I will turn the hearts of the fathers to the sons and the hearts of the sons to the fathers, lest I come and smite the land with a curse” (Malachi 4:6). The good news is, God promises to do it. The bad news is, We often stand by as the

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**We say the problem is greed, but the line of greed runs through capitalism, through socialism, and through us.**

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curse keeps seeping into the culture. Violence, drug use, low income, suicide, and incarceration all bleed from father wounds, or rather, fatherless wounds. In Colombia, domestic violence is three times more likely in fatherless homes. It is the boyfriend more often than the dad who beats the woman.

What if the church working with the city would train boys and men how to be loving, responsible heroes in their homes? I dream about billboards showing a dad with his children that says, “My Dad, My Hero.”

Jesus taught more about responsibility than he did about rights. He said, “Take from him the pound, and give it to him that hath ten pounds” (Luke 19:24). We wouldn’t put that over the church door. The one-pound man was afraid and lazy. The ten-pound man was faithful over what he had, and Jesus gave him more. If we teach that in Sunday School, some kids may scream, “That’s not fair.”

But Jesus has a lot of tough sayings. And men need the church to be tough with them. The church tells a man to sit still and be a nice guy, but who ever dreamed of becoming just a nice guy? We men dream of killing dragons, putting out fires, and rescuing the girl sitting behind us in math class. A man who never grows into his hero call will become an angry man, a violent and lazy man.

Here in Medellin, for centuries the women have kept the homes together. They are the brave ones, tough and resourceful, but they are losing their sons. If we only minister housing, food, and support groups to the women without challenging the men, the generational curse goes on. Our past five mayors have knocked home runs in helping single mothers and undernourished babies but have done nothing for the men. Now they acknowledge that

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**If only the church were more like a bar where we could go and talk without being judged.**

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restoring fatherhood in the city may be essential to begetting equality of opportunity and equality of hope.

As a family man, I struggle with insecurity. When the hospital trusted us to take our baby home, I wondered who would take care of him for the next 20 years. The money pressures, the upkeep, the fevers, the gunshots outside, the demons within are all dark forces trying to make me to run away. Sometimes I want to live alone in a cabin in the woods and train a big dog to bite anyone who comes near with a Bible. Many of us men are hurting and don’t have close friends. If only the church were more like a bar where we could go and talk without being judged. If only the church taught us about a God who is a good Father who wants to turn our hearts toward home and shift the line in men’s hearts toward the good. That moving line, I believe, is the frontline against inequality.

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1 Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, III-IV, translated by Thomas P. Whitney (Harper & Row, 1975), p. 615.

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*The Rev. Andrew McMillan '80 M.Div. recently stepped down as senior pastor of the Comunidad Cristiana de Fe in Medellin, Colombia, after founding the church 26 years ago with his wife, Kathy, and nurturing its growth to 8,000 members. They’ve handed over the mother church to new leadership but continue to live in Colombia, training leaders and planting churches. Andrew hopes to have more time to fish, read, and write poetry.*



A homeless camp, Fresno, CA, 2014

Photo by Matt Black

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# Corporate Reform and God's Creation



By Sarah Yang '21 M.Div.

*I admit, I never used to care about issues of economic inequality. For most of my life, I believed I lived in a meritocratic society where the same governing ideals rightly applied to all of its members, no matter who they were or where they came from: The system rewarded people fairly for the work they did; people received what they deserved.*

The recognition that I received in my early career reinforced these beliefs. I saw no reason to doubt the integrity of the institutional forces at work around me. But when I eventually caught glimpses of the stark economic realities that many people are born into, I was confronted with a hard truth: There is something inherently unfair about the way this world currently works. I started to wonder: Why are there such huge disparities in the distribution of wealth, and what can we, as Christians, do to address it?

## **A Contested Idea**

My quest to answer these questions led me to the contentious term “economic inequality” itself. To enter into constructive dialogue, we have to navigate various areas of disagreement around it. There are, for instance, different understandings of what eco-

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**It is vital to explore what corporate change might look like through a theological lens, the attempt to articulate God's vision for creation.**

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conomic inequality represents. To some, it is a rational measurement of the inevitable variations found in absolute wealth, a natural outcome of financial allocation and award based on differences in skill sets. To others, it is a result of social injustices that privilege some and systematically rob others of access to financial opportunity – injustices that must be historically identified and politically redressed.

There is also the incredible challenge of obtaining a clear picture of how economic inequality is trending over time, as a recent article in *The Economist* reveals. Any given referenced economic data is by no means comprehensive or completely accurate. In other words, the situation might be better than what the statistics tell us, or it might be worse.<sup>1</sup>

With all of these raging questions barreling into public discourse, it is easy to become overwhelmed and frustrated with the lack of progress actually being made. Economic inequality is after all not just an abstract concept. It is a very real problem that affects the lives of the people around us – friends, families, and neighborhoods trying to make ends meet. The issue takes us beyond critiques of capitalism and into the heart of a fundamental organizing principle of any society, namely that which determines who has the power to control and grant access to material prosperity. This is not to conflate the possession of power automatically with social injustice, for power can be a force for good. Rather, we need to acknowledge that economic inequality will trap its victims in persistent impoverishment unless they are empowered to accumulate self-sustaining wealth. The question is, who has the power to liberate people from economic inequality?

## **Pockets of Possibility**

I believe if we reimagine how we run institutions – here I mean corporations and churches particularly – we will unlock enormous power for systemic change. Though tackling deeply rooted elements of

inequity such as racism will be difficult, let us remember the maxim: We often overestimate what can be done in the short term and underestimate what can be done in the long term. To paraphrase Sarah Drummond, Dean of Andover Newton Seminary, what we can do today to address power imbalances is to look out for “pockets of possibilities” and cultivate our own alternative expressions of economic exchange.

Drawing inspiration from emerging business models and church innovations, I find hope on the horizon. In Cleveland, the Evergreen Cooperatives model targets the issue of control and access through its profit-sharing, worker-owned, worker-controlled business and partnerships. Elsewhere, churches are redirecting their budget priorities to help alleviate the debt burdens that have prevented

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**As Christians, it is our responsibility to advocate for ethical workplace principles and corporate frameworks that reflect a good and gracious God.**

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people from accruing their own assets. These include the Christian Assembly Church in Los Angeles (medical debt), Alfred Street Baptist Church in Alexandria, VA, (student debt), and the Circle of Hope church in Philadelphia (credit card debt). In addition, social entrepreneurs have long been working on finding creative ways to help low-income communities build their capacities to generate wealth. If we re-examine the church model seen in Acts 2, we will find many more ideas on how to create “pockets of possibilities” as communities of faith.

What is less evident is how to bear out change in the corporate world, and this is precisely why it is important to explore what that might look like through a theological lens. What I have come to appreciate during my time at YDS is how a theological education prepares me to see the world differently. When I went to work for a tech social enterprise last summer, after my first year at YDS, I experienced a heightened awareness of the needs of the company and its employees beyond what my years of business training had taught me. Grounding my work in a community-oriented approach, I audited the company's organizational design in order to better align its operations with the company's mission. According to the CEO, I was able to identify what many others before me had failed to grasp: their internal cultural dynamics and effects. To me, these insights were simply a natural outworking of

a theological orientation, the attempt to articulate God's vision for creation.

**Corporate Reinvention**

As Christians, it is our responsibility to bring God's vision to the workplace. What I mean is that we need to advocate for ethical principles and corporate frameworks that reflect a good and gracious God. This is the very same God that told us to “do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Mic. 6:8b). Though Christians have a horrific track record of justifying atrocities in the name of God, at the same time our shared past contains many important breakthroughs to celebrate. Life today would be completely different without the pioneering work of Christians in the promotion of science, healthcare, and education. It is time for us to help reinvent the corporate world.

In retrospect, what I experienced as meritocratic was really the result of the work that many before me have done on my behalf. My grandmother grew up in poverty and, against all odds, paved the way for my family to enter into the lower-middle class. My first academic mentor was an early advocate for women in computer science; her encouragement inspired me to take on challenges I never dreamed I would be capable of doing. It took years for their efforts to bear fruit, and even so, my grandmother did not live to witness any of it firsthand. They did not know what kind of impact they would have in the world, and neither will we. Yet, what they did mattered greatly.

So, looking forward, we can be certain of one thing. No matter what we choose to do, it builds on the inspiration and efforts of others, and it will in turn be significant to someone, somewhere.

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*Sarah Yang '21 M.Div. is a software engineer-turned-entrepreneur who hopes to tackle economic inequality after graduation. She has an MBA from London Business School and a Bachelor of Science degree in computer science and math from the University of British Columbia.*

**Note**

1. “Measuring the 1%,” *The Economist*, Nov. 28, 2019.

## RIDDLE

By Jericho Brown

We do not recognize the body  
Of Emmitt Till. We do not know  
The boy's name nor the sound  
Of his mother wailing. We have  
Never heard a mother wailing.  
We do not know the history  
Of this nation in ourselves. We  
Do not know the history of our-  
Selves on this planet because  
We do not have to know what  
We believe we own. We believe  
We own your bodies but have no  
Use for your tears. We destroy  
The body that refuses use. We use  
Maps we did not draw. We see  
A sea so cross it. We see a moon  
So land there. We love land so  
Long as we can take it. Shhh. We  
Can't take that sound. What is  
A mother wailing? We do not  
Recognize music until we can  
Sell it. We sell what cannot be  
Bought. We buy silence. Let us  
Help you. How much does it cost  
To hold your breath underwater?  
Wait. Wait. What are we? What?  
What on Earth are we? What?



At a horse race track, England, 1975

Photo by Ian Berry

© Ian Berry/Magnum Photos

# Why is “Socialism” So Hard to Talk About?



By Edward Watson '18 M.A.R.

*Whatever “socialism” is, the term elicits a visceral response from many in the United States of America. I’m sure people reading this have had conversations where the concept was raised and conversation had to end – the word names the limit beyond which dialogue cannot proceed. Anything tarred with the brush of “socialism” cannot be countenanced.*

Laying my cards on the table, I am an advocate for much of what is called “socialism” in America (universal healthcare, universal post-secondary education, strong unions, and – perhaps more radical than the first two – workers owning at least 50 percent of the companies that employ them). I grew up in Britain and came to the US when I

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**In the US, the words “socialism” and “capitalism” express fundamental values that trigger a chain reaction of emotional associations.**

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was 22, first to teach students from underprivileged backgrounds, then to work in homeless ministries, then to pursue a Ph.D. in theology. I come from a moderate-conservative family, closer to the moderate Harold McMillan vein of conservatism than its Thatcherite iterations.

Even after eight years here, I remain astonished at the extent to which my family would be labeled radical socialists if they were US citizens. And I remain astonished at how hard it is to speak openly about the issues which continually provoke this question, “Is there no alternative to the US’s very specific version of free market capitalism?” This piece is a brief exploration of that difficulty, as well as an attempt to ameliorate it.

So, what is it that makes the muscles clench when the word “socialism” appears? What is it that

triggers every negative association, the absolute and unshakeable conviction that “this cannot be allowed to stand”? From my perspective as a relative outsider, a lot of it has to do with how the word works ideologically. “Socialism” and “capitalism” have specific, technical meanings in the history of ideas, but in a US context, they express fundamental values that trigger a chain reaction of emotional associations and reflexes. Thus “capitalism” stands for “America” which stands for “liberty” which stands for “good.” By this logic “socialism” stands for “Stalinism” which stands for “tyranny” which stands for “evil.” It is hard to think clearly about anything whose very *meaning* seems to threaten “liberty,” the founding ideal of the US. And so when “socialism” rears its head, it isn’t just a political idea among ideas: It immediately summons up specters and ghosts which seem to threaten the very existence of what matters most.

## **Seeing Things Plainly**

One of the effects of these associative chains is the conflation of various phenomena. That is, though capitalism and socialism can be broadly defined, there is no one thing that counts as “socialism,” no one thing that counts as “capitalism.” And so it is difficult to speak plainly about the true nature of American capitalism – its unusual hostility to regulation *combined with* its reliance on government intervention, its “mixed economy” conditions. It is also hard to name the fact that there are other capitalisms, including those which live in symbiotic re-

lationship with socialist programs. Instead, there is only “capitalism/freedom” or “socialism/tyranny.”

The second effect is that it is hard – perhaps impossible – to think that the US brand of capitalism might in fact be inimical to liberty. At the level of reflex, the same way that one knows that fire will burn, it is just *known* and assumed that without this form of capitalism, there is no true liberty. And it cannot be conceded that this form of capitalism might deprive more liberties than it grants. Such a claim simply can’t make sense from inside this thought world. Indeed, the notion of liberty in question here is one whose meaning has been shaped by US capitalism. The idea that there are liberties unknown to this economic system is thus unthinkable.

All of this happens behind the eyes. In the same way that a vast array of nerves and neurons determines how our brains will process stimuli as sight, a complex of grammars and associations determine how we can process words as meaningful, then meanings as truth. The way we see is patterned around them – and so it becomes nearly impossible for *what* we see to change *how* we see. The limits are reached.

### **An Impossible Conversation?**

Irrespective of where one stands on the morality of US capitalism, I hope this account has at least some ring of plausibility. Given that the problems driving many US citizens towards a version of socialism don’t seem to be going away, I likewise hope it seems right to say that these things must at least be talked about. It is not enough to just repeat the same foundational assertions – to respond to the idea of universal healthcare with the claim that it is antithetical to liberty. All this does is assert a position within a situation under siege; it does nothing to address the situation. We must, then, have the conversations which we cannot at present have. We must speak about what we can’t speak about. And how are we to do this?

It is here that faith comes into the picture. First, most monotheistic faiths believe that God absolutely transcends creation, precisely as God is intimately close to all creatures. That is, God can be close to us precisely because no creaturely thing is God. One consequence of this, however, is that no creaturely thing can be like God in certain ways. In particular, God alone is good.

Religion can easily be used to entrench ideological associations. It can also be used, however, to break them up. And one way of doing so is to include in one’s prayer life a reflection on the fact

that if God alone is good, then no creaturely thing can be good in the way that God is. That associative chain “capitalism/liberty/America/good” has to be broken up – not necessarily in an absolute sense, but certainly in the sense in which it is absolute. One’s faith in a God above all can thus be a way of questioning and stilling one’s reflexive loyalty to what is not God. (This argument is derived entirely from theologian Kathryn Tanner of YDS, especially her books *God and Creation* and *The Politics of God*.)

### **Look and Listen**

This is a prayer practice based on doctrine. The second possibility is more grounded in the ethics of faith. Almost every urban community has a population suffering homelessness. Contrary to popular legend, more members of that population will have been made homeless by medical debt than poor life choices. (For example, I worked with someone who was made homeless by bills for cancer treat-

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**Contrary to popular legend, more homelessness is prompted by medical debt than poor life choices. Whatever one’s political ideology, the love of God should drive us to serve with those in distress.**

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ment. Her cancer returned after several years on the streets.) Whatever one’s political ideology, the love of God drives creatures to seek each other out in times of distress. There should be ways of serving with those in distress, whether in day shelters or soup kitchens or stronger healthcare protections as the pandemic has underscored. Driven by God to do this, just listen. In many cases, you will be hearing the stories of US capitalism’s victims, not its victors. And whatever the solution to this situation might be, there is nothing like this listening to throw an article of political faith into question.

This is certainly what shook my world, making me realize how much I hadn’t seen. It is, after all, by looking into another’s eyes that our ways of seeing are so often changed. Though this would be at best a beginning – a new possibility of hearing the question, not an answer – different kinds of beginning need to take root in America. We cannot simply repeat the same patterns, driven by the same forces, mistaking our taught convictions for God’s word and failing to see Christ before us.

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*Ed Watson ’18 M.A.R., originally from Scotland, is working on a Ph.D. in theology at Yale, focusing on the relationships between theology, colonialism, and ideology.*





Paris street, March 17, 2020  
Photo by Patrick Zachmann  
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# “We are Called to Deeper Awareness”



By Joshua Narcisse '19 M.Div.

*I wake up early in my seventh-floor apartment in Crosstown Concourse in Memphis, lazily pull on my workout clothes, and head down three flights of stairs to the Church Health YMCA. In the stairwell I notice a man wrapped in several layers of worn-out clothes. His possessions, held in reusable bags and an old backpack, are gathered around his feet. He has made one of the many fashionable public seats around Crosstown a makeshift bed. It does not look very comfortable.*

An hour later on my way back up, I see the man again, this time gathering his things, preparing to leave to begin his day.

## **Lives Upended**

I wonder what his day will be like. For me there will be meetings, calls, laughter with co-workers, the deep joy that comes with the privilege of doing what I am called to do. But for him, I wonder if he, like so many others in the Midtown area where I live, will leave this temporary dwelling and go to a job, only to leave work unsure of where he will sleep. Or as

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**I assured her that she was loved. I said all the things you're taught in seminary to say, yet none of them changed the fact that Angela needed somewhere to sleep that night.**

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I make my way to Mississippi Boulevard Christian Church, will I see him again standing on the corner of North Claybrook and Jefferson Streets, without work, as with so many others who have found their lives upended by economic hardship, opioids, and what can only be captured by the word “life.”

As I begin my day, and think about the particular vulnerabilities of his, what remains in my mind is the simple truth that things aren't supposed to be this way.

It makes my work as a Faith and Health Resident, a position made possible by a partnership between Mississippi Boulevard Christian Church and Church Health, that much more meaningful. At the heart of both organizations is a rugged commitment to helping people experience lives that are “filled with more joy, more gratitude, and a deeper connection to God,” in the words of Church Health founder Dr. G. Scott Morris '79 M.Div.

That is why Church Health, which offers affordable healthcare to working uninsured people, is concerned about the social factors that impact the health of its patients and indeed all residents of Shelby County. At Church Health, poverty matters just as much as high blood pressure, and how you feel about yourself and the world around you matters just as much as your course of treatment.

In the one-mile radius that defines the immediate ministry field for Mississippi Boulevard and Church Health, the social factors that define the lives of those caught in cycles of economic, substance, and social abuse cannot be ignored. Indeed they necessitate a response, whether in the exam room or the sanctuary pews.

## **A Decisive Day at Church**

Every week it happens at church, the Invitation to Christian Discipleship. This particular week, like every other, I stood at the front of the sanctuary

along with the rest of the pastoral staff awaiting the individuals who'd decided to make a discipleship commitment. Among them coming down the aisle to customary applause and praise was Angela. She had a soft, kind face, but avoided making eye contact. After being welcomed by Pastor J. Lawrence Turner '06 M.Div. and his wife, Bridgett, Angela was escorted to the New Disciples suite, where after church the congregation formally receives those who have made a "decision for Christ." What I encountered there was unlike any other Sunday I'd spent in worship.

Each person was asked, What propelled you to walk down the aisle? And when Angela's turn came, she said, "I know I need to get right with Jesus. And I decided to start today." There was silence, and the expected nods of agreement. And then Angela continued, "I sleep outside on the side of the church, I like it there, there's an outlet I can charge my phone, and no one bothers me, but I just want to make sure you guys won't call the police on me."

No one was ready for that admission, not I, not the congregants who week in and week out embrace new members into the body of Christ.

What does it mean to become a Christian and continue to experience homelessness? What does it mean to join the church where you sleep on the steps each night? How do you respond to Angela? I had few words, except to assure her we wouldn't call the police on her, and I told her that she was loved. I said all the things you're taught in seminary to say, yet none of them changed the fact that Angela needed somewhere to sleep that night, and for many nights after that.

### **Moving into Action**

That's when the real work of the day began. As service let out, I began to work with the receptionist to call local shelters in the Shelby County area. Surely if they had a bed, we could get Angela there. Except finding a bed for someone on Sunday morning is easier said than done, because many of the local shelters are closed on Sundays. Angela was eventually connected with county social services, and from time to time I see her at my grocery store, and her face is no less kind. More importantly, she now has stability in her life and knows she has people at church who are willing and excited to do life with her.

This experience of trying to minister to and with Angela added a greater depth to the conversation about outreach ministry at The BLVD (as our church is affectionately called), and helped push the congregation to commit to opening The BLVD Cares Center later this year. The BLVD Cares Center will

be a central hub where the congregation can further live out its mission to Lead, Learn, Live, and Love without Limits in Memphis, connecting with people who work yet remain food and housing insecure, under- and uninsured, and by all accounts trapped in systems of poverty and brokenness that break the heart of God.

### **The Web of Mutuality**

The ministry of Church Health and the mission of The BLVD Cares Center aim to meet our neighbors' practical needs. Since arriving in Memphis, I've learned there is an intimacy to be shared with those who are abused by the lethal machinations of human systems designed to debilitate. In Memphis one has little choice but to get proximate with others who are hurting: The web of mutuality seems so much stronger here on the banks of the Mississippi.

We are called to this deeper awareness. We are called to meet the demands of kenosis, where we take seriously the call to empty ourselves of our

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**My hope is tied to the Resurrection, which always means reimagining and reconciling Creation. This is the work that must endure, beyond soup kitchens and clothes closets.**

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privileges, our desires, our comfort, and become accountable to the will of God for ourselves and for Creation. This is the first step, the step I try to take each day. For I believe that in the kenosis encounter – where the fullness of who we are meets with the boundless possibility that is God's presence in the world – we find the power, the grace, and the courage to hold stubbornly to hope. A hope that is tied to the Resurrection, which always means reimagining, reordering, and reconciling Creation. This is the work that must endure, beyond soup kitchens and clothes closets. We must not forget that discipleship demands that we be present and awake, that we keep watch as Christ moves in the world, that we partner with God and one another to work and witness.

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*Joshua Narcisse '19 M.Div. is the inaugural Faith & Health Resident on staff at Mississippi Boulevard Christian Church and Church Health in Memphis. He is pursuing ordination in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).*



It is nearly 7 a.m. when we pull onto Rosette Street. We greet “Good morning” to the folks waiting out on the porch and walk through the front door of Amistad Catholic Worker, the house of hospitality located in the Hill neighborhood of New Haven. Amistad was established 25 years ago by Mark Colville and Luz Catarineau-Colville. They began this journey in the heart of the city as a means of bearing witness to new possibilities of justice. As Catholic Workers, Mark and Luz have dedicated their lives to serving the disadvantaged and marginalized communities in the city – establishing a haven that provides sustenance, solidarity, and a sense of safety and stability in otherwise unsettling circumstances. Ever true to Dorothy Day’s words, “Food for the body is not enough. There must be food for the soul,” Mark and

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**Now more than ever, in the midst of this global pandemic, it is crucial to reach out to the most vulnerable in our society.**

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Luz have worked tirelessly to provide visitors with food for both the body and the soul.

Every morning, we prepare, cook, and serve breakfast to 50-60 visitors. There are no check-points, no requirements to enter, only one’s presence. Within these walls exist the narratives of people from every walk of life, situation, and experience. Their stories and histories are embedded in every part of the house. This Catholic Worker house, a private home in a previous era, is today ever-changing and adapting to the needs of the community. What was once someone’s room became a pantry. What was once a living room became a dining room set for as many as could fit. Sometimes it has served as an altar.

Community is at the axis of the Catholic Worker movement, reminding me that I am called to live in a different way. The usual social dynamics or divisions found between the provider and those being served do not exist here. There is no difference between those who are cooking the meals and those who are being served. Amistad is not a facility or an organization in the customary sense – it is situated in the Colvilles’ home, in the midst of New Haven. It does not turn itself away from the circumstances of people who have been pushed towards the margins. Rather it pulls and invites all of us to come closer to one another, to both bake and break bread with each other.

In this place that breaks social boundaries, we are reminded of the importance of accountability. At the end of each meal, we volunteers must clean all the dishes and pots that have built up over the course of the day. This is definitely one of the least attractive parts of our job. These dishes take up most of our work. We scrub every inch of every plate, cup, utensil, bowl and pan that has been used. It’s the last thing any of us look forward to doing. But one day I came across the words of Christian activist Shane Claiborne, “Everybody wants a revolution, but nobody wants to do the dishes.”

It was at that moment that things crystallized for me.

I used to believe that the expectations of justice meant that every one of us needed to be on the front lines, advocating and speaking truths to the powers and systems that perpetuate injustices against the most marginalized members of society. We remember the voices of those who have spoken up, marched, and mobilized movements boldly with love and courage. However, do we remember those who work behind the scenes, the people who open their homes, prepare meals, and wash dishes at the end of the day?

*Everybody wants a revolution, but nobody wants to do the dishes.* Bold acts of love and courage don’t always reach the spotlight. They might not always catch the attention of the media or go viral. They do, however, draw us closer to one another. They remind every one of us of our own beloved-ness.

Now more than ever, in the midst of this global pandemic, it is crucial to reach out to the most vulnerable in our society; amid the uncertainties of this period, Amistad continues its commitment to its constituency. We must bear witness to the reflections of God’s love and mercy in the world, wherever they may be.

When I wash these plates, I remember that they held food cooked by volunteers. These plates were set on a table that supports the weathered and weary hands of people who have been working hard and long throughout the day, and this table was set in a room that has carried laughter, tears, and stories of all who have entered.

So I wash the dishes. I wash the dishes and I scrub the pots and pans, rinsing and drying them so that they can be ready the next day, ready to hold food for the body and soul.

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*After graduation in May, Michael Libunao-Macalintal '20 M.Div. hopes to pursue a career working with students, emphasizing diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice themes. He worked at Amistad in New Haven last summer.*

The Amistad Catholic Worker in New Haven, CT, is one of about 175 Catholic Worker communities in the US, grounded in the gospel, prayer, and Roman Catholic tradition.

“As Catholic Workers, we strive to follow Jesus in seeking justice for the poor, an end to all wars, and a new way of life grounded not in the endless, exploitation-fueled accumulation of material things but rather based on solidarity, nonviolence, and mutual love,” says the Amistad website ([amistadcw.wordpress.com](http://amistadcw.wordpress.com)).

“Our sources are the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures as handed down in the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, with our inspiration coming from the lives of the saints, ‘men and women outstanding in holiness, living witnesses to Your unchanging love’” (according to the Eucharistic Prayer).

The movement got its start in 1933 during the Great Depression, when *The Catholic Worker* newspaper debuted on New York City streets, and Dorothy Day (1897-1980) and a few others sold copies for a penny, according to the Catholic Worker Movement website ([catholicworker.org](http://catholicworker.org)).

Movement activists today continue to be stirred by the words of co-founder Day who said, “God meant things to be much easier than we have made them,” and co-founder Peter Maurin (1877-1949) who wanted to build a society “where it is easier for people to be good.”

Positions are spelled out at the Amistad site, including:

- *In labor, human need is no longer the reason for human work. Instead, the unbridled expansion of technology, necessary to capitalism and viewed as “progress,” holds sway. Jobs are concentrated in productivity and administration for a high-tech, war-related, consumer society of disposable goods, so that laborers are trapped in work that does not contribute to human welfare. In all areas, moral restraints are run over roughshod, and a disregard for the laws of nature now threatens the very planet.*
- *In morals, relations between people are corrupted by distorted images of the human person. Class, race, and sex often determine personal worth, leading to structures that foster oppression. Capitalism further divides society by pitting owners against workers in perpetual conflict over wealth and its control. Those who do not “produce” are abandoned, and left, at best, to be “processed” through institutions. Spiritual destitution is rampant, manifested in isolation, madness, promiscuity and violence.*

To donate to Amistad’s work, see [amistadcw.wordpress.com](http://amistadcw.wordpress.com).

## SHADOW HAND

By W.S. Merwin

Duporte the roofer that calm voice  
those sure hands gentling weathered tiles  
into new generations or  
half of him rising through a roof  
like some sea spirit from a wave  
to turn shaped slates into fish scales  
that would swim in the rain Duporte  
who seemed to smooth arguments by  
listening and whom they sent for  
when a bone was broken or when  
they had a pig to kill because  
of the way he did it only  
yesterday after all these years  
I learned that he had suddenly  
gone blind while still in his sixties  
and died soon after that while I  
was away and I never knew  
and it seemed as though it had just  
happened and it had not been long  
since we stood in the road talking  
about owls nesting in chimneys  
in the dark in empty houses



Beggar, Madrid, 1997  
Photo by Josef Koudelka  
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# By Whose Rules Shall We Construct Our Lives?



By Bill Goettler

*In every church, on every Sunday, and on most of the days in between, pastors and church leaders come face to face with issues that connect the church and the economy, faith and human thriving, the interplay of gospel values and market values.*

Oh, the questions don't appear in those terms, not most of the time. Most Sundays, it looks more like this: The third-grade Sunday School teacher arrives late again, because his other part-time job, taken to make ends meet, has exhausted him, body and spirit. "How am I supposed to build a healthy life when I've got so many bills to pay," he asks. The head of the usher team, whose usually optimistic smile is missing, confides that her health is failing, just as she is realizing that she just doesn't have

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**There is a yearning in every faithful gathering for a space of holy intention, where all will find a home, every soul is valued, and real needs are met.**

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enough money to retire this year as she had hoped. Then a family enters, a family who has gone yet deeper into debt to pay for the college education of their twins. Just behind them, a successful financial manager heads for the back pew, looking tormented as ever. And then there is Daniel, hovering outside the pastor's office, ready to ask for a bit of money again so he can ride the bus to the mall and spend the day inside instead of out on the street.

## **Tough to Preach**

If only a few more dollars from the offering plate could solve the myriad of economic challenges that the pastor's congregation is faced with every Sunday. But trained to be a thoughtful pastoral theologian, mindful of biblical imperatives against dismissing the needs of the poor and requiring the

faithful to do justice, build community, and live faithfully together, she finds herself wondering yet again just what sort of word God intends for her to preach to this congregation on this day, on any day.

Like most pastors, she has often preached about responsible stewardship, about the need for the congregation to give generously, fund the local shelter, stock the food pantry, promote jobs programs and classes through local non-profit agencies. But the questions facing the faithful in American society these days are bigger than that. The struggles of those who come through the door every Sunday makes that clear.

How is it possible to live faithfully, she wants to ask, in an economic system that demands endless hours of labor for most, and seems to steal the very souls of those who are most successful? The acquisition of tremendous wealth by a few, over the last decade, has little to do with Christian promises for abundant life. But those models of success have ensnared all of us, and we are exhausting ourselves in our struggle to live up to the standards of the rich.

## **A Daring Theology**

What does Christian theology have to offer to a people who value good work that is well done, and who strive for economic stability? Does that theology dare to assert that good work and financial security must never be an entirely private matter but must be shared by all of God's own, by those who have much and those who have little, or else it is surely not of God?

That is tough to preach – tough to preach to those who truly believe that it is their hard work



alone that has led to their thriving. And it is tough to preach to those whose money problems are real, who wish that they too could achieve some success in making their way in this system, in spite of the racism and sexism that has hurt them every step

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**Because of the COVID-19 crisis, the web is abuzz with congregations urgently experimenting, trying to find new ways to reach out to members and strangers alike. What we will learn from this time is yet to be revealed.**

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of the way, in spite of the untreated addictions and seemingly insurmountable barriers that have so often thrown them off course.

### **Success and Exhaustion**

If that gospel word of balance and sharing is hard to hear for those who are rich, it is also difficult for those stuck in the middle ... working two jobs or three, making ends meet but hardly thriving, continually exhausted and somehow still wanting to believe that their moment is just a short way down the road, that they too will enter the company of the so-called successful.

So the theologians and the preachers alike do their best to avoid challenging the wealthy in ways that might be perceived as unfair, instead addressing issues of injustice in broad enough terms that no one will feel threatened. And we address in primarily pastoral terms those who are severely compromised by economic inequality, offering our support and promoting modest fixes instead of economic analysis.

What if, instead, we helped one another formulate alternative ways for structuring our lives, alternative visions of what might make for “enough,” for full and satisfying lives that are less tied to the culture of consumerism, or what Kathryn Tanner calls finance-dominated capitalism?

### **Where Every Soul is Valued**

There is a yearning, in every congregation, in every faithful gathering, for a vision that stands in opposition to the societal norms of recent decades, for a vision that makes clear the need for that space of holy intention, where all will find a home, every soul is valued, and real needs are unquestionably met even as the excesses of society are called into question.

Some old models of inclusive religious communities are being explored anew these days, often

built around fresh modes of gathering, perhaps returning to wise ways once known. New congregations are using borrowed space, and focusing their time together on shared meals, the reading of sacred text, and singing songs that suggest holy ways for knowing and being known. At Yale Divinity School, we often welcome students who have just completed a one-to-three-year communal living and service program in a town or city, sponsored by a denomination or other justice initiative. Those students arrive at YDS with light in their eyes, having been immersed in new approaches to both meaningful labor and economic livelihood. Elsewhere, for decades, older folks have sought to create intentional shared living communities, where friendship and flourishing might be made possible by sharing material resources and burdens alike.

Early in the Spring of 2020, we are experiencing a time of necessary social distancing and isolation in response to the COVID-19 crisis. The web is abuzz with congregations urgently experimenting, trying to find new ways to reach out to members and strangers alike, to make meaning in a global period that seems suddenly out of control. What we will learn from this time is yet to be revealed. But it will surely have implications for the kinds of meaningful connection that is so central to the practice of faith.

Daring to reimagine the possibilities for engaging gospel values and economic justice is challenging enough. Taking risks to step away from the norms of American society is harder still. But what other choice do we have? The market has no regard for the call of faithfulness. So, finally, by whose rules shall we construct our lives?

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*The Rev. Bill Goettler, a Presbyterian pastor, is Associate Dean for Ministerial and Social Leadership at YDS. He leads the YDS Office of Vocation and Leadership and oversees the School's Transformational Leadership program, which offers intensive, two-day courses taught by leaders in church and society.*

## CREDITS

### **Reflections Spring 2020** **Yale Divinity School**

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#### **POETRY**

**Jericho Brown** is the author of three books of poetry, including *The Tradition* (Copper Canyon Press, 2019).  
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**Bob Hicok**, the author of 10 books of poetry, teaches at Virginia Tech.  
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**Tony Hoagland** (1953-2018) wrote several books of poetry published by Graywolf Press as well as two essay collections, including *Twenty Poems That Could Save America and Other Essays* (2014).

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**Alberto Ríos**, the first poet laureate of Arizona (2013-15), is the author of several books, including *A Small Story About the Sky* (2015), *The Dangerous Shirt* (2009), *The Theater of Night* (2006), and *The Smallest Muscle in the Human Body* (2002), all with Copper Canyon Press.

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**Jerry Robbins** ’61 B.D. is the author of three books and has written for various publications.

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**Tracy K. Smith**, US Poet Laureate from 2017-19, is the author of four volumes of poetry, including *Life on Mars* (Graywolf, 2011), which won the Pulitzer Prize.

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**C.D. Wright** (1949-2016) wrote many books, including *One With Others* (Copper Canyon Press, 2011), which won the National Book Critics Circle Award. “Poetry is a necessity of life,” Wright once said. “It is a function of poetry to locate those zones inside us that would be free, and declare them so.”

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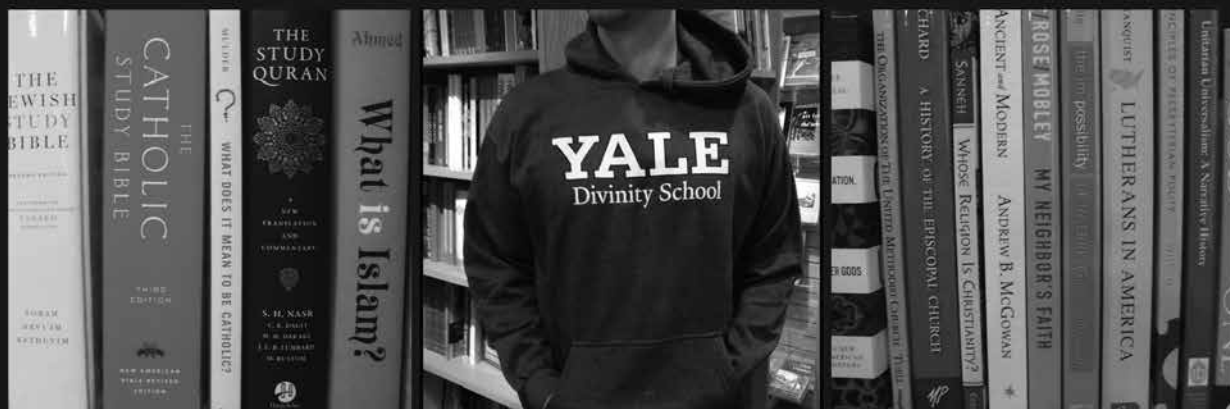
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## Poems for the Planet

**His Holiness the Dalai Lama**

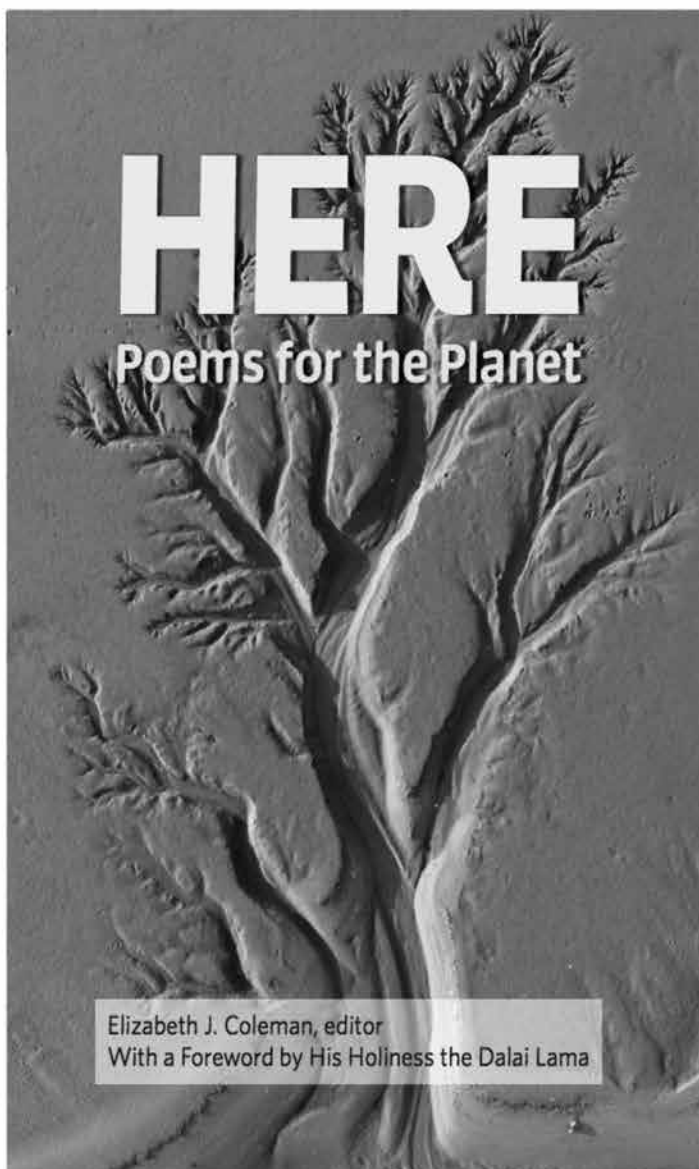
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# Come Home To Yale Divinity School Convocation & Reunions October 21-23, 2020



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**Andover Newton Seminary at YDS** signifies both intellectual preparation for thinking theologically and professional readiness for ministry. Ministers need both in an era when reenergizing the church can help heal divisions and promote peace.



Interested candidates apply to Yale Divinity School and select Andover Newton's program as they complete their M.Div. applications online at [divinity.yale.edu/admissions-aid](http://divinity.yale.edu/admissions-aid).

Contact Andover Newton's dean and staff, beginning with a call to 203-436-9970.

Visit us online at: [andovernewton.yale.edu](http://andovernewton.yale.edu)

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The joint degree is supported by faculty who teach in both schools and by the Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale. Students work concurrently on either a Master of Environmental Management or Master of Environmental Science at F&ES and either a Master of Divinity or a Master of Arts in Religion at YDS.

Individuals must apply separately to both F&ES and YDS and be admitted to both. In consultation with the registrars and academic deans at both schools, students develop a study plan for meeting all requirements.

*For more information, please contact the YDS Admissions Office at [divinity.admissions@yale.edu](mailto:divinity.admissions@yale.edu) or the F&ES Admissions Office at [fesinfo@yale.edu](mailto:fesinfo@yale.edu).*





# From the Editor: *The Antibodies of Christ*

By Ray Waddle



Last year, during the exchange of the peace at church, I turned to the people behind me as usual.

"Peace be with you," I said to a tall nervous guy.

"Do you have \$5?" he replied.

I was expecting a ritual connection, not a confrontation with the global cash nexus. He saw my hesitation.

"I'll pay you back next week," he said, as if to sweeten the deal.

Minutes before, we had recited the creed, confessed our sins, accepted forgiveness from the Most High, and now, awash in gospel compassion, I offered this stranger ... my annoyance. Was he really in need? How to help him? The liturgy rumbled on, leaving us standing there. But I had a \$5 bill and handed it to him. He left.

So goes the awkward half-formed ethics of navigating modern economic life.

True, I gave him the \$5 he asked for. It's also true that I did not hand over the \$20 bill that was also peeking out of my wallet. Twenty dollars seemed like "too much" to give away.

There's a modern assertion heard all the time now: *I work hard for what I earn*. This is the music of meritocracy. It suggests individual success owes nothing to anyone else, owes nothing to luck or family connection or advantageous tax policy. It implies unnamed others aren't working so hard for the money. But what about people making less than minimum, or parents holding down two jobs and a side hustle, or underemployed people fending off bad luck, racism, sexism, illness – aren't they especially working hard?

Well, that was last year. The virus pandemic is upending our reverence for that arrangement, stripping bare the old frivolities, inflicting pain in every economic corner, most existentially on the least of these. Perhaps it will rewrite some rules or create new, better stories to live by. Social distancing is the word right now, jostling with fear and uncertainty, but new roadmaps of compassion will eventually be drawn. The DNA of Christian faith – belief in a God who walked among the sick – will help articulate renewal, both spiritual and economic.

A grim economic connectedness between rich and poor is never discussed. Writer-actor Wallace Shawn once wrote a play, *The Fever*, about it: The rich stay rich when the poor stay poor. In

one scene he ponders the mundane price of a winter jacket:

*"What is it that determines the price of a coat? The coat's price comes from its history, the history of all the people who were involved in making it and selling it and all the particular relationships they had. And if we buy the coat, we, too, form relationships with all of those people, and yet we hide those relationships from our own awareness by pretending we live in a world where coats have no history but just fall down from heaven with prices marked inside. 'I like this coat,' we say, 'it's not expensive,' as if that were a fact about the coat and not the end of a story about all the people who made it and sold it."*<sup>1</sup>

What does commodity pricing have to do with religious faith? Nothing. Everything.

We can envision future sacred spaces opening up – and hearts opening up – to liturgies that speak the facts of desperate neighborhood suffering, homilies that chart policy paths to a living wage or question why CEO salaries ballooned to 400:1 to worker wages. (In the 1960s, the ratio was closer to 20:1.) Meditations could focus on the damage done by three interlocking trends of the past 40 years – deregulation expansion, intensified inequality, and climate crisis denial. French writer Bruno Latour connects them: Explosive inequality has shattered our belief in a common horizon where all might prosper.<sup>2</sup> Our faith has held this knowledge inside its bones for generations – that we live in a common world made by the Creator, and it is grievous to injure it and poison it. Today we're getting clarity about the fragile financial world we've created and the durable courage there is to find in every gospel story.

Shamefully, I now realize I was annoyed by that guy in church because he broke up the zone of calm I want from worship. I had not taken to heart the communion prayer we also recited that day, "Deliver us from the presumption of coming to this table for solace only, and not for strength; for pardon only, and not for renewal." I never saw him again. Not yet anyway. The task continues, the work of turning to meet the next stranger, the effort to repair this commonly shared world, in sickness and in health.

1. Wallace Shawn, *The Fever* (Grove Press, 1991), pp. 20-21.

2. Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime* (Polity Press, 2018).

**Our scholarship  
students say  
“Thank You”**

**GERONIMO D. DESUMALA, III  
'21 M.DIV. CANDIDATE**

What I am most grateful for is being surrounded by my “tribe.” It is a blessing to call as friends and future colleagues in ministry, such accomplished and brilliant classmates who are also incredibly passionate about serving and changing the church so that it might better reflect and serve the world. I cannot imagine my education, my spiritual formation, and vocational discernment without the YDS community.



**CECELIA BELLAMY  
'21 M.DIV. CANDIDATE**

I am so glad to have the ability to stretch outside my comfort zone, learn from differences in spirituality, and expand my own understanding of the church as a whole. Worshipping with my fellow students and professors at Marquand Chapel at least once a week has served as a brilliant reminder of the beauty of the tapestry-like faith we share.



**SHANCIA JARRETT  
'19 M.DIV., '20 S.T.M. CANDIDATE**

When I applied to YDS, I came with the intentions of developing a theological language to understand God’s existence and His Divine response to human suffering, particularly concerning the Disabled community. To my surprise, YDS has taught me to see the world, and to love the world as it is while striving to bring about peace and justice and to trust God along this journey.

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