

# Christianity, Capitalism, and Desire: Can Religion Still Make a Difference?

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As we investigate matters of Christianity and capitalism in the current context, the fundamental theological question is: What difference does religion make in a world of traumatic economic inequality? Before we can get to that question, however, I first need to address another question: What difference does capitalism make to religion?<sup>1</sup> This is the question that most people forget to ask, supporters and critics of capitalism alike.

My point is that Christianity and capitalism are interconnected in many ways. Economic matters are never just about money. In fact, economic matters shape us more deeply than we think: they shape the way we live our lives, they shape our relationships, what we think and feel, all the way down. Religion and faith are also among the matters affected by economics. Christianity may serve as an example. The most blatant example of course is the so-called Gospel of Prosperity, which promises people unprecedented wealth and happiness if they support the precepts of the prosperity preacher. The Gospel of Prosperity resembles neoliberal capitalism in that it preaches limitless success endorsed by God, beginning with the elites and moving from the top down. While this approach works for the few, there is little evidence that it has worked for the many.

While mainline churches on the whole do not officially endorse the Gospel of Prosperity, there are nevertheless some parallels in the theological imageries. God is generally envisioned at the top, whether in heaven or at the pinnacles of power, and therefore in close proximity to those who are successful in the current economic system. Common images of God are shaped by wealth and top-down power, similar to the top-down powers that control neoliberal capitalism. As a result, God often turns out to look like a heavenly CEO, whose power is fairly unilateral and who does not need to get his hands dirty.

One of the problems with this kind of Christianity, which masquerades as traditional because its formation by contemporary power and wealth is rarely seen as part of its theology, is that it does not work for the masses. The masses are left behind just like the workers are left behind in neoliberal capitalism. Moreover, this kind of Christianity does not even work very well anymore for those of us who belong to the middle class, as even the middle class is benefiting less and less from

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1 This is one of the key questions of my book *No Rising Tide: Theology, Economics, and the Future* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009).

the spoils of neoliberal capitalism.<sup>2</sup> The other problem is that Christianity, which is thus shaped by capitalism, promotes images of God that have fairly little in common with what we know of the God of Israel and the God of Jesus Christ.

#### WHAT DIFFERENCE CAN RELIGION MAKE?

Religion and economics are often seen as at the opposite ends of a spectrum, and so it may appear as if they have nothing to say to each other. Economics is perceived as a matter of realism, planted firmly in the concerns of this world. Religion, by contrast, is perceived as a matter of lofty ideas, which have to do mainly with “higher things,” or another world. Yet these common definitions miss what is really going on. Religion and economics are much closer than meets the eye.

There are now even some economists who have noted that economics today often functions like a religion. The task of top economists, they note, is not nitty-gritty economic analysis and number crunching, but keeping the big ideas before the public. In other words, the role of top economists is to maintain the faith.<sup>3</sup> The problem with this approach, whether in economics or in religion, is that it gives up close contact with economic reality, especially the economic reality at the bottom, in exchange for big ideas. To put it more strongly, this sort of an approach is built not on faith in general, which can be informed by reality, but on what we might call blind faith.

One example for such blind faith is the well-known statement: “A rising tide will lift all boats.” The principles expressed in this statement, which goes back to President John F. Kennedy, still guide much of contemporary economics, and serve as the basis for tax cuts to the wealthy and government bailouts of, and support for, large corporations and banks. Here, the difference between blind faith and valid observations becomes clear: While it can indeed be observed that the economic tide goes in cycles and therefore rises at certain times, that everybody benefits from rising economic tides amounts to an unconfirmed assumption and thus to blind faith.

As I have shown in greater detail in my book *No Rising Tide*, there are parallels between economics as blind faith and religion as blind faith. People who have been conditioned to accept religious principles on blind faith seem to be more likely to accept economic principles on blind faith as well. It is not surprising, therefore, that blind faith is one of our key problems today in the United States. Unfortunately, many people think that this is what religion necessarily is: blind faith or big metaphysical ideas that do not have to prove themselves in reality.

The good news, which I am seeking to develop in this article, is that neither economics nor religion has to be built on blind faith. Both economics and religion

<sup>2</sup> This is another of the key arguments of *No Rising Tide*. In addition to reflections on the deeper meaning of the problem, I also provide the relevant numbers there, which demonstrate the decline of the middle class not just in terms of wealth but also in terms of power and influence.

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Robert Nelson, *Economics as Religion: From Samuelson to Chicago and Beyond* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), xiv, 8.

can be planted firmly in the concerns of this world and can contribute not only to a better life for all but also to a more adequate understanding of what is going on.

Nevertheless, leaving behind the blind faiths to which we have become accustomed is not going to be easy. In addition, even what is sometimes considered to be realism often still misses reality. In order to deal with these problems, I have suggested examining things in terms of the “logic of downturn.”<sup>4</sup> Only if we look at the challenges of economics and religion from the perspective of those who have suffered the brunt of the recent economic downturns can we get a better sense for what is really going on. From this perspective, we can see for example that the blind faith of the Gospel of Prosperity is not helping: it cannot lift more than a few out of poverty, and even when it lifts some out of poverty, it happens at the expense of others who are left behind.

If we employ the logic of downturn and ask who benefits from the current economic and religious status quo, we realize that the majority of people are not benefiting and are not bound to benefit ever in this kind of world. Blind faith works for the few, but not for the many.

#### ALTERNATIVE RELIGION

Unlike blind-faith economics and blind-faith religion, Jesus of Nazareth did not demand blind faith. When John the Baptist fell on hard times and began developing doubts about whether Jesus would be the promised Messiah, Jesus did not respond by encouraging him to believe blindly and without question. Rather, in his response to John, Jesus provided some evidence of why his kind of religion makes a difference when he told John’s followers: “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them” (Matt 11:4-5).

The religion that Jesus proclaimed presents itself as an antidote to blind faith, which must have been a problem even in Jesus’ time. The Jesus movement is linked to concrete transformations, which are happening here and now, rather than to grandiose ideas, obscure doctrines, or other forms of blind faith. These concrete transformations have to do with human flourishing, expressed here in terms of health issues that affect not just individuals—as modern society perceives of them—but the community as a whole. Unlike today, people in the first century were more likely to be aware that health is a communal good, because the lack of health placed burdens on society as a whole, and that “if one member suffers all suffer together with it” (1 Cor 12:26).

The climax of Jesus’ proclamation in the above passage from Matthew is that “the poor have good news brought to them.” From the perspective of the poor, who are more familiar with the logic of downturn than anyone else, the good news may be many things, but it cannot be blind faith. The blind faith of pie-in-the-sky religion or some unsubstantiated economic hope that a rising tide will lift all boats

<sup>4</sup> Rieger, *No Rising Tide*, chapter 2.

not only does not help the poor; it is harmful to them because it makes their lives more miserable. This is the problem with the blind faith of the Gospel of Prosperity as well as the promises of neoliberal capitalism that have not materialized since they took center stage more than three decades ago.

Good news to the poor has to be the news of concrete transformation not just of individual lives, but of the lives of communities, and ultimately of the transformation of the structures that push people into poverty and keep them there. What would religion and economics that proclaim such good news to the poor look like?

#### THE COMMON GOOD

It is often overlooked that neoliberal economics claims that it has in mind the common good: since a rising tide is assumed to lift all boats, increasing prosperity of the super-rich is seen as a good sign for the country, even if it happens to fall in times of economic trouble for everyone else. From this perspective the growing wealth of what is now called the one percent is not strictly speaking a matter of greed and selfishness, but rather a matter of pursuing the common good because it is believed that it will eventually benefit everyone. However, serious doubts are emerging about whether this is true. While we have had pie-in-the-sky theologies for centuries, it seems that we now also have pie-in-the-sky economics.

If we consult the logic of downturn, it appears as if the top-down visions of the common good have not worked. Rather than benefiting people, the production of wealth at the top has done harm. Instead of creating jobs, as predicted by neoliberal economic theory, the production of wealth at the top has led to the exclusion of more and more people from the benefits of the economy. Fifty percent of the jobs destroyed in the Great Recession are not coming back, especially the more decent ones.<sup>5</sup> Many of these jobs were simply outsourced to places where labor is cheaper, while other jobs were cut and the workload distributed among the remaining workforce. Some who lost their jobs were rehired for similar work at lower pay and with significantly fewer benefits. The profits from all of these transactions were pocketed by corporations and their stockholders. As a result, the common good proclaimed by neoliberal economics has led to what has often been called a “jobless recovery,” a term which is in itself an oxymoron.

Christianity has a different response to the common-good question. The apostle Paul<sup>6</sup> states one of the deepest insights of the struggling community: “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it” (1 Cor 12:26). When Paul compares the church to the body of Christ in this context, he picks up an ancient

5 This distinguishes the so-called “Great Recession” from earlier recessions since the Great Depression. This problem was already pointed out during the recession itself, and the prediction has proved correct. See Will Deener, “Working?” *The Dallas Morning News*, July 13, 2009, 4D.

6 For the following interpretation of Paul, see Joerg Rieger, *Christ and Empire: From Paul to Postcolonial Times* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), chapter 1.

image that was a commonplace in the Roman Empire. In the empire, there was a deeply held belief that all the members of the empire are organically related. Yet the theologians of the empire also believed that each part of the body was destined to stay in its predetermined place, and that there was a natural division between the higher and lower levels.

Paul turns this around: “Members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect” (1 Cor 12:22-23). In other words, the common good is not built from the top down but from the bottom up. This logic is deeply engrained in the Judeo-Christian traditions. In the Hebrew Bible, this is the place of the proverbial concern for widows, strangers, and orphans. Or, in the words of the labor unions: “An injury to one is an injury to all.” In the New Testament, the famous passage of Matthew 25:40 points in a similar direction: “Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” The hungry, thirsty, strangers, lacking clothing, sick, imprisoned are not the objects of social service projects, the recipients of charity. Their interest is at the heart of God’s own interest, and therefore at the heart of the common interest.

Two things stand out here. First of all, the common good can only be achieved if the concerns of the weakest members of society are taken into account not as an afterthought but as at the heart of the common life. This has deep implications for how we reconceive economics. Secondly, and here is where the challenge for religion lies, solidarity with the “least of these” is not a secondary issue but is solidarity with Godself, and solidarity with God is solidarity with the least of these. Religion in this context is not blind faith, but a new way of life that relocates the common good from the top to the bottom.

What are the implications of this relocation of the common good? The issue that comes to mind first of all is the question of distribution. Is there enough to go around? Are all receiving what they need? Those who defend neoliberal capitalism often point out that, despite astronomical differences in distribution, many people are better off than they used to be in the past. More people have color televisions than ever before in history, for instance, and in the United States most people own cars. What this response overlooks, of course, is that even in the United States many are not receiving what they need. In Dallas, for instance, a city that prides itself as being economically strong and growing, more than one in four children live below the poverty line and many children do not have enough to eat.<sup>7</sup>

7 An editorial titled “Study Finds Growing Child Poverty among Dallas’ Prosperity,” *The Dallas Morning News*, November 18, 2011, notes that 29 percent of children in Dallas County live in poverty, up from 19.2 percent in 2000. On the web: <http://www.dallasnews.com/opinion/editorials/20111118-editorial-study-finds-growing-child-poverty-among-dallas-prosperity.ece>, accessed January 12, 2012.

Yet distribution may not even be the primary issue in this debate. If we add the issue of production to the issue of distribution, things become clearer. Here, the question is whether all people have the opportunity to employ their creativity for the common good and whether they are compensated fairly for the contributions that they make to the common good. While in the United States and many other places around the globe more people have color television sets today than ever before, the opportunity for productive and creative labor that is compensated fairly has not increased.

The top-down logic of neoliberal capitalism rules when it comes to production. In the manufacturing industry, for instance, CEOs are compensated several hundred times higher than the workers. The default assumption in this context is that productivity has mostly to do with the accomplishment of the CEOs. Yet a CEO cannot produce a single thing without a qualified workforce that is needed to operate at all levels. In addition, the amazing and growing gaps that we are currently observing between CEOs and workers have not always existed in the United States. Sarah Anderson reports that even in the recession year of 2009 “CEO pay ... more than doubled the CEO pay average for the decade of the 1990s, more than quadrupled the CEO pay average for the 1980s, and ran approximately eight times the CEO average for all the decades of the mid-20th century. American workers, by contrast, are taking home less in real weekly wages than they took home in the 1970s. Back in those years, precious few top executives made over 30 times what their workers made.”<sup>8</sup>

If we look at the common good from the perspective of production, we need to reconsider our default assumptions. How we value the production of workers is a matter that shows us the logic at the heart of neoliberal capitalism. Nevertheless, it is not just an economic matter. It also shows how we value the community as a whole with all its diverse members, and how we value alternative forms of creativity. The common good can only be maintained if all have significant opportunities to make positive contributions to it, and if the contributions of all are valued to some degree. At present, the opposite is the case, as the contributions of working people are increasingly devalued.

These reflections on the common good remind us that the top-down approach hurts not just the workers. While workers are treated as expendable, managers have no choice but to work in the interest of stockholders rather than workers, and even small business people are not benefiting because the larger corporations will not respect them, but go after their profit as a matter of principle.<sup>9</sup> While the compensation of CEOs is often debated, it is overlooked that while CEOs make 400 or 500 times what the workers make, top investors make 20,000

<sup>8</sup> Sarah Anderson and others, “Executive Excess 2010: CEO Pay and the Great Recession” (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Policy Studies and United for a Fair Economy), [www.ips-dc.org](http://www.ips-dc.org), accessed January 12, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> This is what happens when large corporations like Wal-Mart come to town, whose strategy is to wipe out smaller competitors systematically in order to increase their own market share.

times of what workers make.<sup>10</sup> A community that is so divided may not be able to endure for very long.

“Good news to the poor,” as Jesus proclaims it, cannot just be about distribution but needs to include the perspective of production, sending the message that people are needed and that their labor is needed.

#### THEOLOGY: WHERE IS GOD?

In a religion that is not built on blind faith but on evidence, theologians need to ask the question where God is found at work. In the Judeo-Christian traditions there are many strands that find God at work with the “least of these.” The same is true for the history of the church. In the history of the United States, such belief in a presence of the divine with the “least of these” has made a difference at some of the most important turning points: the Suffragette Movement, for instance, found some religious support for its struggle for women’s voting rights, despite much opposition. The work of Elizabeth Cady Stanton is but one example. The Civil Rights Movement is another example of a strong alliance between a progressive movement with religion, embodied in leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. and others. The Labor Movement is another example of significant changes introduced “from below,” as it were, including weekends off work, the 8-hour workday, pension plans, and health care benefits. What is often overlooked is that the labor movement enjoyed strong religious support as well, especially in the early decades of the twentieth century and today from newly emerging religion and labor movements.

While none of these successes prove without a doubt that God is at work, they change our images of how God works in the world and where God is active, and they lead us back to a more biblical understanding of God. Jesus’ response to John the Baptist describes some of these “bottom-up” activities: “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them” (Matt 11:4-5). Good news to the poor takes concrete shape in the work of the Jesus movement. This is not a top-down movement that distributes charity to the poor while siding with the powers that be; the Jesus movement is a bottom-up movement that integrates the poor, supports their agency, and values their productive capacities.

The production to which formerly blind, lame, leprous, deaf, dead, and impoverished members of society are invited is nothing less than the production of the Kingdom of God, in which Godself participates. This Kingdom is the opposite of the Roman Empire and other monarchies, as here the last will be first and the first will be last (Matt 20:16). God’s participation can best be seen in the work of Jesus, as one who organizes people on the margins for the production of the

<sup>10</sup> Sarah Anderson and others, “Executive Excess 2007: The Staggering Social Cost of U.S. Business Leadership” (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Policy Studies and United for a Fair Economy), [www.ipsdc.org](http://www.ipsdc.org), accessed January 12, 2012.

common good. Jesus in this context needs to be understood as an organizer just as much as a preacher. In fact, what makes his preaching effective is his organizing, and it is here that God is seen at work most clearly and surprisingly.<sup>11</sup>

Religion presents itself here not as another blind faith. This is a way of being religious that is the exact opposite of dominant pie-in-the-sky religion. If religion is thus in touch with real life, rebuilding the world from the bottom up and working for the common good, we can begin to reimagine what economics might look like if it, too, were in touch with real life.

#### RESHAPING DESIRE FROM THE BOTTOM UP<sup>12</sup>

One example of how economic processes can be rebuilt from the bottom up has to do with the role desire plays in our lives. Desire points us to the core issues both in religion and economics.

The sixteenth century Reformer Martin Luther has captured the religious significance of desire in his definition of God as “that to which your heart clings and entrusts itself.”<sup>13</sup> Desire points us to the heart of our faith, it shows us where things are ultimately rooted. Nevertheless, Luther’s definition leaves open the possibility that desire might be misguided and that our heart clings and entrusts itself to false desires.

In neoliberal capitalist economics, desire is often taken at face value by supporters and critics alike. Critics of neoliberal capitalism are quick to blame consumerism, greed, envy, and jealousy, all of which are related to desire, while supporters of neoliberal capitalism praise these attitudes as the engine of a healthy economy. Where these desires are rooted, however, is not addressed. Rather than taking consumerism and the popular shape of desire at face value, however, we need to take another look at where these things come from.

What consumers want, it is quickly assumed, is more “stuff,” i.e. the whole gamut of consumer products. For religious critics of consumerism, this is often taken to mean that the products that people acquire become their God. In this perspective, desire appears to translate directly into the acquisition of consumer products. Yet consumerism is not primarily about consumer products. Consumerism is about a deeper desire for intangible things like happiness, meaning, love, and freedom. The new car, for instance, is not simply about a desire for a new toy or a better and more reliable means of transportation, but about intangible things like feelings of security, power, and happiness. So how are consumerism, consumer products, and desires related? Many people, economists and theologians included,

11 This is shown by Richard Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002).

12 For a more in-depth and detailed account of the argument of this part, see Rieger, *No Rising Tide*, chapter 4.

13 Martin Luther, “The Large Catechism,” in *The Book of Concord*, trans. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 365. Luther reminds us, furthermore, that “money and possessions,” “knowledge, intelligence, power, popularity, friendship, and honor” can also take the place of God.

assume that desire for more things is a natural part of our humanity. Yet this may not be true. In fact, at a certain point, desire for more things has to be produced artificially. It is often overlooked that desires and wants of things diminish at a certain point. People only want so many new cars, gadgets, houses, or chocolate bars. Who wants twenty cell phones? Economist John Kenneth Galbraith has called this phenomenon the “diminishing urgency of . . . wants” or a “diminishing urgency of consumption.”<sup>14</sup> A capitalist economy, however, which is based on economic growth, needs to keep producing things.<sup>15</sup> And so the desires of consumers have to be produced and maintained artificially, precisely because they are not natural.

The desires that we tend to take at face value are, therefore, not natural but produced and reproduced by an economy that depends on the steady growth of desire. This means that the idea of a “consumer-driven economy” is less than accurate. Capitalism depends on the top-down production of desire, which proceeds by endowing consumer products with intangible meaning in order to produce greater profit. Consumers are driven by the economy as much—or more—than they are driving it.

In our search for alternatives we need to understand that these produced desires go very deep. Advertising, one of the key mechanisms for the production of desire, is aimed at the formation of the deeper levels of our existence. Its goal is not primarily the providing of information about the products that are to be sold, like cars and cell phones; advertising is about linking products with deeper desires for happiness, meaning, love, and freedom. The ultimate goal is to imprint people for life, starting with our children when they are very young.

Unfortunately, those who seek to provide alternatives, including religious communities, commonly fail to deal with these deeper levels of desire. The many indictments of consumerism in particular often fail to address the mechanisms by which consumerism is produced and kept alive. Yet moralizing about desire does not help if desire is so deep-seated. The problem is, therefore, not just about ethics but about theology. Luther was right: That to which your heart clings and entrusts itself is your God; our deepest desires point to who is God in our lives. The good news is that desires are not set in stone but can be reshaped. The question is how we do that and how alternative religion and economics can contribute to the reshaping of desire.

Let us return to the Prosperity Gospel one more time in order to clarify what is at stake. What is wrong with it? One common critique is that it focuses too much on the material and neglects the spiritual. This is one of the critiques that are also leveled against capitalism, expressed in the often-heard claim that capitalism would be too “materialistic.” Yet this critique rests on a fundamental misunderstanding.

14 John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin 1998), 120, 122.

15 Economists talk about the “falling rate of profit”: over time, profit margins go down, and production needs to increase in order to keep making profit. See, for instance, Robert Brenner, *The Economics of Global Turbulence: The Advanced Capitalist Economies from Long Boom to Long Downturn, 1945–2005* (New York: Verso, 2006).

Capitalism's focus on the material is inextricably linked with the promise of spiritual happiness, as we have seen. The same is true for the Gospel of Prosperity.

The problem has to do with what kind of material reality is promised here. Both capitalism and the Gospel of Prosperity promise limitless wealth to individuals and the fulfillment of all of the desires that the advertising industry holds before us. In this way, people's attention is trained on the material objects that the dominant economic system selects for us, like the latest cars and cell phones. These material objects are presented as the core of every person's desire. As we have seen, however, such desires are not natural, and they tend to lead us to false gods that cannot, and are not supposed to, produce true happiness.

The problem, therefore, is not with the focus on the material, but that we are confronted with two fundamentally different approaches to the material world. These two approaches can be distinguished in terms of the difference between artificially produced desires and our real needs. What is unlimited in this context are not needs and desires in general, but artificially produced desires based on the false promise of limitless wealth.

When this is clear, we can begin to reshape desire by comparing desires and needs. This is one major way of rebuilding economic processes from the bottom up. If in capitalist economics the production of desire has overshadowed the focus on the real needs of people, it is not enough merely to reject desire and its symptom, consumerism. Rather, we need to reshape desire in light of the real needs of people. Desire as such is not a bad thing, and neither should we expect it to disappear.

In the Jewish-Christian traditions, God is often found at work in the context of the real needs of people; desire is shaped and reshaped in this context. In the following, I will give two examples, one from the Hebrew Bible and one from the New Testament.

In the Moses tradition, Moses gets separated from his parents and is raised as an Egyptian prince. We can only imagine how this upbringing must have shaped his outlook on life and his desires. Yet the narratives talk about how his desires are reshaped in his encounters with the needs of the common people: "One day, after Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and saw their forced labor. He saw an Egyptian beating one of his kinsfolk" (Exodus 2:11). Moses begins to side with the Hebrews because he sees their needs and senses their desire. The experience must have been traumatic, because Moses overreacts and kills a slave master (Exodus 2:13). It is precisely in this context that God appears to him in surprising and life-changing ways.

Moses must have had a certain set of desires as an Egyptian prince. Getting in touch with the needs and desires of the people reshapes his desires and his images of God. This is the context of the epic Burning Bush story: God speaks only after Moses has connected with the needs of the people. This God is no longer the god of the Egyptian status quo worshiped in the palace; rather, this God is the liberator of the slaves, the one who radically transforms the status quo.

Without understanding this basic shift the Burning Bush story is just another status quo story, in which God announces some abstract sovereignty ("I am who I am" [Exodus 3:14]).

The Jesus traditions, like the Moses tradition, also make no sense without a deep sympathy with the needs of people. Just like Moses' life was turned around when he left the palace and got in touch with the people, Jesus must have learned a few things from working in construction with Joseph and from spending much of his time with the common people. Desire is deeply shaped and can be reshaped in such settings. Not surprisingly, therefore, Jesus' parables are full of examples from the everyday life of work and the needs and desires that matter there. Among the protagonists are shepherds (who don't own their flock), working women, workers in vineyards and fields, fishermen, and service workers. The parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matt 18:23-32) is one example of how desires are shaped and reshaped as they encounter human need.

The parable, set in the context of the harsh life of service workers in the first century, begins with a dramatically reshaped image of God. God is portrayed as a master, who goes against all business logic by forgiving the entire debt of one of his workers. This is an odd move, because it is precisely this debt that makes workers compliant to their masters and pits worker against worker. By forgiving this debt, the master acknowledges the need of the workers.

Unfortunately, the worker whose debt has been forgiven remains a slave to his unreconstructed desires and forgets about the needs of his fellow workers. When a fellow worker asks him for the forgiveness of a minor debt, he is unwilling to forgive and has him thrown into prison. Reading this parable in the tension between desire and need, we are beginning to understand that the point is not to moralize: it is not to say "you must forgive, no matter what," as this parable is so often interpreted. The point of the parable is that everything changes when the true needs of the people are recognized. If the forgiven worker had recognized that the needs of the people, including his own, have less to do with money than with solidarity, he would have acted differently.

From the perspective of the needs of the people, the case is fairly clear: the solidarity of working people is more valuable than money. After all, the flourishing and the survival of the community depends on this solidarity, rather than on the possessions of individual workers, which will never match the possessions of the master and which guarantee his power. Reshaped desire is located, therefore, in the solidarity of workers that meets the real needs of the people.

Of course, this perspective only makes sense from the bottom up, that is, if the needs of the people are taken into account. From the top down, things look different. The unforgiving servant follows the desire for individual power and wealth that characterizes the lives of the elite. From this perspective, the parable can only be understood as a moralizing exhortation, which is how it continues to be preached in most churches to this very day.

We are now at a place where real human needs can become part of economic considerations again, thus reshaping desire. The needs that form the bedrock of our lives appear to be fairly clear: we need food, shelter, and clothing. Moreover,

sanitation, education, and healthcare can also be considered as needs. The need which is often overlooked, however, is the need to be productive, to be engaged in work that matters and makes a difference. This brings us back to what we said earlier: alternative economics, and the alternative religion that is tied to it, needs to take a fresh look at production, not merely at redistribution.

We can now see more clearly the distinction between economic processes based on artificially produced unlimited desire and economic processes based on need. Economic processes based on unlimited desire are tied to a material reality, which is driven by the production of more and more consumer products. Yet what matters here are not the products. The goal is the maximization of profits for stockholders, and so the production of desire serves the interest of the elites.

Economic processes based on need, on the other hand, are tied to a material reality, which is driven not by the infinite maximization of profit but by the ability to work with dignity and be compensated fairly. What matters here is space for creative labor. The goal is the solidarity of all who work, and so desire is reshaped by human need, which includes the ability to make constructive contributions to the flourishing of life on the planet.

#### CONCLUSION

It is often noted that the rich are getting richer while the poor are getting poorer. This is true globally as well as within the United States. Yet the basic challenge in this connection is not what most people think it is. At the heart of this growing gap is not distribution; at the heart is production. The basic questions are: Who is given the opportunity to do work that counts as productive and is rewarded accordingly? Who is in a position to do the sort of work that makes a difference? In the current economic situation, determined by neoliberal capitalism, such opportunities are increasingly limited to members of the elites, and they are decreasing for everyone else.

Religion has been co-opted in this context. It frequently functions at the level of artificially produced desire and blind faith, without grounding in the real needs of people. No wonder that the God who is worshiped here resembles the god of the neoliberal status quo. Luther was right: our desires show us who our God is.

The good news is that many of the Jewish Christian traditions provide antidotes. Things change if God is understood as in touch with the real needs of people, at work from the bottom up rather than from the top down, in solidarity with a band of slaves in Egypt, service workers in the first century, and people's movements throughout history. No one sums up this difference better than the Apostle Paul: "Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the

world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are" (1 Cor. 1:26-28). Desire is not demonized here, but it is reshaped in light of human need and put in the service of the community.

Finally, there is new energy emerging from places where we have failed to look for a long time. This energy comes not from heroic leaders or the elite, but from the community. The good news is that these dynamics have been going on throughout history; in the United States, abolitionism, the Women's Movement, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Labor Movement are examples. Most recently, the Occupy Movement has raised new hope that the true needs of the 99 percent can help us to reshape desire in such a way that an alternative economy becomes possible and that alternative religion is not finished yet.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> On this topic, see Joerg Rieger, "Occupy Wall Street and Everything Else: Lessons for the Study and Praxis of Religion." *Peace Studies Journal* 5:1 (January 2012), 1-13.