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# Top Down or Bottom-up? Religion, Economics, and Social Justice

*Jessica Ann Began*

## **Introduction**

All Americans participate in or are affected by the economy on a daily basis; yet, we rarely give the economy much thought. We may think about economics at work, when reading the news, or making a purchase. We are not blind to economic inequality, but we generally accept it as the unfortunate nature of the system, and many partake in charities, volunteer organizations, and more to help. However, we rarely notice how pervasive it is on an individual and society at large. That is, until a massive economic downturn, such as the financial crisis of 2008. Downturn on this scale uncovers how deeply connected our society is to our economic system. The financial crisis was not only detrimental to our bank accounts and finances, but our psyche. It was a shock that caused many to reevaluate the current economic order, letting voices of smaller or past economic theories be heard, which shed light on the injustices the current system fosters. Yet, these injustices are still largely pushed aside as ‘part of the system,’ and the nature of downturn. We just need to ‘ride it out’ and trust in ‘the cycle.’ Economists, politicians, and economic elite reassuringly preach the famous words of John F. Kennedy, “A rising tide lifts all boats,” and many faithful comply, because faith in the system is formidable, almost intoxicating.

## **Religion and Economics**

Religion is more than an individual’s personal beliefs, they are systems to organize, give meaning to, and provide an understanding of life and society. Religion impacts all aspects of life. However, in America, religion is sectioned off to the private lives of individuals in effort to safeguard the religious freedom our nation was founded on. Additionally, the current free market, or political economy, and the American government claim to be void of religion and that religion has nothing in common with the free market economy. These notions persist as many view religion as unearthly, mystical, personal, or isolated to history; but religion is resolutely planted in the concerns of this world, and its impact can be radically transformative. Conversely, dominant views of economics believe it to be a modern science, used to understand and solve the concerns of this world. However, the financial crisis revealed how disconnected the dominant free market system is,

and its disconnect with present problems. Economics has taken on a religious-like role in our modern world. Few, if any, predicted the crash, because of the deep seeded faith, or blind faith, in the current order. This kind of faith accepts without question, therefore, opposition was generally dismissed. However, the inescapable nature of this downturn created a new wave of questioning.

Religion is socio-political, and concerned with humanity. Thus, it is essential that religion not remain compartmentalized to the private sphere; it must be both personal and public. The world cannot function or be understood as separate, isolated entities. Our world, culture and society are all deeply connected, and religion possesses a deep understanding of humanity. Religion offers inimitable knowledge of the human experience, and understanding humanity helps evaluate structures used to organize society. Religion has a long tradition of opposing oppressive systems. The political economy can be enlightened through religion because it provides a lens and framework to critique, instill hope, and transform the system, all in light of social justice.

Yet, religion itself can be manipulated to support the free market. Despite what many believe, religion is present and used by the current order in several different ways, which reiterates the need for an evaluation framework to detect manipulation and distortion. Religion still pervades the public sphere, and the church must uncover these manipulations and reclaim religion. However, all can utilize the religious framework for socially just transformation, which will later be explained as the prophetic spirit.

### **Permanence of Downturn**

John F. Kennedy's famed rising tide metaphor summarizes the dominant understanding of the American economy. If the macro economy does well, GDP increases, then all of society will prosper. The market is believed to operate in continuous cycles of prosperity and downturn, so we should never doubt the system in a downturn, because it will rise in the future. When the tide rises everyone does better; we just need to have faith. The rising tide can also explain the well-known 'trickle down effect.' If those at the top do well, the positive results will trickle down to the bottom. The free market will increase everyone's well-being.

However, this rising tide is not lifting all boats. The 2008 financial crisis was one of the most violent collapses experienced in economics in the last hundred years, and the majority of Americans were profoundly affected by the crash (Skidelsky, 2009). The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported in December 2007, the national unemployment rate was 5.0 percent, and in the previous 30 months it was at or

below that level. In June 2009, the end of the Great Recession, unemployment was at 9.5 percent. In the months after unemployment continued to climb. By October 2009 the unemployment rate hit an unbelievable 10.0 percent (Goodman and Mance, 2011). Moreover, unemployment rates of African Americans and Latinos were higher than whites. These high numbers are reflective of their economic environment, but that does not down play their significance. Since WWII, on average, employment saw a gain of 17.8 percent until February 2001. Then, from August 2003 to January 2008, employment only saw gains of 6.3 percent, (Goodman et al. 2011). Not only has the recession produced record highs for unemployment, but the duration of unemployment has also exceeded past recessions.

While many Americans were still unemployed and recovering from the crisis, the top earners were already gaining. During the recent recession, the income inequality gap did begin to shrink, "however, during the first year of the recovery, 2010, the incomes of the richest 1 percent of Americans grew 58 percent while the rest had a 6.4 percent bump (Porter, 2012)." The top 1 percent of Americans obtained 93 percent of the total income gains, while 99 percent only received seven percent of the gains (Porter, 2012). When will the tide rise and who will it raise?

Economic injustices began well before the 2008 crisis. Economic inequality has dramatically increased over the years. According to the Congressional Budget Office, between 1979 and 2007 the top one percent of earners experienced income growth of 275 percent, while the bottom fifth only experienced income grow of 20 percent (The Congress of the United States: Congressional Budget Office 2011). Over the course of this period, the economy experienced several years of prosperity, like the tech boom of the 1990s, and inequality continued to expand. Despite these facts, economic policy continued to conform to the theories of free market. Since the Reagan administration tax cuts were administered for the wealthiest Americans and large corporations, along with subsidies, and increased deregulation policies, all under the justification of and faith in the trickle down effect. The rising tide has continually left more people behind, yet faith in the system remains.

The extreme income inequality is very important, because capital provides access to livelihood. However, the most disturbing message behind these statistics is the difference in privileges between these gaps. What is the underlying meaning of the gap? In the free market, money does not only buy material possessions, but influence and power. Influence and power are not confined to the economic sphere; they impact all aspects of life. Power and influence impact all sectors of

society and the psyche of the individual and those they wield their power and influence over. The market has become increasingly pervasive in all aspects of life. It now plays a central role, whether we realize it or not. Theologian Joerg Rieger noted the sharp increase in the death toll during the Great Recession, and “calls to the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline were at a record high, up more than 25 percent in one year (2009: 3).” The death rate surpassed that of the Great Depression, implying the increased impact the economy has on personal life. As the tide continues to leave a greater number of people behind, and the inequality gaps widen, and the economy dictates an even greater portion of our lives. While these facts are no secret, over the past 25 years a surprisingly small number of people, compared to its supporters, outwardly opposed the present order. Who actually rises with the tide? How has a system with rapidly increasing inequality amassed such a faithful following?

### **Religious Legitimation of the Current Order**

America has a unique relationship with religion. America is a land of religious freedom and religious pluralism. We claim to have a separation of church and state, which I will argue does not actually exist. The country was founded on Christian principles and ideals, which some consider the soul of America. Unlike many other developed nations, religion still plays a decisive role in the lives of many individuals. The Pew Institute found that as many as 92 percent of U.S. residents believe in God, and of the 92 percent, 71 percent believe with complete certainty (Salmon, 2008). Religion is a part of American life, which is why neither the economy nor the government actually keeps it confined to the private sphere.

Religion influences faith in the free market and the free market also influences faith in religion. A common theme between the two is unquestioned faith. Many followers of both religion and the free market accept what they are told without questioning. This faith stems from a lack of awareness of alternatives. Many Christians assume all individuals and churches believe and practice the same religion the same way. Rieger explains that some Christians assume when other Christians talk about God they essentially mean the same thing. This allows for easy political support, because a politician can talk about God, and these same Christians will likely support them (Rieger, 2009). The process being, ‘if they talk about God we must share beliefs.’ Promotion and perpetuation of this faith preserves the current social and political structures, it maintains the present reality. To keep the current order intact, the most effective legitimating tool is religion (Berger, 1967).

## Civil Religion and God Concepts

The language used for the economy produces religious-like dedication and belief in the current system, political and economic. Civil religion is so deeply intertwined in our political system, and used on a regular basis in political rhetoric, that most people do not notice it. However, it smacks of religion for us. People use metaphors to correlate and produce an understanding for two things that appear not to correlate. In other words, metaphors are a word or phrase that are applied to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable (McFague, 1987). Meeks discusses the power and presence of religious language in the market, such as trust, faith and fidelity or words like redemption, saving, security, debt and profit. All are fundamentally economic and religious. The language is so embedded in the market the religious origin is almost unnoticed until it is analyzed, but the brain will still subconsciously draw upon the religious meaning. The language of religion has become the language of the market. These words are used to evoke religious-like faith in the economy.

Moreover, in politics, virtually every presidential speech ends with, "God bless America," and our pledge of allegiance contains, "One nation, under God, indivisible with liberty and justice for all." Additionally, "In God we trust," is everywhere in our society, and for most it symbolizes a deep trust. They are not connections we need to ponder; the connection is reflexive. Understanding the power and use of language can be a key tool in unmasking the flaws and installing a change in the free market ideology. The political economy uses civil religion and God concepts to encourage 'faith' to the system, because the number of people that have faith in the system correlate with the permanence of the system (Nelson-Pallmeyer, 2005). Moreover, the system seems impenetrable, a reality without alternative. Religion relates the system to the cosmos making it seem sacred (Berger, 1986).

Biblical language is now fundamentally economic. Faith, one of the most basic of all religious concepts, is intrinsically connected to the economy. The economic system thrives on faith. Faith, in this context, does not refer to belief in an ecclesiastical doctrine, but rather to "the propelling, all-embracing visions which direct persons in everything they feel, think and do (Meeks, 1989; 30)." This type of faith penetrates every facet of life and is expected to support one's being. Theologian Paul Tillich would argue this level of faith reveals one's ultimate concern; something believed to have the ability to support our being. According to Tillich, whatever is our ultimate concern becomes our god. If society dedicates this type of faith to the system, society transforms the market into a god. Civil religion uses decontextualized language and symbols from religion to authorize and justify po-

litical decisions that support, unify and legitimate the economy (Nelson-Pallmeyer, 2005). It renders the system universally just and indivisible, therefore it refutes any challenge to the present system.

Incorrect metaphors and manipulation of scripture also support the current oppressive system, because how we understand God is how we understand the world, and thus the system employing it (Daly, 1973). Within the religious community how God is understood determines where God is found here on earth. In traditional understanding in Western Christianity, God has power reminiscent of a king's authority (McFague, 1987). This has distorted Christian notions of a communal, liberative God. When these convictions hold, Christian faith can easily be swayed to legitimate the assumptions of the free market, thus religion can be used in unjust and dehumanizing ways. When God is king we expect dominance and submission, therefore, we are more likely to submit to the authority of the system. Moreover, we expect some groups to have more power over others. "The more the market logic threatens to become the Church's way of organizing its life, the more the church is defined by the prevailing economy of our society and the more market rules determine what we mean by justice (Meeks 1989, 37)." The more power and influence the market obtains, the more society and social institutions will become enculturated. Therefore, the market can and does dictate the values of many churches, and manipulates them to support the free market economics and governmental policies that support the market. The market has become a religion.

When the market is associated with the ultimate people can place hope in the system. Regardless of recognizing the 'ultimate' connection religion attaches to the market our mind will establish a connection. Hope in the future suppresses discontent with the present. If people believe it is only a matter of time until their situation changes they will remain faithful to the market, and complacent to its injustices. This is the same tactic slave owners used in early America. They brought their slaves to church, so they would learn about the kingdom of heaven. If they believed their ultimate reward was in the future they could withstand the present discomfort (Cone, 1997). Not that the example implies a direct correlation, but, as Berger, says our greatest fear is meaninglessness and loss of location. Hope in the system provides a location and a sense of meaning. When the market embraces religion many will submit with faith.

### **The Free Market: A Religion**

Religion is defined as "the belief in and worship of a superhuman controlling power, especially a personal God or gods. Religion is a particular system of

faith and worship. A pursuit or interest to which someone ascribed supreme importance (Merriam-Webster)." The term religion is traditionally ascribed to belief systems such as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism, and is generally limited to similar belief systems. However, a more abstract understanding of religion is something that grounds people, providing them with an understanding of the world and their role in the world, all in relation to the ultimate. Religion shapes reality, however, these are often deeply embedded in our consciousness, so determining where our faith is actually originating is not always obvious. We maybe believe to be ultimately concerned in religion, but what are the origins of that religion? What effect does it have on society? What role is religion playing today, and how has it impacted the faith? To begin, what are the similarities between religion and economics?

The free market is based on exchange relationships; it is an economic system in which prices are determined by the unrestricted powers of supply and demand. The prices reflect the consumer demands to the producer. Government's role is to establish the best environment for the unrestrained forces of the market to work (Weintraub, 1993). Many people believe the free market and capitalism to be one and the same. However, Adam Smith's capitalism is not identical to the current free market, because technically their goals differ. Capitalism is "an economic system in which a country's trade and industry are controlled by private owners for profit (Merriam-Webster)." The system naturally functions like a democracy, but both systems are considered laissez-faire, meaning removal of all nonmarket forces in order to facilitate market forces to operate freely. However, its impact reaches well beyond the economic realm.

"Economics promises an objective science, but actually delivers a hidden metaphysics. Behind their formal theorizing, economists are engaged in telling stories that have powerful symbolic messages that often have a philosophical (or theological) content (Nelson, 2002; xxii)." The principles on which economic systems are founded are accepted as truth-claims, establishing faith in the market. The system has a set of values, norms, and truth-claims, which are internalized by individuals and institutions. We cannot separate ourselves from our values and beliefs; they impact all aspects of our life. Economics is a systematic ordering of society to promote its values and faith claims. Many theologians and economists support Nelson's belief that the current economic system functions like a religion. Theologian Paul Knitter supports Nelson's claims. Knitter added: modern economics could be viewed as a religion, because the markets truth-claims must be unquestioningly believed for the system to work (2002).

Free market economics is based on the classical economist Adam Smith's ideas of capitalism, which are explained in *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. Free market still embraces the powerful 'invisible hand' metaphor, relying on the unrestricted forces of supply and demand. Consumers still need to peruse self-interest to accurately reflect their demand. Finally, the relationships of exchange are supposed to be mutually advantageous.

Adam Smith believed capitalism to be a dynamic and constructive system with the ability to increase human wellbeing. Adam Smith published *Wealth of Nations* as a theoretical framework explaining and endorsing the workings of a market system: capitalism. It argues capitalism's superiority over the previously dominant system of feudalism. Smith's capitalism is not just rules, guidelines, or structures to facilitate exchange. It is the belief in a set of values and truth-claims that must be embraced and internalized for the system to maximize its potential.

Smith believed that the capitalist order was naturally occurring, and represented the highest achievement of human progress (Smith, 1976). Capitalism required self-interest regulated by competition in an unregulated market, to achieve the common good. The system is supposed to develop with continual accumulation of capital, technological progress, free trade and specialization. Under these conditions, the greatest number of people would receive the benefits of the market.

Adam Smith's invisible hand metaphor is one of the most prominent economic metaphors of all time. It represents the forces of supply and demand moving toward the end goal of equilibrium, which represents the point in which producers and consumers equally gain from the exchange; all participants benefit. This occurs through the unrestrained self-interest of the consumers and producers. As Smith said, "[b]y pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it (Smith, 1976; 339)." Smith assumed there was a harmony of interests among all participants in the economic system (Allen et al. 2000). When these self-interests are acted out and led by the invisible hand, all benefit. Thus, in a competitive, unregulated market, self-interest would equate common good. This idea is an expected truth-claim by those who believe in the system, because it cannot be scientifically proven.

Self-interest converting to common good is another truth-claim that must simply be accepted, because it cannot be confidently verified. The conversion process cannot be calculated or explained, it simply happens. If it were a natural occurrence there would be evidence. Nonetheless, Smith believed in pursuing self-interest.

Give me what I want, and you shall have this which you want, is the meaning of every such offer; and it is the manner that we obtain from one another the far greater part of those good offices which we stand in need of. It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love (Smith, 1976; 13).

Self-interest is perceived as a virtue, because it leads to an increase in overall economic welfare. Self-interest only achieves success with its counterweight, competition. Competition keeps in check and regulates any one individual's greed from prevailing. Smith believed competition would prevent monopolies and cartels from forming. In essence, it would prevent producers from increasing their profits at the expenses of laborers and consumers. Self-interest is then only virtuous in the presence of competition (Cypher et al. 1997). These are all unfounded claims that require unquestioned belief.

Smith was not naïve enough to think the social and political institutions would not impact the economic system. *The Wealth of Nations* is essentially about how to transform the institutional and social environment to support unleashed dynamic market forces of growth via a competitive capitalist economy from which the greatest number might benefit. Smith did not support constant government intervention, such as labor unions, minimum wage, and trade policy, but he did believe in intervention when competition or self-interest was jeopardized (Cypher et al. 1997). These constituent elements, capitalism, capital accumulation, free trade, and institutional innovation, continue to be essential elements in thinking about economic, and thus societal, development to this day. The system is not simply self-regulating, but self-sustaining (Allen et al. 2000).

In the free market, supply and demand are driven by a price set by the producer, and no individual producer is big enough to set the price alone. The market will only work properly if it is left to its own devices with minimal outside intervention. It is based on the ideas of self-interest, free and fair competition, freedom of choice, and private property. Faith resides in the belief of equilibrium, that market forces will create conditions for equilibrium; the point at which the supply and demand regulate price. If the market is operating effectively, it should lead to maximum social welfare (Waters, 1998).

Capitalism and free market share many of the same ideas, but the most important is the framework providing, values, norms and truth-claims. The free market is more of a belief system with powerful moral implications. The market impacts society well beyond exchanges of goods and services. It is more than a system

to organize economic activity; it establishes identity of the individual and society. Capitalism and the free market are not just laws and structures; they are sets of values and truth-claims that many members of society, social institutions, and political institutions internalize. If society did not adhere to or live by the values of the free market, it would not prevail. The system is more than a science; it's a way of life (Nelson, 2006). Faith lies within the belief of an equilibrium, when the producer and consumer mutually benefit from an exchange. Faith is also in the belief that the market is the most effective distributor of welfare. It is a natural 'self-regulating' system that appears to exist whether or not society acknowledges it, but it doesn't. It is socially constructed and maintained.

### **Empire: Blind Faith**

Why and how does this unquestioned faith prevail? While faith questions are more theoretical and deal with individual's consciousness, the impacts of faith in the economy are very real and concrete. In 1983 the top 10 percent of households held 68.2 percent of the wealth, and the bottom 60 percent held 6.1 percent. In 2001 the top 10 percent held 71.5 percent of the wealth and the bottom 60 percent held only 4.2 percent (The Stanford Center for the Study of Poverty and Inequality 2011). Moreover, the trends in salaries are alarming. "During the previous decade, CEO salaries, when adjusted for inflation, have risen by 45 percent, and workers pay only 7 percent; the minimum wage has gone down 7 percent in real terms in the same timeframe (Rieger, 2009; 9)." These statistics and relentless faith in the system cannot be explained by the basic economic powers of supply and demand alone. The numbers are truly concerning, because more complex issues and forces undergird these than just income inequality. In the current system, capital is equated with power and influence, so these gaps are the increased concentration of power on the top. Inequality statistics show that the top is gaining power by taking it from those at the bottom. If the truth-claims and values of the system are not actually present, what are you supporting? What powers are at work?

Theologian M. Douglas Meeks defined the free market economy as, "the social relationships of power that exist in the human attempts to gain livelihood for the community and its members (Meeks, 1989; 1)." The problem is the power structure. For an increasing number of Americans downturn is not a phase in the economic cycle, but a persistent reality. The financial crisis was a kind of wake up call to the permanent injustices of the current economic order. As these injustices grow so too does the commodification of every aspect of life. Almost everything in our society is viewed in terms of profitability, from the environment to the people.

The great divide lies between those who own and control the means of production, and have large sums of capital, versus those who labor for a living. When one cannot accumulate enough capital they themselves become commodities (Rieger, 2009). All commodities are given a value dictated by the consumer, or in the case of empire, the elite. Immediately, hierarchies are established. People have started to question the system, because these injustices are not limited to economic downturn. They are a daily reality.

In economic terms, class is associated with income level and social status. However, in the current situation, class is determined by power and influence, and income and social status are results of one's power. Many factors determine income, such as a job or career, and our career significantly impacts our identity. In terms of power, not income, most Americans are categorized as 'working class,' "62 percent of Americans belong to the working class in this scenario; 32 percent are middle class; and only 2 percent belong to the ruling class (Rieger, 2009; 35)." The ruling class is defined as those who control the means of production and command capital. In this respect many workers seem very similar. The real differences depend on the authority you have over yourself and others in your job. Those who do not control the means of production are almost forced into selling their labor. The majority is controlled by 2 percent of society. In short, the ruling class is made up of those who received significantly more benefits from the current order. However, for a significant time, many people were made to believe they were benefiting from the system with the use of 'financial innovations,' the tide was rising. However, this was all a façade of empire. They simply needed to increase consumption to stimulate economic growth, because they benefit from the growth.

Anything can be commoditized in a free market system: land, labor, and capital; thus everything and everyone are subject to those with power. Society is subject to the laws of the free market, because, by definition, the free market is the producer and distributor of all goods. Moreover, it influences many governmental policies, and even the church. The current economy impacts every aspect of life in today's society. If I could reiterate, the economy has become the religion of society. The free market is made out to be the only viable and just economic order. People are deluded to believe the rising tide will lift all boats (Meeks, 1989). Top down economics, or the trickle down effect, is promoted as the exclusive form of economics, and the majority of society believes in these claims with blind faith (Rieger, 2009). Thus, the market is not simply a tool for wealth accumulation, but social power and control, and the majority are led to believe it will work for them. Society believes the market can and will support their beings, give access

to livelihood thus producing fulfillment. In actuality, the economy is a human construction, and subject to change. The 'powers of supply and demand' do not work equally for all. On the contrary we will uncover a hierarchical system of oppression controlled by empire.

### **Imperial Market Mentality**

The actual application of economics and religion must be understood and evaluated based upon power and power relationships. What holds power, how it is distributed, how is it implemented, and what are the effects of power on society? Power in the market has physical and mental control. The most destructive form of power is empire. Empire is "massive concentrations of power which permeate all aspects of life, and cannot be controlled by any one actor alone (Rieger, 2009; 19)." Currently, empire is rooted in economics and is controlled by those with power and privilege. They manipulate the consciousness of society to support the current economic situation they are benefiting from. They do so by eliminating any alternative. Imperialism is more than control of money and power; it also shapes the consciousness of all. Empire shapes every aspect of who we are; it creates a reality. The current empire's domination is almost subconscious. Most people do not recognize the control of empire, because it is so deeply embedded in our consciousness we believe the values, beliefs, and desires that empire has instilled in us are our own self-interest. These beliefs, desires, and values penetrate and are internalized by social and political institutions as well, so they too subconsciously endorse empire, under the cover of Smith's ideals. This phenomenon is what Walter Brueggemann calls enculturation. Brueggemann would say that society has been enculturated by consumerism. The church is no exception. Empire operates under the ruse of individualism and self-interest. Society is organized according to empire, but we are made to believe we determined our place in society. The American Dream prevails, however fewer and fewer people achieve it. Empire is a mindset, and the dominant system that organizes society. Empire drives the dominant consciousness and works to legitimate the free market.

I am not implying that every event in American history has been oppressive or bad. On the contrary, America has had many unique and inspiring events and upheld admirable ideals. However, I do believe empire does not and cannot deliver social justice or freedom, and America has embraced that empire. Empire empowers a few while oppressing many, and eliminates any means of critique. American's suffer from the effects of empire.

Empire created a market mentality. Market mentality is the notion of liberty

and justice for all via the political economy. The American Dream is a powerful tool for empire. It is used in political campaigns, and a core economic belief of the free market. Those who work hard can change their status, the idea that class is fluid in America. It creates a 'winner' mentality. The current situation may not be ideal, but they will always have hope for the future with the American Dream. They can become a winner, but it is actually blind faith created by the market mentality. The market mentality instills subconscious submission to the desires of the empire, because in reality there is no freedom in empire. Under the façade of 'liberty and justice for all' empire can make all the decisions, while people adhere with the reciprocation of blind faith. Blind faith "...is that which people blindly accept, in terms of the big ideas that do not need to be-and should not be- questioned (Rieger)." Blind faith eliminates alternatives, leading to the acceptance of problems as part of the system. Meaning, shortcomings, social problems are part of life, not the results of a problematic system. The free market appears to be the only option; no alternatives exist (Mo Sung 2007).

The economy has a romanticized past. Empire manipulates the past to glorify the free market. It covers any imperfections or disappointments in the system. Moreover, a romanticized past determines how society understands the future. The political economy draws upon the romanticized past of the free market in attempts to instill the drive and desire to recreate that idealized past in the future. It is a method of perpetuating the current system. If the free market was understood and believed to be ideal, society would work to bring that system back, or perpetuate the system if it feels it is currently reflecting that past (Taylor, 2005). Empire naturalized this romanticized history, their values, and structures, stripping all other history prior to the current order (Pui-Lan, 2007). Society must believe it wants this system, because it has and always will be the most advantageous. During downtime they must believe the rising tide is on its way in.

The free market only works for those with capital and the means of production, thus they manipulate the system. To be an active participant and beneficiary of the system one needs capital, this creates a beneficial cycle for the elite, those with power of capital. They will always hold the power to dictate the market. The system claims to produce wellbeing through participation in the system, yet not all have equal access to livelihood. The poor have the most need to participate, but cannot enter the system. The structures of empire create a cycle of oppression. Empire is oppressive, and must maintain oppression to thrive.

Empire thrives under the illusions of freedom and opportunity, both of which are assumed to arise from self-interest. Society must believe individuals are re-

sponsible for their place in the system; it is no fault of the market. That is why the imperial system enforces the idea of self-interest. Fulfillment of self-interested will, theoretically, set the market at equilibrium. In essence, self-interest equates common good. 'Self-interest' is actually subconscious promotion of the interests of empire, which maintains hierarchies. But, that is precisely the perverse genius of empire that all the decisions have already been made (Keesmaat and Walsh, 2005). The market can only work for those in power, those with capital. We believe to act on self-interest, but self-interest does not truly stem from the individual. Our community, society, and the institutions therein, influence us.

Not only is capital required for market participation and power, but it also applies to governmental participation and influence. Lawmakers are elected by the people for the people and work to implement laws that support the district or state they represent. However, members of the House and Senate have another job, fundraising. The elected officials need capital for re-election, and the candidate with the most money usually wins. "In the House, the candidate with more money wins in 9 out of 10 races, according to the Center for Responsive Politics, a nonpartisan group that tracks money in politics. In the Senate, it's 8 out of 10 (Blumberg, 2012)." Therefore, the representatives dedicate a significant portion of their time to fundraising, and not working to better their state. It also allows wealthy individuals and corporations to have a greater voice in government than those with less money, because they can choose to back candidates who will best support their wants and needs. Money is a top priority for elected officials, "It's not uncommon for congressmen to average three or four hours moonlighting as telemarketers. One lawmaker told me (Democratic Sen. Dick Durbin.) if it was the end of the quarter and he really needed to make his numbers, he'd be there all day long (Blumberg, 2012)." Not everyone's voice has equal power. Moreover, they must always be mindful of the wants and needs of their donors and not their state in general. What is most concerning is the time dedicated to fundraising. How much good can the representative do or impact can they have if the majority of their time isn't dedicated to making laws?

## **Metaphors**

Not only do we construct the world we live in, but also we forget we've done so. Language as an oppressive and legitimating force was discussed, but it also plays an essential role in the liberation process. Theologian Sallie McFague articulates the power of language and metaphors, specifically in light of theology. Like Berger, McFague recognized language as a construction and its ability and neces-

sity to change. McFague focuses on the power of names, “Names matter because what we call something, how we name it, is to a great extent what it is to us. We are the preeminent creatures of language, and though language does not exhaust human reality, it qualifies it in profound ways (1987, 3).” Names influence how we understand something; therefore, names can be positive or negative. Either way, they can be radically transformative (McFague, 1987). No image or metaphor is neutral as they are typically intertwined with a sociopolitical structure.

In terms of theology, language is a tool to expand our understanding of God, which in turn expands our understanding of society. McFague remarks, “theology is mostly fiction but a multiplicity of images, or metaphors, can and should enhance and enrich our models of God (McFague, 1987; xi).” The way we understand God and society is a social construction, and must be understood as subject to change; therefore the language used to understand God must change. God, the divine, can never be fully understood, and therefore, God can never be defined. That is precisely why metaphors are the best way to talk about God. “A metaphor is a word or phrase used inappropriately (McFague, 1987; 33).” A metaphor is a tool to understand something unfamiliar in terms of the familiar. We are not trying to define God, just associate different characteristics than are currently used to enforce the oppressive system. All metaphors are inappropriate and inadequate for God, because the divine cannot be defined or fully understood. No word or phrase can refer directly to God. In summary, we must unmask these absolutist notions of truths traditional metaphors make about God. The metaphors employed by the political economy.

The traditional metaphors have remained relatively unchanged: Lord, King, or Father. Because they have remained unchanged for so long, many understand them as definitions rather than metaphors. The problem with these metaphors is that God as King or lord conjure notions of obedience, dependence, submission, and oppression. They separate us from God. God is perceived as the king over or above us, and earth is part of God’s kingdom. God’s commands cannot be refuted. In short, God does not need us, and is uninvolved in the world. These metaphors legitimate the oppressive hierarchical system; therefore these metaphors cannot establish social justice.

Meeks works to establish metaphors for God the economist. He strives to do so because associating God with the economy will allow us to see, more clearly, aspects of God that have been suppressed, not known, or forgotten. Calling God economist will also allow for us to renew a vision of God particular to our time and place in history. If we use household to describe the economy God, the

economist is responsible for the cosmic household. In the past, economist was a servant or a steward; it was a lowly term. That is why God as householder resonates better (Meeks, 1989). Householders, in the ancient world, were free persons, thus they had political influence. Today, economist is connected with power and influence gained through property accumulation. So God as “property-owner and householder,” are appropriate (Meeks, 1989).

God as householder, who impacts and influences the entire household, is the distributor of righteousness. A God of righteousness is the one who steadfastly loves the earth and all of humanity with justice and compassion (Hanson, 2001). It is also seen as “God’s power for life.” God’s righteousness also reveals his power to create and liberate. God as householder allows us to see God as involved in the human drama, not just some divine being in the heavens.

“Each generation must venture, through an analysis of what fulfillment could and must mean for its own time, the best way to express that claim. A critical dimension of this expression is the imaginative picture, the metaphors and models, that underlie the conceptual systems of theology (McFague, 1987; xi).” We need first to articulate what goal we are working to achieve. Then, we must ask, what is the relationship between God and the world (McFague, 1987)? What understanding can see God in this situation? Today, we are not looking to God to control human beings; those metaphors are harmful and oppressive. If we believe religion to be fulfilling and liberating traditional metaphors are not appropriate. God as healer, friend, creator, or liberator is more appropriate, so God can work to heal and unite humanity. These metaphors establish a relationship between God and humanity, God as working for social justice, not power over the nation (McFague, 1987). These metaphors call us to help God heal humanity and the broken relationships. They call us to work for social justice. We must understand ourselves as intrinsically interdependent with all of society which is opposite of what our individualistic consumer culture preaches. This understanding will abolish hierarchies. New metaphors can provide an enriched understanding to new ways of conceiving God in light of the present challenges; it can spark new imagination. These metaphors are more adequate for ethical problems, predominantly the task of employing social justice.

### **Bottom-up Economics and Poverty**

The opposition to the system must be acted out in a strategic manner. The inequality that the system creates is stabilizing, and instability results in social tension, the results of which we’re seeing today. America seems to have fallen into

extremes. People are desperately calling upon free market, because they fear a loss of identity and understanding. They fear anomy. Will they be excluded from a new system? Will an alternative uproot everything they know? If people rebel or respond to the inequality and instability in violent or unorganized ways, it inversely justifies the system, because it makes the current order out to be the stabilizing force removing the destabilizing rebellious acts. While it is the *current* order that breeds instability it would appear as though the opposition will bring instability. (Taylor, 2005). Poverty and marginalization provide the location and justification to begin peaceful and organized transformation. I emphasize the word begin, because poverty and oppression are major problems but not the only problems.

While a complete overhaul of the political economy is what this research seems to suggest, this is not the case. We live in this world and society, and know that a total change is naïve, ideal but naïve. We must work with the given structures while always working toward an ideal. We must stress policies that “integrate macroeconomic policy and social policy, but the mainstream approach is one of adding on social policy (Cagatay et al. 2000; 1347).” Although people acknowledge the need for social policies, people still understand that to mean, “...continuing to design what are termed ‘sound’ macroeconomic policies with a focus on market-based criteria (Cagatay et al. 2000; 1347),” which are aimed at achieving the macroeconomic goal of price stability and deregulation. Once those policies are implemented and their goals achieved, social policies are generated to ‘fill in the gaps.’ Social policies are implemented to achieve outcomes such as poverty reduction, or any other social problems not fixed, or even problems created by sound policies. The ‘soundness’ of macroeconomic policies should not be evaluated based on economic criteria, but on its ability to achieve social justice. Again, if the goal of free market economics is to provide a better life through profit maximization then its success should not be measured in terms of profit, but the desired social outcome. Are people profiting? When people profit, does that raise their standard of living?

“Overcoming poverty requires helping the poor but also changing deeply rooted, ‘permissive’ culture within government social programs and replacing it with work requirements and efforts to encourage other standards of good behavior (Bane and Mead, 2003).” What must change is the culture of poverty, the mentality of society and the oppressive institutions. Poverty is more than an issue of low income; it is also the problem of being outcaste by society. Under the current economic system, being poor suggests you’ve done something wrong or are simply not good enough. What Mead calls “deservingness”, meaning, people deserve to

be poor, because of something they did, or failed to do. The poor are not simply lacking material goods; they are marginalized from society, which impacts their psyche. The poor are understood to be poor because they violated social norms, it's 'their fault. For whatever reason, not 'taking advantage of opportunities' they supposedly have or more, is why they are poor. In reality it is the system that excluded them and continues to exclude. There is a mentality around poverty that must change (Bane et al. 2003). The poor deserve to be a part of the community. Inclusion can break the mentality of poverty.

Increasing income is vital, however, it is not the only issue in resolving or defining poverty. This notion can be supported through statistics in reports like the Human Development report. While income is not the best definition for poverty, work and income are still essential in overcoming poverty. Work is important for more than an increase in income, but the increase in participation in the community: socially, economically and politically (Bane et al. 2003). Economist's Wray and Forstater justify the right to work as a fundamental prerequisite for social justice in any society in which income from work is an important determinant of access to resources (Wray, 2009). The church can find similar justification in Jesus' ministry, "restoring outcasts to full membership in the community, which includes taking responsibility for self and others (Bane et al. 2003; 113)." Bane and Mead emphasize the importance of community's responsibility to the poor and marginalized not as givers of charity, but sociopolitical activists. The community must work to bring these members of society back into the system that has pushed them out. This can only be achieved through transformation of the system, and the consciousness it upholds.

Bottom-up economics starts by fulfilling the basic needs of the poor. If the needs of the poor are met then everyone's needs can be met (Duchrow et al. 2004). This idea of siding with the poor, oppressed and marginalized is a persistent theme throughout the Bible. It is not about charity, but inclusion. A bottom-up system that encompasses the surplus population is just, and "justice and life are the basic perspectives and the golden thread of biblical traditions (Duchrow et al. 2004; 157)." Bottom-up economics creates an inclusive system that dismantles the oppressive nature of the current order. Bottom-up economics provides all members with equal access to livelihood, by providing them with the opportunity to participate in the system. The poor are outcasts and marginalized, so by bringing them into the workforce they can become closer to their community and greater society (Bane et al. 2003).

Today, the Church must call upon its sociopolitical roots and cross the line

of church and state. Not that the church should argue that all of society adhere to the beliefs and traditions of their religion, but the focus on humanity. The issue is not simply poverty, but social injustices that keep people impoverished. It is the structures and policies of the political economy that must be changed. The Church needs to act against the state's injustices, and therefore the structures of the system it works in. Human rights must be the focus of the system. "Treated as an end, human rights must be made the object of rational action (Duchrow et al. 2004; 70)." Human rights challenge the means of achieving profit maximization. Human beings should not be objects, commodities, of the economic system. "... All economic structures, institutions and actions must be reconstructed according to the logic of the survival of all (Duchrow et al. 2004; 159)." Social structures like the government must focus on those that are inherently marginalized, and getting them into the system. Therefore, religion must focus on uncovering social injustices in the system and work to make the system more just by transforming social and political institutions. Religion must always be in contention with the dominant consciousness, and always on the side of the oppressed and marginalized.

Duchrow and Hinkelammert suggest the "reorganization of ownership (2004, 156)," as a challenge to traditional views of private property. They are not suggesting a socialist or communist like state. "There can be no law governing private property, nor can state ownership of the means of production be the only alternative (Duchrow et al. 2004; 161)." Reorganization is based in changing the power structures of the system, not taking from the rich and giving to the poor. Charity is good, but not transformative. Reorganization is based on bottom-up economics. Duchrow and Hinkelammert stress the importance of local economies and have the greatest problem with transnational corporations.

Bane furthers this argument by saying, poverty is, "the deprivation of the societal structures and personal opportunities to live out God's plan (Bane et al. 2003; 121)." We must focus on the poor as working age people who are not working. These people are not working because of cultural obstacles, not because of lack of opportunity. Poverty is lack of freedom, or ability to fully participate in the system (Bane et al. 2003). That is why social programs should have a focus on work, and also on fuller participation within society as a whole. To fully participate, everyone should have the right to, "basic sustenance, health care and education (Bane et al. 2003; 114)," whether or not they meet government program requirements. Therefore, Bane believes we cannot talk about solutions to poverty without addressing the institutional structures, as it is institutional structures and policies that restrict participation.

We must emphasize programs that help people overcome societal barriers and bring them back into the community, which leads to the importance of work. "Work is both essential to human flourishing and tightly related to material and other aspects of well-being (Bane et al. 2003; 35)." There are programs that have shifted toward helping working poor families and their children. However, this shift has taken away from the non-working poor, who are truly outcasts and oppressed. This gap is astronomically higher among blacks, Hispanics and other racial groups. Stereotypes have perpetually plagued these races and have intensified the gap between races, the inequality gap, and they have also kept certain races oppressed from perpetuating them within races (Bane et al. 2003; 30).

"...The market does not necessarily create jobs for everyone, so public intervention is appropriate and necessary to limit joblessness as much as possible (Bane et al. 2003; 37)..." While economic programs are being created to help the poor and disadvantaged, they all fall short, because, "... few of the poor in the United States have the necessary skills to enter our very competitive business climate (Bane et al. 2003; 39)..." Being outside the labor market is highly stigmatizing. Furthermore, participating in the labor market is simply not an option for some poor, because of health conditions, and other chronic disabilities. In conclusion, work is a key part in overcoming poverty, but social obstacles must be dealt with first.

Change is not a one-way street. A reciprocal relationship between society and the poor must be established. In other terms, "Jesus responds to the poor but also expects good behavior from them, and government should do the same. The ideal is to create a community in which both rich and poor contribute (Bane et al. 2003; 8)." I believe that is the true meaning of community, not just the rich giving to the poor, but also the poor responding to changes in the system to contribute to society. Moreover, the poor need to work alongside the government, it is a two way street to fix or alleviate the problem. "Programs that help people without expecting anything of them ratify that culture and so become part of the problem (Bane et al. 2003; 121)." Like Cone asserts, people must work toward liberation and salvation. It is an action, not a complacent prayer or worship. He labels this call to action paternalism, which strives to build a more productive society through giving people tools, care and attention to succeed rather than just giving them money.

Again, this reciprocal relationship will only be established if there is a change in mentality. The poor and oppressed must realize they do not deserve to be social outcasts. Change should occur within the culture that accepts these failures. Political, social and economic institutions are closely linked, and all shape one another's norms and practices (Blank and McGurn 2004). The market reflects social

norms, because the market is a social creation. Mentality must change, then the structures we create can change as society and the institutions we create engage in a dualistic relationship shaping one another.

“Market outcomes should be used to assist the disadvantaged...The market should not only be judged by the wealth they create for individuals, but also by the opportunities that they create for the larger community (Blank et al. 2004 95)” to prosper. Inclusion in the system is essential for change as all humans desire community and stability. Therefore work is imperative, because work implies inclusion. “Insufficient employment, in turn, is the great evil of capitalism, which generates jobs only to make a profit and not to employ the entire labor force (Bane et al. 2003; 63).” Furthermore, when employed, wages must reflect what people need to live or support families. As a complete system transformation is essentially impossible based upon our current mentality, the government and social institutions must intervene with the market failures. Transformation can begin with sociopolitical structures.

### **ELR Implementation**

The neoclassical economic self-regulating system has not succeeded in eliminating instability, nor have free market deregulation policies. A full employment program could increase wellbeing, productivity, and stability. The government would create a limitlessly elastic demand for workers, and employ them based on the needs of local communities (Kaboub 2007b). Work would complement the private sector, not compete with it, making the economy and society more productive. When employment is certain, businesses and households’ future expectations will be more stable. Households know they will not suffer from unemployment and they will always have income. If income is guaranteed so is consumption, which will stabilize future expected demand for producers. “Thus, ELR will stabilize economic activity at full employment (Todorova, 2009; 6).” People will also be living more meaningful productive lives, because unemployment not only denies adequate access to livelihood, it also has strong negative impact on self-esteem and overall wellbeing.

The government would guarantee employment, hiring all who are ready, willing, and able to work, regardless of skill level. Workers would be taken “as they are” and offered job training when needed (Todorova, 2009; 5). There would be no barriers to entry. It would create jobs that are not fulfilled by the private sector, because they are seen as unprofitable. However, these jobs will be socially beneficial, physical community repair, after school programs, and other work that is

traditionally considered volunteer work. Jobs will vary based on the public need of specific areas and the employee's skill set (Fernandez et al. 2010). Participation is always an option.

Everyone would earn a set, livable, basic wage. This would set a price floor for the private sector, which will lead to increased price stability (Kaboub 2007b). Another major criticism of the program is inflation. Economists fear the increase in wage rate would cause inflation. However, it would be a onetime increase for the entire economy, thus it would balance out over time. More importantly, the increase in wages and guaranteed employment would spark a consistent increase in consumption, and thus an increase in production. Therefore, the program would not be inflationary.

The uniform basic wage would also ensure minimal competition with the private sector, because the private sector could always attract workers of the ELR program by paying a wage slightly above the basic ELR wage, or offer better benefits than the ELR program. Workers with the most advanced and desirable skill sets would most likely be hired away first, giving the private sector an advantage, as the uniform wage paid in the ELR program would be less than the average private sector wage for the skill set (Wray, 2009). Furthermore, the ELR program preserves and increases skill level and work ethics that would ordinarily be lost during unemployment. The private sector will have a better pool of employees to choose from, and the employee will have more options available to him.

Moreover, the size of the program would fluctuate depending on the demands of the private sector. When the private sector demands more labor they will buy laborers from the ELR program with some form of increased incentive, whether it's increased pay, benefits, or more. In essence, during economic prosperity the ELR program will provide workers for the private sector, and during economic hardship the program would absorb the excess workers (Todorova, 2001). This guaranteed income during economic recession would help stimulate the economy, because government spending would increase in the form of ELR wages. The increase in government spending and guaranteed income will increase consumption, stimulating the private sector. Therefore, the fluctuation in the size of the program will also help stabilize the economy (Wray, 2003).

Finally, the ELR program would improve working conditions in the private sector because employees would always have the option of returning to the ELR program. Racial, gender, sexual, and other forms of discrimination may also be reduced, because, again, unfairly treated workers always have the ELR option (Wray, 2009). A price floor and decent benefits-package will also increase ones chance

for upward mobility, but there is still the social stigmas that must be overcome. ELR by itself cannot end discrimination.

A major concern among policy makers is the cost of the program, because people fear major government deficits. However, unemployment costs more than implementation of the ELR program. Unemployment costs are more than output inefficiency. The effects of unemployment extend beyond the economic sector including increases in crime, dysfunctional relationships, family and friends, and physical and psychological health problems (Wray, 2009). The ELR program would reduce government spending on assistance programs like welfare. It is also far lower a cost than the massive bailouts the government spent after the latest financial crisis (Fernandez et al 2010).

The program is financially feasible. Sweden employs a program that is considered a variation of the ELR program. "Sweden has long maintained that because it is a small nation, it cannot afford unemployment—it needs to have all of its adult population contributing to production in order to be able to maintain high living standards (Wray 2009)." At the time of the program's creation, Minsky estimated the program's cost around 1.25 percent of GDP (Minsky 1965). More recent estimates "by Harvey and Wray put net spending by the government on a universal ELR program at well under 1 percent of GDP for the United States; Argentina's Jefes program peaked with gross spending at 1 percent of GDP (Wray, 2009)." Moreover, a study on Tunisia concludes that the increased consumption by the ELR employees would increase GDP by more than it cost to execute the program (Kaboub, 2007b). In essence, the program could pay for itself while increasing stability.

## Conclusion

Inequality is prevalent and expanding, but we have the ability to reverse the trend. The current free market is not the only option to operate efficiently, economically, and socially, in this day and age. On the contrary, it appears to be holding America back. The permanence of the current economic system is dictated by society, and our compliance with the system. The market religion must be realized, so an alternative can materialize and take root.

Who and what do you worship? The awareness of empire is critical to understand reality. Who is controlling your reality? Nothing should be accepted with blind faith, everything, including religion, must be questioned because anything and everyone can fall victim to manipulation. Whether it is manipulation of consciousness or religious message. The prophetic spirit provides everyone with the

framework to recognize injustice, reclaim hope, and work for a more socially just and effective system for the current climate.

Jesus called us to help those in need. This must be achieved through sustenance, community and autonomy (Bane et al. 2003). Sustenance is to give people the means to sustain their lives. The capabilities of those in need must be addressed in addition to increasing their income. They must also acquire responsibility, because Jesus "does not want his followers to be passive recipients of his bounty, but active participants in their own salvation (Bane et al. 73)." A radically inclusive community must also be stressed, because poverty is more than a lack of income. Poverty is exclusion and oppression from community, because of disconnects in dominant social norms. The non-poor must bring the poor back into the community, not through charity or transfers of privileges given out through the present system. Rather, radical inclusion within a transformed system. In the words of Hyman P. Minsky, a system that 'takes them as they are.' Radical inclusion requires a reciprocal relationship between the poor and the non-poor. Everyone must work for a new system. The goal is a new social reality, a new understanding and ordering of society.

Human beings have created the current economic order, thus it necessitates change. The market should always be evaluated and redefined to fulfill the realities of the time. Religion is needed to find the balance between self-interest and other-interest; it provides a framework to evaluate the system through the lens of humanity. The challenge is to live in the current order, but not be wholly possessed by the market mentality. "Those who hope in Christ can no longer put up with reality as it is, but begin to suffer under it, to contradict it. Peace with God means conflict with the world, for the goad of the promised future stabs inexorably into the flesh of every unfulfilled present (Moltmann, 1993; 22)." Religion reminds us of our social constructions: the unnaturalness of human injustice, and the importance of human life. We can never be satisfied with the current order that upholds oppression and exclusion. We are called to embrace and spread the prophetic spirit. "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful (John 15:1-2)." We can survive alone, but we thrive together.

*References provided in the M.S.*