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— A Guide for Study and Discussion —

CREATING COMMON GOOD

Theological Perspectives on Economic
Inequality and Human Flourishing

including addresses and papers from
Trinity Institute® 44th National Theological Conference
The Parish of Trinity Church Wall Street, New York
The Reverend Dr. William Lupfer, Rector
The Reverend Phillip A. Jackson, Vicar



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DOES INEQUALITY REALLY MATTER?

JUSTIN WELBY

Summary

The Archbishop of Canterbury reminds us that although personal wealth can justifiably be seen as a sign of God's blessing, widespread social inequality is politically unsustainable, biblically unsupportable, and theologically bankrupt.

Questions for Discussion

1. In his address Archbishop Welby notes that "there is a biblical injunction against the systematic and indefinite accumulation of grossly unequal societies. It always leads to abuse, even if every wealthy person is generous, because the asymmetries of power mean that wealth allocation becomes a matter of paternalism, not a basic issue of justice" (p. 12). Do you agree with this statement? How would you characterize the Bible's stance on inequality and injustice?
2. In his reference to the equality inherent in the Adam and Eve story, Archbishop Welby observes that "hierarchy is deeply embedded" in human existence (p. 8). In the Anglican tradition, the liturgies for ordination in *The Book of Common Prayer* admonish the newly ordained to take a special concern for "the poor." How do the hierarchical structures of the church both support or challenge the inequalities of society?
3. How are the resources and wealth of your congregation used to reduce inequality in your community and in the world?

CLASS MATTERS

BARBARA EHRENREICH

Summary

Barbara Ehrenreich believes that most people do not understand the humiliating circumstances which keep people in poverty. The poor are not poor because of bad choices they may have made; they are poor because the system keeps them poor.

Questions for Discussion

1. How aware is your congregation of the causes of poverty in your surrounding community? Is there “hidden” poverty that is not readily evident?
2. Read the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25–37, where Jesus defined a “neighbor” as the one with whom we do not have much in common. A first step in following our Lord, then, is to get to know those who are our neighbors. Who is your “neighbor” in your community or city? Does your church know any of its neighbors?
3. How are the poor viewed in your congregation and community—with compassion or with contempt?

WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT ECONOMIC INEQUALITY?

JULIET B. SCHOR

Summary

Juliet Schor argues that inequality, with few exceptions, is the natural result of traditional capitalist economies, benefiting mostly a few but suffered by most people in the world. What is needed are new and innovative market approaches that are based on cooperation rather than competition.

Questions for Discussion

1. Professor Schor maintains that “the structures and institutions that dominated in the nineteenth century—private property, the motivation of financial interest—are no longer those that yield efficient and socially beneficial outcomes” (p. 30). Do you agree? What evidence could support your view?
2. Does Christianity favor one economic system over another? How does the Bible view the proper role of faith—if any—in determining our common economic life?
3. Can your congregation play a role in initiating or nurturing any of the innovative efforts that the author names as fair and sustainable in this article?

IS PLUTOCRACY SINFUL?

WILLIS JENKINS

Summary

Willis Jenkins contends that publicly assigning the theological category of “sin” to the reality of vast disparities in wealth may be less productive for actually ameliorating that condition than engaging in concrete acts of resistance against that supposedly “natural” economic order. Practicing an alternative economic regime, even in small and local ways, can expose the true sinfulness of plutocracy and the slate of nested inequalities to which it leads more directly, compellingly, and effectively than belief-based arguments have demonstrated an ability to do.

Questions for Discussion

1. Professor Jenkins is careful to point out that sin-language can be applied helpfully to plutocracy, but most likely only under specific circumstances and for specific people. What are those circumstances and who are those people? How does this relate to the overall “tactic” of his position?
2. How does the author understand the relationship between beliefs and practices? Why does he think that addressing inequality at the level of belief may be less effective than resisting it as a concrete practice? How do you assess this perspective?
3. On page 43, Jenkins discusses a set of economic practices that he judges to be good practices but that he thinks are not sufficient as a Christian economic ethic on their own. What is the basis of his concern? How does it emerge from his view of economic systems and practices as spiritualities? What is your evaluation of this caution?

THE SPIRIT AND THE SUBPRIME:
RACE, RISK, AND OUR COMMON DISPOSSESSION

AMARYAH JONES-ARMSTRONG

Summary

Following Willie James Jennings's influential account of how a particular imagination of Christianity gave rise to American ideas of race, this essay employs Sarah Coakley's method of *théologie totale* to carry out a critical and contemplative "pneumatological dispossession," exposing and dismantling Christian complicity in creating a view of the common good from which many black Americans are largely barred, explicitly or functionally. Amaryah Jones-Armstrong then suggests practical actions that Christian communities might take to enact a revised theological imagination, one with a larger notion of the common good and a reconceived view of who properly has access to it.

Questions for Discussion

1. How does Amaryah Jones-Armstrong connect Jennings's perspective on the theological underpinnings of American constructions of race to the socio-political (including financial) realities of the black Americans she refers to as "the subprime"?
2. Why does Jones-Armstrong put Jennings's perspective into conversation with Coakley's method? What do these two theologians each provide that, taken together, advance her project?
3. The author quotes from Sarah Coakley: "The very act of contemplation—repeated, lived, embodied, suffered—is an act that, by grace, and over time, inculcates mental patterns of 'unmastery'" (p. 63). What do you think Coakley means by this? What role does it play in Jones-Armstrong's overall argument? In addition to those drawn out by Jones-Armstrong herself, what ecclesial implications might employing Coakley's method have for reconceiving the common good and practically manifesting that reconception?

SOTERIOLOGY, DEBT, AND FAITHFUL WITNESS:
FOUR THESES FOR A POLITICAL THEOLOGY
OF ECONOMIC DEMOCRACY

LUKE BRETHERTON

Summary

By way of articulating and defending four interrelated theses, Luke Bretherton offers a theopolitical framework for questioning both neoliberalism and democratic socialism as our only options for our politics and economics. His framework is based in part on a theological understanding of salvation as God's liberation of humanity and all of creation from "debt slavery," in an expansive sense. Churches have a crucial role to play in this, as a site where corporate modes of enacting the biblical value of *koinonia* (fellowship) are able to contribute to the creation of a truly democratic and life-giving *oikonomia* (economy) that is consistent with the divine desire for the flourishing of the whole world.

Questions for Discussion

1. The support that Professor Bretherton offers for each of his four theses relies, to varying extents, upon his conviction that "talk of God will always have a complex relationship of resonance, resistance, and reconfiguration with talk of economics" (p. 76). How does his essay support this position? How do you evaluate it theologically?
2. What does the author mean by "debt slavery"? How and why does he address this understanding of "debt" by outlining a theology of salvation?
3. In what sense does Professor Bretherton think that how we shape Christian community and live within it can affect how the common good is perceived, pursued, and procured? Are there specific actions your church or community has taken or could take that might exemplify this idea?

CLOSING THE GAP: A SOCIAL IMAGINARY FOR THE COMMON GOOD

SCOTT BADER-SAYE

Summary

Scott Bader-Saye presents philosopher Charles Taylor's idea of the social imaginary to argue that the way in which we currently view, relate to, and use money is embedded in certain narratives, policies, and practices that, far from being inevitable, can and must be questioned and either modified or replaced. This effort is especially crucial, he claims, for communities of faith, because their robust resources for thinking in holistic terms about the common good position them well to offer workable alternatives for reducing our record-high levels of global inequality.

Questions for Discussion

1. According to Professor Bader-Saye, what is the difference between *homo economicus* and the vision of the human person offered by the Christian theological tradition? How would you question, nuance, or further elaborate this distinction?
2. How does the author think that our current social imaginary has lost sight of limits? What has been the cost of this? What theological resources does he bring to bear as a corrective? Can you offer additional examples of how limits are often disregarded, assessing their costs and suggesting theological and concrete responses?
3. Values (of all sorts) and how things are valued (economically and theologically) play a central role in Professor Bader-Saye's essay. How does this theme relate to his overall effort? Are there additional values or methods of valuation that you would add? How would you connect them to the revision of our social imaginary?

THE STRUGGLE FOR HUMAN DIGNITY IN A CONSUMER-ORIENTED CULTURE

BEVERLY EILEEN MITCHELL

Summary

In our work to reduce the negative effects of inequality, Beverly Mitchell contends, we must avoid reproducing the same conditions that have given rise to inequality in the first place. We must safeguard the inherent value of human lives, the devaluing of which has been at the root of economic disparity, by honestly addressing our own biases against the economically disadvantaged. This process involves understanding more precisely exactly *who* is disadvantaged and in what way(s), and including members of those groups in our efforts to address the underlying conditions.

Questions for Discussion

1. What does Professor Mitchell mean by “defacement”? How does it occur on various levels? On what grounds is it problematic theologically? How do you evaluate this aspect of her article?
2. Professor Mitchell writes: “The theological is deeply political. Human dignity, theologically understood, is political because economic, social, and political policies and practices are enacted which either uphold or deny human dignity” (p. 120). How does she make her case in support of this claim? How would you argue this position? How does your position differ from the author’s? Why?
3. Professor Mitchell focuses the concluding section of her essay on three categories of action that can be taken to honor the humanity of those excluded from material prosperity: “(1) addressing our biases and negative feelings about the materially disadvantaged; (2) clarifying who the materially disadvantaged are; and (3) enlisting the aid of the impoverished in seeking the solutions to economic injustice” (p. 121). In your own communities (academic, ecclesial, social, political, geographical), how have you observed the need for these practices? How have you participated in them? What other concrete actions can be undertaken to help achieve these goals?

THE AGAPE ECONOMY: THE CHURCH'S CALL TO ACTION

JULIO E. MURRAY

Summary

Bishop Julio Murray believes the global market has not benefited the majority of the world's population, but rather has exploited the very people who work to sustain those economies. The Christian gospel demands that the church take action to transform institutions from being instruments of marginalization and oppression to those fostering justice and fairness for all people.

Questions for Discussion

1. How would you respond to someone who says that we should not even try to address global problems when we have so much need in our own country?
2. Bishop Murray describes the indigenous Latin American tradition of *sumac kawsay* (in Quichua) meaning "good living," in contrast to the "living good" philosophy of modern hedonistic lifestyles (p. 128). How might you practice *sumac kawsay* in your own life?
3. In the Baptismal Covenant in *The Book of Common Prayer*, we promise to "strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being" (p. 305). How does our economic system help us or hinder us to live out this baptismal vow?

CO-CREATING COMMON GOOD: DIOCESAN COLLABORATION IN THE MISSION OF GOD

IAN T. DOUGLAS

Summary

In baptism we are invited and “co-missioned” to participate in the mission of God, the *missio Dei*, to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ. We become co-creators with the Triune God in God’s common good.

Questions for Discussion

1. Bishop Douglas speaks of the role of a diocese in addressing economic inequalities, yet most Episcopalians in the United States do not look beyond their local congregations as instruments for mission. How do you view the vocation of your diocese in “creating common good”? How well does your parish support the diocese in these efforts?
2. The author emphasizes that we should not start with asking what *we* can do, but rather what *God* has already done to create common good. Why is this difference so important to keep in mind when we discern how the church should respond to inequality?
3. The Episcopal Church in Connecticut sums up the biblical story of God’s mission in one hundred words on its website and other publications. Does your congregation have its own understanding of mission that can be found in its publications and teachings?