

**“Occupy the Waterfront!”:
Reflections on Theology and Culture in the 21st Century**

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I pluck the second note on the fourth string
Of the Lute of the Black Crane.
The sound surges like a stream broken forth from the ice,
Rushing towards the sea.
Distant raindrops, too, play in concert:
They beat lightly on the lotus leaves.¹

- Chong Ch'ol (1537-1594)

Introduction

Contextual theologians have long recognized that theology cannot be neatly limited to “religious” areas such as worship or doctrine, but, rather, is expressed through all facets of a culture. As Lewis R. Rambo states, “There is a religious dimension to all experience, so religious issues need not be related to those extraordinary experiences of conversion or mysticism.”² Bernard E. Meland writes, “Theology cannot adequately convey the witness of Christian Faith by conceiving of its task solely within the bounds of the institutional church. I have argued further that it cannot do so by undertaking to express it simply in terms of individual experience or judgment . . . what I seek to add to all these, even within the modern period, is the data which comes from the witness of culture within which both church and individual have achieved their historical experience.”³ The “witness of culture,” according to Meland, emerges from the way in which religious themes, such as justice or redemption, are embodied in the culture of a given period – not specifically expressed in terms of church doctrine or individual religious experience, yet shaping and being shaped by

¹ Peter H. Lee, *Poems from Korea: A Historical Anthology* (Honolulu: The University Press of Hawai'i, 1974).

² Lewis R. Rambo, “The Matrix of Meaning: Experience, Symbols, and Religion,” *Encounter* 39 (1978), 23.

³ Bernard E. Meland, *Fallible Forms and Symbols: Discourses on Method in a Theology of Culture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 164.

the general moral and social understandings of the historical moment that contains them. It is important to pay attention to how these understandings play out in our cultures because they tacitly reflect and determine what we can and can't envision, and ultimately what kind of world we live in.

We currently live in a world marked by huge divisions between rich and poor, both within industrialized nations and between industrialized nations and the “developing world.” We also live in a world faced with immense problems of violence, extremism, depletion of resources, and incipient environmental catastrophe. In this interdependent world, political and ideological power still rests with the West, and particularly with the United States. As Eun-kyu Kim observes, “The United States of America, currently, has the world at its feet militarily, politically, economically, and culturally,”⁴ and what happens in the United States has repercussions throughout the world, including South Korea. Thus, some Koreans greeted the recent FTA with America with praise and others greeted it with protests. Economic globalization is often proposed as the answer to all the world's ills, a kind of worldwide redemption, both by pundits and politicians in the United States and by their admirers in other countries. In order for the international community to understand and evaluate the promise offered by the American model of free trade, deregulation, and privatization that lies behind such treaties and policies, it is important to examine how such an ideology has developed over the last thirty years and to look specifically at its economic repercussions in the United States. In this paper, I will attempt to put the last 60 years in America in a theological context by surveying the “witness of culture” in America since the 1950s. More specifically, I will put this in the context of a shift in religious understandings from a theology of

⁴ Eun-kyu Kim, “Was the Proclamation of the Canon a Medicine or a Poison?” *Madang* 13 (June 2010), 84.

social responsibility to a theology of economic individualism, examine the economic and social conditions that are/were concurrent with each understanding, and finally, explore how Asian relational theology can take the lead in resisting and counterbalancing global exploitation and inequality.

On the Waterfront (1954)

One facet of culture that expresses and influences religious understandings is and has been popular entertainment, especially popular films, which are always good weather vanes for where the winds of culture may be blowing. As Margaret R. Miles remarked, “The representation and examination of values and moral commitments does not presently occur most pointedly in churches, synagogues or mosques, but before the eyes of ‘congregations’ in movie theaters.”⁵ One film that revealingly examines and reflects the values and moral commitments of its own historical moment is Elia Kazan’s 1954 classic *On the Waterfront*, which tells the story of a longshoreman’s union that has been taken over by gangsters, and of a dockworker and petty thug, played by Marlon Brando, who at the end of the film finds courage and self-respect by standing up to the gang boss. The petty thug, Terry Malloy, is a washed-up boxer who now does strong-arm errands for the gang boss, played by Lee J. Cobb, in return for small amounts of money and easy assignments on the docks. At the beginning of the film, Terry lures a fellow dockworker – a man who had intended to testify to a Crime Commission against the gang boss – to a rooftop, where other thugs murder him by throwing him off the roof (Terry, who hadn’t known that the dockworker would be murdered, feels uneasy about this, but suppresses his stirrings of conscience). As people crowd around the body of the murdered man, his sister

⁵ Margaret R. Miles, *Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values at the Movies* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 25.

Edie, played by Eva Marie Saint, confronts the priest, played by Karl Malden, who ministers to the rough neighborhood in which the dockworkers live. Edie, distraught and angry, is kneeling by her brother Joey's body, and Father Barry attempts to comfort her.

Father Barry: I'm in the church if you need me.

Edie (contemptuously): You're in the church if I need you? Did you ever hear of a saint hiding in a church? (Shouting) I want to know who killed my brother!

In this first scene, the film establishes a theological foundation: the church should be involved in the world, and the church should be concerned with justice. Father Barry, challenged by Edie's words, grows from a dispenser of conventional piety – "Faith and time are great healers" – to a fighter for social justice who risks allowing the dockworkers' "resistance movement" to meet in his church basement and who later inspires the men with a stirring speech in the hold of the ship where a key member of the anti-gangster dockworkers has just been murdered in a staged "accident."

Father Barry: Some people think the Crucifixion only took place on Calvary. They'd better wise up⁶. Taking Joey Doyle's life to stop him from testifying is a Crucifixion. And dropping a sling⁷ on Kayo Dugan because he was ready to spill his guts⁸ tomorrow – that's a Crucifixion. And every time the mob puts pressure on a good man – tries to stop him from doing his duty as a citizen – it's a Crucifixion. And anybody who sits around and lets it happen – keeps silent about something he knows has happened – shares the guilt of it just as much as the Roman soldier who pierced the flesh of our Lord.

A gangster: Go back to your church, Father!

Father Barry (looking defiantly around the hold as he stands beside Dugan's crushed body): Boys, *this* is my church!

In this scene, Father Barry embraces and articulates Edie Doyle's theology of an involved and activist church, a church that comes out from behind its holy walls to work for justice and the welfare of ordinary people. More than that, he articulates an

⁶ "They'd better wise up" – they'd better realize the truth and accept it.

⁷ A sling is a suspended platform onto which the dockworkers load cargo to be lifted out of the ship's hold.

⁸ "To spill his guts" – to tell everything he knows to the Crime Commission.

immanent God who is manifest in the lives of ordinary people, who suffers with us, is even crucified again with us. These theological themes will come to full flower in the 1960s, in the Civil Rights and Anti-War movements in the United States, in Liberation Theology in Latin America and *Minjung* Theology in Korea, and in the hymns of “new wave” hymn writers like Fred Pratt Green⁹ and Brian Wren.¹⁰

A complementary theological thread is woven into the film’s fabric as Terry Malloy begins to fall in love with Edie. Edie, who doesn’t suspect Terry’s involvement in her brother’s murder, also feels attracted to him. They have a drink together, and share their conflicting philosophies – Edie: “Isn’t everybody a part of everybody else?” and Terry: “Do it to him before he does it to you.” Edie asks Terry to help her find her brother’s killers, but Terry says he knows nothing about the murder. Nevertheless, a seed of change has been planted in Terry, and the rest of the film follows Terry’s growth from a selfish thug to a man who finds the courage first to confess to Edie his role in her brother’s death, then to testify against the gang boss to the Crime Commission, and finally, to rally the dockworkers to break the gangsters’ power over their union.

In the film’s climactic scene, Terry returns to the docks after testifying to the Crime Commission. He does so to confront his former boss, and also to claim his right to work there. The gangster in charge of selecting each day’s workers refuses to select Terry, so Terry calls the boss out of the union office and denounces him in front of the other workers, who are waiting to begin the day’s work unloading ships. The gang boss is enraged, and comes out of the office to fight Terry. Terry gets the better of him until the other thugs join in and beat Terry badly. As Terry lies unconscious at

⁹ “If our hearts are lifted where devotion soars high above this hungry, suffering world of ours, lest our hymns should drug us to forget its needs, forge our Christian worship into Christian deeds” – Fred Pratt Green, “When the Church of Jesus” (1968).

¹⁰ “In every insult, rift, and war, where color, scorn, or wealth divide, he suffers still, yet loves the more, and lives, though ever crucified” – Brian Wren, “Christ is Alive” (1968).

the water's edge, the ship owner walks up and demands that his ship be unloaded. The corrupt union boss orders the men to work, but they refuse unless Terry works with them. Seeing a chance to break the corrupt boss's power, Father Barry and Edie urge the badly hurt Terry to walk from the union office to the pier to commence work. He does so, at first unsteadily, then with increasing resolution and determination, as expressed by close-ups of Terry's battered face and by Leonard Bernstein's powerful musical score. The camera cuts between shots of Terry and shots from Terry's blurry point of view. As Terry reaches his goal, the music holds on a dramatic flourish, the ship owner shouts, "Let's go to work!" and the musical theme associated with Terry begins again, triumphantly, as all the men march to the pier past the furious union boss.

This is of course Hollywood entertainment, but it is also theology, as Terry's courageous act of social responsibility and human solidarity confirms Edie's relational philosophy¹¹ – "Everyone is a part of everyone else." This theological stream, joined with tributary notions of God's immanence in every human being and with a complementary emphasis on social justice and realizing God's kingdom "in the midst of life," will broaden and deepen in the coming decade, and flow through the social programs of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society and the words and deeds of martyrs like Martin Luther King, Chun Tae Il, Thich Quang Duc, and Oscar Romero. And since – as I began by saying – theology cannot be confined to institutional religions, this "mighty stream" also carries along with it an economic vision. In his sermon "Beyond Vietnam – A Time to Break Silence," delivered on April 4, 1967 at

¹¹ This idea is echoed in relational or process theology and also in the Korean indigenous religion *Donghak*, which condemns a society in which "every man acts for himself, violating the principle of Heaven and disregarding the will of Heaven" (Suun, founder of *Donghak*, quoted in Kwangsoo Park, "New Korean Religious Movements," in *Religion and Peace* [Spring 2012, forthcoming]).

Riverside Church in New York City, Martin Luther King offered an alternative vision to militarism and exploitative capitalism:

A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth. With righteous indignation, it will look across the seas and see individual capitalists of the West investing huge sums of money in Asia, Africa, and South America, only to take the profits out with no concern for the social betterment of the countries, and say, "This is not just." . . . a genuine revolution of values means in the final analysis that our loyalties must become ecumenical rather than sectional. Every nation must now develop an overriding loyalty to mankind as a whole in order to preserve the best in their individual societies.

As Dr. King's words show, Edie Doyle's relational, immanent, social justice oriented theology was not the only, or even the most powerful, ideology in the 1960s and 70s. But it had enough social authority to counterbalance more conservative social visions, and even to enjoy some successes in the United States: the Civil Rights Act, the eventual turning of public opinion against the Vietnam War, and social programs like Medicare and Head Start.

“Free-Market Theology” (1980–2012)

Every stream of history runs its course, however, and with the ascendance of economist Milton Friedman's glorification of radical free-market capitalism and Ronald Reagan's election in 1980, the tide definitely turned. Soon Reagan was breaking the power of unions, championing deregulation of business and financial institutions, and cultivating white middle and working class resentment by condemning apocryphal Cadillac-owning welfare mothers. As Reagan's policies directed wealth upward, homelessness began to be a serious problem in America. Outside of the United States, neoliberal globalization policies increased Dr. King's “glaring contrast of poverty and wealth” worldwide. This pro-market, deregulatory impulse, regarded as an unquestionable good, continued under Bush and Clinton,

coming to full flower during the disastrous presidency of George W. Bush, whose unrestrained spending¹² combined with huge tax cuts for the wealthy and lax regulation of financial institutions led to the global financial crisis of 2008. Now, in 2012, unchecked by the feckless Obama, free market ideology, like Poe's Red Death, holds "illimitable dominion over all,"¹³ and Terry Malloy's pre-conversion gangster credo – do it to him before he does it to you – is our only moral compass.

I call this unquestioned economic theory a theology because it is the only way in which our present age can judge value, and because it pervades every aspect of our public lives, including religion. In this I am following John B. Cobb, who writes, "[E]conomic theory has become the basic theology of the world . . . so that the rest of our social lives have been subordinated to the goals toward which economic theory is directed."¹⁴ Cobb goes on to say that economic theory – by which he means Friedman's free-market economics – has been invested with such an "aura of moral justification" that "many people of goodwill, including many Christians, have accepted the idea that the way forward for society as a whole is based on an economic theory that has no place for community, no place for justice, no place for the natural world. Policies based on that theory have been extremely destructive for human communities everywhere, have led to extremely unjust distribution of goods, and have extensively degraded the natural world."¹⁵

Theologically, this extreme free-marketism that for the past thirty years has been gnawing its way through history in a symbiotic relationship with conservative

¹² This paper does not discuss the military adventurism of George W. Bush and other American presidents. For a full discussion of this blatantly destructive facet of free-marketism, see Kenneth H. Moore, "Requiem for the Innocents," *Religion and Peace* 4, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2011), 36-48.

¹³ Quoted from Edgar Allen Poe, "The Masque of the Red Death."

¹⁴ John B. Cobb Jr. "Imperialism in American Economic Policy," in David Ray Griffin et al., eds., *The American Empire and the Commonwealth of God: A Political, Economic, Religious Statement* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 23.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Christianity is nothing less than an expression of Meland's "surd of insensitivity that resists and defiles the communal growth of love and forgiveness."¹⁶ In its radical individualism it contradicts the basic claim of relational theology¹⁷ that "in no instance can there be an isolated, solipsistic consciousness. The personal is social."¹⁸ Such a claim is anathema to free-market theology, which endorses the idea of "the individual as the ultimate entity in society."¹⁹ While one cannot accuse Milton Friedman, despite the immense harm his theories have inflicted upon the globe, of having gone so far as to praise a serial killer for his lack of empathy²⁰ as did crack-pot author Ayn Rand, other powerful conservatives and free-market advocates such as Alan Greenspan and Clarence Thomas idolize Rand and the Randian "ideal man" exemplified by Howard Roark, protagonist of *The Fountainhead*, who "was born without the ability to consider others"²¹ (Rand intends us to understand this as a positive characteristic). Furthermore, as linguist George Lakoff points out, conservatives in the U. S. "are trying to redefine empathy as irrational feeling," thus to render it an inappropriate measure to guide or inform political and judicial decisions. As Lakoff explains, "Empathy . . . is a threat to conservatism, which

¹⁶ Meland, *Fallible Forms*, 83.

¹⁷ I use "relational theology" to broadly refer to any theology that emphasizes God's presence in just and loving human relationships and human interdependence with the natural world; for this term I am indebted to Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki (see footnote 18).

¹⁸ Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *The Fall to Violence: Original Sin in Relational Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1999), 39.

¹⁹ Milton Friedman, "Capitalism and Freedom," *The New Individualist Review* 1 (April 1961). Archived in *The Online Library of Liberty* Online: http://oll.libertyfund.org/?option=com_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=2136&chapter=195245&layout=html&Itemid=27.

²⁰ This conservative anti-empathetic impulse was on display recently during the debates among contenders for the Republican nomination for president of the United States. When the moderator of the debate mentioned the governor of Texas's record of executing more people than any other state, the right-wing audience cheered wildly. And when another candidate remarked that a sick person without health insurance should be left to die, his comment was met with even wilder applause.

²¹ Mark Ames, "Ayn Rand, Hugely Popular Author and Inspiration to Right-Wing Leaders, Was a Big Admirer of Serial Killer," n.p. [cited 26 Feb. 2010]. Online: <http://www.alternet.org/story/145819/>.

features individual, not social responsibility and a strict, punitive form of ‘justice.’”²² In contrast, Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki understands empathy not as irrational feeling, but as “self-transcendence” that “emerges when one relates to the other as the related other who is also subject. Such self-transcendence is the enrichment of the self as well as an enrichment of the other.”²³ Suchocki goes on to offer an understanding of sin that directly contradicts the conservatives’ strict, punitive conception of a vertical, judgmental, offended-against God:

Developing a horizontal, or world-related, interpretation of human self-transcendence allows us to bring the social nature of the self into view, and through that social nature, to account for the vulnerability that allows us both richness and destructiveness of being. It brings creaturely interdependence and therefore creaturely obligation into view. The unnecessary violation of this interdependence and obligation is a direct sin against the wellbeing of creation. Sin, then, is rebellion against creation.²⁴

This rebellion against creation, co-identical with Meland’s “surd of insensitivity,” may be extended from personal and social relationships to the overall ethos of economic globalization (the Siamese-twin of free-market theology), which is driven by an us/them ideology that devalues and exploits the so-called “third world” while claiming for itself a false “aura of moral justification” that any examination of its actual effects on ordinary people’s lives would quickly demonstrate to be false. For example, a November 2008 article in the *Daily Mail* describes how thousands of Indian farmers are being driven to suicide after purchasing genetically modified crops.²⁵ National governments and organizations like the World Bank push such

²² George Lakoff, “Conservatives Are Waging a War on Empathy,” n.p. [cited 21 June 2009]. Online: http://www.alternet.org/story/140362/conservatives_are_waging_a_war_on_empathy_--_we_can't_let_them_win/.

²³ Suchocki, *The Fall to Violence*, 40.

²⁴ Ibid. 43.

²⁵ Andrew Malone, “The GM genocide: Thousands of Indian farmers are committing suicide after using genetically modified crops,” n.p. [cited 3 Nov. 2008]. Online: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1082559/The-GM-genocide-Thous...ting-suicide-using-genetically-modified-crops.html/>. See also Vandana Shiva, *Water Wars: Privatization, Pollution and Profit* (Cambridge, MA: Southeast

policies in the name of globalization, deregulation, or privatization, and promise prosperity for all,²⁶ but the results are huge profits for corporations and poverty, depletion of resources, and environmental degradation for the poor and powerless. As with political terrorism (in both its state and non-state versions), the victims of economic terrorism are irrelevant or invisible. Lawrence Summers, until recently U.S. president Obama's chief economic advisor, made this argument when he was vice-president of the World Bank in 1991: "The South should be the dumping ground for the North's toxic waste because pollution-induced illness would not matter so much where people die young: 'the economic logic behind dumping a load of toxic waste in the lowest wage country is impeccable and we should face up to that.'"²⁷ Cynical and arrogant private pronouncements like this, which Koreans should find particularly poignant in light of the recent dioxin dumping revelations, reflect the secret heart of economic globalization, but even globalization's smiling public face (as expressed through free-trade agreements and promises of endless benefits through privatization) constitutes the "brutalized" version of Meland's "redemptive theme," which Meland characterizes as the Western zeal to redeem the world, "bolstered by theories of inevitable progress and limitless resources."²⁸ This zeal, however intentioned, is essentially exploitative in that it seeks to endlessly extract resources and impose a top-down economic vision rather than be guided by "an overriding loyalty to mankind as a whole" or by a harmonious vision of global community that respects both humanity and the natural world.

Press, 1997); idem, *Stolen Harvest: The Hijacking of the Global Food Supply* (Cambridge, MA: Southeast Press, 2000).

²⁶ We should note that even in its positive self-portrayals, free-market theology, as Cobb has reminded us, can only conceive of "good" in economic terms.

²⁷ Teresa Brennan, *Globalization and its Terrors* (London: Routledge, 2003), 17.

²⁸ Meland, *Fallible Forms*, 195.

Thus, in fifty or so years we have come to the antithesis of Edie Doyle and Martin King's vision of an interrelated, interdependent world. So how, specifically, is this new economically based vision playing itself out in our societies? In the sphere of religion, mainstream churches are losing members, while once marginal theologies are flourishing. Prosperity theology, which holds that material wealth is a blessing from God, is gaining popularity worldwide (prosperity congregations include South Korea's Yoido Full Gospel Church), and books espousing prosperity theology, such as Joel Osteen's *Your Best Life Now*, are bestsellers. Right-wing Christian leaders regularly claim that capitalism is biblically mandated, and regard any attempt to regulate markets as sinful.²⁹ Popular conservative talk show host Glen Beck tells his huge American audience that "social justice Christians" – those few pitiful remaining specimens huddled in the basement of some Unitarian church discussing free trade coffee – aren't really Christians at all, and have a secret agenda to destroy capitalism.³⁰ Insofar as conservative Christianity has any vision apart from winner-take-all economics and the institution of Biblical law in civic life, it is a moralistic, purity-based vision that focuses on the supposed misbehavior of others – those Muslims, homosexuals, socialists, feminists, and foreigners who don't think as "we" do and without whom the world would be a much better place (in this they share much, *mutatis mutandi*, with Hindu, Muslim, and Jewish fundamentalists). From a theology of inclusion and human solidarity we have come, in the second decade of the 21st century, to a theology of extreme exclusion. Meanwhile, on the environmental

²⁹ Andrew Walsh, quoted in Nicole Neroulis, "Poll: Americans see clash between Christianity, Capitalism," n.p. [cited 11 Apr. 2011]. Online: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/04/20/poll-americans-see-clash- n_851712.html.

³⁰ David Sessions, "Glenn Beck Urges Listeners to Leave Churches That Preach Social Justice," n.p. [cited Mar. 15 2010]. Online: <http://www.politicsdaily.com/2010/03/08/glenn-beck-urges-listeners-to-leave-churches-that-preach-social/>. See also Kato Milvule, "Jerry Falwell Jr, Glen Beck, and the Mockery of the Poor," n.p. [cited Mar. 15 2010]. Online: <http://www.yesumulungi.com/index.php/commentaries/410-jerry-falwell-jr-glen-beck-social-justice-and-the-mockery-of-the-poor.html>

front, as icecaps melt, rainforests go up in smoke, extreme weather rages, species vanish, and island nations disappear beneath the lapping waves of the Pacific, leading conservative politicians in the U.S. howl that global warming is a hoax, nay, a veritable socialist plot to destroy capitalism, and then call for more oil drilling.

As I suggested earlier, society influences religious understandings and religious understandings influence society in a reciprocal, chicken-and-egg relationship, and this influence is measurable in the quality of people's lives. So what are people's lives like in the early 21st century, especially in America? An article in the online magazine *Business Insider*, by no means a left-wing publication, provides 41 charts and statistics that point to an unprecedented income gap between the super-rich and everyone else. Here are a few of the statistics:

- With unemployment at 9% in 2010, corporate profits were at an all-time high of over 1,400 billion dollars.
- CEO pay is now 350 times the pay of the average worker, up from 50 times in the period from 1960 to 1985.
- The top 1% of Americans own 42% of the country's financial wealth. The top 5% own nearly 70%. The top 20% own 92%.
- The U.S. now ranks 93rd in the world in "income equality."³¹

Taxes on the wealthy are lower than they have ever been; financier Warren Buffet famously remarked that his secretary pays at a higher tax rate than he does. In 2010, the General Electric Corporation "reported worldwide profits of \$14.2 billion and said \$5.1 billion of the total came from its operations in the United States. Its American tax bill? None. In fact, G.E. claimed a tax benefit of \$3.2 billion."³² While tens of millions in the U. S. cannot find work, have no healthcare benefits, and have lost or are on the verge of losing their homes, the rich and powerful enjoy unprecedented

³¹ Henry Blodget, "CHARTS: Here's What the Wall Street Protesters Are So Angry About," n.p. [cited Oct. 11, 2011] Online: <http://www.businessinsider.com/what-wall-street-protesters-are-so-angry-about-2011-10#>.

³² David Kocieniewski, "G.E.'s Strategies let it Avoid Taxes Altogether," *The New York Times* (March 24, 2010).

power and political influence. The entire system, in fact, favors the rich and powerful. A hungry homeless man named Roy Brown was sentenced to 15 years in prison for stealing \$100, even though he soon felt guilty and went back to the bank to return the money and then surrendered to the police voluntarily.³³ In contrast, Paul R. Allen, the CEO of a mortgage company who was convicted of perpetrating a \$3 billion corporate fraud received a 40-month sentence.³⁴ Meanwhile, under the smokescreen of reducing budget deficits, Republican governors and state legislatures have passed laws restricting unions and public employees from acting together on their own behalf, thus seeking to remove the last remaining curb on otherwise unbridled corporate power. Other alleged deficit-reducing measures have slashed social programs, reduced the benefits and salaries of teachers, policemen, and firemen, and then used the money saved not to pay down debts but to give additional tax breaks to corporations.³⁵

It Used to Be a Wonderful Life

Although I could continue this grim litany for many more paragraphs, I'll now wistfully turn back to the American 1950s, the time of *On the Waterfront*, when corporate interests were counterbalanced by a shared sense of social responsibility and by strong labor unions, and when even a Republican president could warn the nation against the growing influence of "the military-industrial complex." The 1950s

³³ Chris V. Thangham, "Homeless man gets 15 years for stealing \$100," n.p. [cited. Jan 17, 2009] Online: <http://digitaljournal.com/article/265402>.

³⁴ Matthew Barrakat, "Paul Allen, Ex-Mortgage CEO, Sentenced to Prison for \$3B Fraud," n.p. [cited June 21 2011]. Online: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/06/22/mortgage-fraud-ceo-prison-paul-allen_n_881946.html.

³⁵ This tactic of reducing deficits on the backs on the poor was also common in 19th century Korea. As Kwangsoo Park tells us, "[T]he government officials and much of the *yangban* class abused their powers, using the common practice of tax evasion. The practice simply consisted of not recording ownership of huge farmlands in order to escape the increasing taxation on that land. To compensate for the loss of revenue, the government raised the taxes of the poor farmers who were already desperately overburdened." In Park, "New Korean Religious Movements."

were a time of steady economic growth, high corporate taxes, high social mobility, and low income inequality – in other words, the mirror image of the 2000s.

Progressive taxation did not hurt productivity, since all levels of society shared in the growth: “When the top [tax] rates were truly high from 1950 to 1978, American income at all levels grew at about the same pace. But when progressivity was lost in the 80s, the income of the poor began falling, while that of the rich continued growing.”³⁶ The Concise Encyclopedia of Economics makes the same point:

“Between 1947 and the mid-1970s, income grew rapidly at all points in the distribution, resulting in both rising living standards and moderating inequality.

After the mid-1970s, average income grew much more slowly, and the growth that did occur was concentrated in the distributions’ upper half.”³⁷ Labor unions were

also much stronger in the 1950s, giving workers more leverage against their employers. Paul Ryscavage remarks on how workers would soon lose this leverage:

“Another significant change that has taken place in the labor market [since the 1950s] is the deunionization of the American work force. Back in the mid-1950s, union members accounted for approximately 33.2 percent of all nonagricultural workers, but by 1995 the percentage of total wage and salary employment represented by unions and labor organizations was 16.7 percent.”³⁸ With higher wages and benefits, a factory worker in the 1950s could support his family and even send his children to college on his salary alone, an inconceivable situation for the debt-ridden, two-income, multi-job families of the 1990s and 2000s.

To further understand how a communal, socially responsible, relational theology was bodied forth during the 1940s and 50s, one need only turn to another

³⁶ “Income and Wealth Inequality,” n.p. Online: <http://www.huppi.com/kangaroo/4Inequality.htm>.

³⁷ Frank Levy, “Distribution of Income,” in *The Concise Encyclopedia of Economics*, n.p. [cited 27 Dec. 2011]. Online: <http://www.econlib.org/library/Enc/DistributionofIncome.html>.

³⁸ Paul Ryscavage, *Income Inequality in America: An Analysis of Trends* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc. 2000), 88.

voice from Meland's "witness of culture," Frank Capra's perennially popular film *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), which not only expresses a relational theology, but also emphatically moves it into a broader social and economic context. Within a cosmological frame that adds a divine endorsement to its philosophy, the film presents two antagonistic characters in the imaginary town of Bedford Falls, New York – George Bailey (James Stewart), the community-minded, compassionate president of Bailey's Building and Loan, and Mr. Potter (Lionel Barrymore), a wealthy bank president and slum-lord, who regards George's arguments for strengthening the community through making money available to working people as "sentimental hogwash." George argues that giving working people low-interest loans that enable them to move out of the slums and into their own homes is good for the entire community – it makes them "better citizens, better customers." Potter asks sarcastically, "Are you running a business or a charity ward?"³⁹ As the film moves to its climax, Potter, who has long desired to take over George's business and run Bedford Falls on his own terms, gets his chance when George's uncle loses a crucial \$5,000 bank deposit. Potter alerts the police and the bank examiners, and George faces prison and financial ruin. In despair, and feeling as though his life has been a failure, George contemplates suicide, saying "it would have been better if I was never born."

Now enter George's "guardian angel," Clarence, who magically transports George to what Bedford Falls would have been like if George had never been born. This alternate-reality Bedford Falls, now called Pottersville, is a mean-spirited town of slums, gambling houses, cheap bars, and unhappy people. This is not the moral

³⁹ "There is one and one only social responsibility of business – to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits so long as it stays within the rules of the game." Milton Friedman, in *The New York Times Magazine* (September 13, 1970). Of course the market itself will somehow mysteriously enforce the "rules of the game."

condemnation so loved by conservatives, but a social one: an individualist ethos leads to despair and brokenness.⁴⁰ Clarence wants George to realize the importance of his own life, the influence his life has had on others: “Strange, isn’t it? Each man’s life touches so many other lives. When he isn’t around, he leaves an awful hole, doesn’t he?” But this mean-spirited, disconnected Pottersville also lacks the counterbalancing force of George’s communal vision, his “capitalism with a human face.” In Bedford Falls, and to some extent in real 1940s and 50s America,⁴¹ people were valued for their contribution to the overall community – cab drivers, factory workers, and teachers as well as bank presidents and CEOs. They all contributed to society and could take pride in their contributions. They all could also feel that through hard work they could support a family and improve their lives. In the winner-take-all society of our 21st century Pottersvilles, the only measure of success is financial – you are either a winner or a loser.

Occupy Wall Street: Terry is back!

The problem in 21st century America is not so much that it has competing visions of Pottersville and Bedford Falls;⁴² the problem is that Pottersville has won so absolutely. “Capitalism as an ethical system,” writes Curtis White, “has succeeded in convincing the people living under it that it is not a system at all but a state of nature”⁴³ Thus,

⁴⁰ *It’s a Wonderful Life* emphasizes this point when, during his magical trip to greed-driven Pottersville, George Bailey encounters a man whom he had known in Bedford Falls as a kind and warm-hearted person. This man has now become a mean-spirited bully, showing that people are not absolutely good or evil, but are shaped and influenced by the kind of society in which they live, and the kind of vision that that society encourages.

⁴¹ The 40s and 50s certainly were not ideal societies, especially for African Americans and other minorities, or for those persecuted during anti-communist witch-hunts. Yet McCarthyism was eventually discredited, and the Civil Rights Movement eventually prevailed.

⁴² I am indebted for this application of *It’s a Wonderful Life* to the contemporary American political situation to Leo Gerard’s article, “How the GOP Tries to Transform America into a Selfish, Soulless Place,” n.p. [cited 27 Dec. 2011]. Online: http://www.alternet.org/teaparty/153581/how_the_gop_tries_to_transform_america_into_a_selfish_soulless_place/.

⁴³ Curtis White, *The Barbaric Heart* (Sausalito, CA: PoliPoint Press, 2009), 27.

any tendency toward resistance has been sublimated into violence, misogyny, xenophobic, self-righteous patriotism, and hyper-consumerism. Young people in those inner city areas with the least opportunity and poorest schools, facing not only a lifetime of poverty but an existential denial of their value as humans, turn to gangs and crime for a sense of community and self-worth (albeit a twisted one), and embrace consumerist values through “bling” – the ostentatious display of flashy wealth. Equally telling is the inner city term “chump change” for a small amount of money. If you don’t have money, you are a “chump” – a naïve fool. Free Market theology not only oppresses people, it dehumanizes and degrades them; it preaches that opportunity exists for all, that (despite all evidence to the contrary) we can all be CEOs or lawyers or pop-stars or hedge-fund managers, and that if we are not, it is our own fault.⁴⁴ Americans continue to believe this even as the middle class disappears, as more and more jobs are “outsourced” overseas, as “austerity measures” force ever more lay-offs and cuts in community services, as any tentative suggestion that the super-rich pay slightly more taxes is met with cries of “socialism” and “class warfare,” as bailed-out banks use taxpayer money not to increase lending but to give even larger bonuses to their top executives, as bankruptcies and foreclosures spread throughout the land like a rat-borne plague, and as “education, health care, and retirement are ever more inaccessible”⁴⁵ for most of the country.

When Terry Malloy stood up to the corrupt union boss to take the dockworkers’ union back from the gangsters, the system itself was presented as fair, an avenue for the oppressed and victimized to seek justice. In 2012, the gangsters *are*

⁴⁴ Mitt Romney, billionaire and candidate for the Republican party nomination for president, recently remarked, “I think president Obama wants to make us a European style welfare state, where instead of being a merit society we’re an entitlement society, where government’s role is to take from some and give to others . . . What I know is if they do that, they’ll substitute envy for ambition, and they’ll poison the very spirit of America and keep us from being one nation under God.” (Romney keeps the money and ordinary Americans keep the “spirit of America.”)

⁴⁵ White, *Barbaric Heart*, 27.

the system, and their strong-arm thugs (whether witting or unwitting) are the police officers in riot gear armed with tear gas, sound cannons, pepper spray, and rubber bullets (in Syria and Egypt they use real bullets). When Terry Malloy, after testifying to the Crime Commission, goes down to the waterfront to work despite the gang boss's threats, he tells Edie, "I'm just going to get my rights." His courage, his articulation of an alternate vision, his willingness to stand up for his rights, changes the dynamic on the waterfront, and breaks the power of the gang boss. In September of 2011, a small group of young activists, fed up with crushing student-loan debt, deep cuts to social services, and lack of opportunity in a society rigged to support only the rich and powerful, began sleeping on cardboard in a park near Wall Street in New York City, because they too just wanted to get their rights. This Occupy Wall Street movement (hereafter OWS), inspired by the protests in Tunisia and Egypt and Syria, soon spread throughout the world, and their courage and determination also changed the dynamic. Before OWS, the conversation in the media and the U.S. congress was all about the national debt, and the drastic cuts that would have to be made to Social Security and other social programs. After OWS, the media have sluggishly, reluctantly turned their attention to income inequality. And just as Terry was brutally beaten by strong-arm thugs, the Occupy activists have endured brutal, militarized police repression. But the citizens of the U.S., groggily emerging from their consumerist, free-market stupor, are now waking up to the extreme income inequality that has oppressed them for years, and to the unjust political system that maintains it – they are now beginning to realize that they have been living all along in Pottersville, not Bedford Falls. The all-encompassing free-market theology that has shaped our world though decades of privatization and deregulation is now showing

some cracks, and the long-frozen theological stream that envisions social justice and human solidarity is now breaking free from the ice and rushing towards the sea.

Conclusion: The Lotus Leaves Play in Concert

And the sea connects America with the rest of the world. Asian and American activists are already working together; Kim Jin-suk, the Korean welder who spent 309 days on a crane to protest job cuts at the Hanjin shipyards, addressed the OWS group in lower Manhattan on October 8, 2011, saying that OWS activists, Korean Hope Riders, and “occupy” activists throughout the world are all involved in the same fight against oppressive corporate and/or state power.⁴⁶ Korean activists, with their long history of struggle against oppressive systems, can teach Americans much about courage, patience, and persistence. On the other hand, Asians should also take note of America’s failures, as Asian supporters of American free-marketism increase their efforts to implement America’s morally and socially dysfunctional system in Asian countries, and as the income inequality and lack of upward mobility that have been the hallmarks of American society begin to manifest themselves in Asia.⁴⁷

Moreover, Asian theology, current and historical, resonates with the relational theology expressed in *On the Waterfront* and *It's a Wonderful Life* and articulated by Meland, Cobb, and Suchocki. The Korean religious movement Donghak arose in response to an oppressive and dehumanizing system, and proclaimed, “Each human is

⁴⁶ Kap Su Seol, “The Shipyard Stalwart,” *The Progressive* (Dec. 2011/Jan. 2012), 44.

⁴⁷ “[R]ecent data in Korea . . . confirms the consensus view of a declining middle class is correct. The decrease of the middle class has been accompanied by the increase of the lower and upper classes. However, during the sample period, while the size of the bottom low class is stable, the size of the top high class is rapidly increased; thus the income distribution of Korea is bi-polarized.” In Joonwoo Nahm, “Shrinking Middle Class and Changing Income Distribution of Korea: 1995-2005,” *The Korean Economic Review* 24, no. 2 (2008), 357.

God.” It further proclaimed that each human should also “bear God,”⁴⁸ which is to say “Humans are to function as God and in turn treat others as God, thereby bearing that which is God within them,” thus to recover their divine natures within a just society.⁴⁹ This is similar to the vision of an interrelated community of love and justice articulated by Suchocki, a vision “drawn from the whole universe of relations, [which] bespeaks the beauty of reciprocal well-being, of justice, of love without boundaries. It bespeaks a vision of no less than the community of God. This vision calls us to recognize who we are individually and communally, and to live forward in the hope of transformation.”⁵⁰ In other words, as we come to know our own natures and feel the otherness of others through empathy and love, we are “recontextualized in God” as both fully ourselves and as participants in God: “Otherness and sameness dance in the interchange between God and a resurrected world. In God, empathy and love converge.”⁵¹ Anselm Min proposes a similar embrace of the otherness of others, and brings it more explicitly into a global context as he observes, “the gap between the rich and poor nations is quite pronounced. The rich, largely industrialized nations dominate the world, its politics, economics, and culture through its information technology, its military power, its banks and corporations. They consume a scandalously disproportionate share of earth’s resources as well as produce an irresponsibly disproportionate share of environmental damage.” Min emphasizes, “Rich or poor, we are all living in a demonstratively and experientially interdependent world.”⁵² As an answer to global violence, inequality, and exploitation, Min proposes

⁴⁸ Compare this concept with Meland’s statement: “We are literally the bearers of grace and redemptive love to one another, and there is no concrete nature of God, no new creation except as it is made incarnate in these relationships that hold us in existence.” In Meland, *Fallible Forms*, 83.

⁴⁹ Lee, “New Korean Religious Movements.”

⁵⁰ Suchocki, *Fall to Violence*, 160.

⁵¹ Ibid. 159.

⁵² Anselm Min, *The Solidarity of Others in a Divided World: A Postmodern Theology After Postmodernism* (New York & London: T & T Clark International, 2004), 225.

“a theology of solidarity; not the theology of the same, but precisely the solidarity of the different, the solidarity of strangers, the solidarity of those who are other to one another.”⁵³ Proceeding from a similar idea of complementary, interrelated otherness, Jung Young Lee employs the Taoist concept of yin-yang to re-articulate the Trinity from a holistic, connectional Asian perspective that can answer the shortcomings of the individualistic Western model.⁵⁴ Lee’s Asian contextual approach emphasizes interdependence – “as we face ecological crises, we must give dignity and respect to other living beings. It is time for us to take seriously the Asian trinity, which regards all creatures as our relatives,”⁵⁵ – and community – “Any act that is destructive of that community is not an act of freedom but an act of violence, which not only disrupts communal harmony but eventually takes away freedom.”⁵⁶ For Lee, freedom is the spontaneity that allows human creativity to be fully realized as we “participate in cosmic creativity, which is the spontaneous response of the cosmos to the life of the divine Trinity.”⁵⁷

These Asian perspectives, in their various ways, locate God in nature and in social relationships; they are antithetical to the fundamentalist religious impulse that locates God in a particular doctrine or set of moral laws and that clings to an obsession with certainty⁵⁸ and the fundamentalists’ own sense of “chosen-ness.” Thus right-wing fundamentalists (Christian and otherwise) see political events as faith-confirming manifestations of God’s literal blueprint for disposing of human history rather than as consequences of conflicting human needs and systems.

⁵³ Ibid. 84.

⁵⁴ Jung Young Lee, *The Trinity in Asian Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 213.

⁵⁵ Ibid. 214.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 215.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Such a concern with certainty, Meland reminds us, “is neither profound nor sensitive in its response to the realities of faith . . . it is common observation that an inflexible display of certainty invariably leads toward intolerance in one’s witness, arrogance in exercising judgment upon others, and narrowness in one’s sympathies or in one’s understanding of the human situation.” In Meland, *Fallible Forms*, 73.

Furthermore, they see political opponents and people of other beliefs and cultures as identity-confirming manifestations of God's literal blueprint for dividing humanity into "sheep and goats," rather than as fellow humans with legitimate concerns – and even more than this, as ways through which to come closer to God. It is as though they were looking through the wrong end of the theological telescope, so that the world they see becomes not larger and more detailed but smaller and more restricted. God's presence is rendered certain in their lives not through harmonious relations with others and with the natural world but through an inspired conviction that Barack Obama is the Antichrist or that America is the Great Satan or that God has bequeathed them the entirety of "Judea and Samaria" on which to build their apartment blocks or – and this applies to all – that they have some heroic role to play in a coming cosmic battle between good and evil.

This action movie mentality renders conservative theologies inadequate to envision a response to the problems facing the world community, or even to see the problems at all. Problems and solutions are seen in terms of absolute morality, the "purity code" that Marcus Borg ascribes to the 1st century Pharisees.⁵⁹ If all the world's problems come from disobedience to God's law, then enforcing that law or instituting it in civil society is the only solution. Moreover, morality (however defined) becomes the only lens through which to evaluate our global situation. Thus religious conservatives obsess about perceived immorality rather than inequality or environmental degradation despite a quite justified sense of unease or even crisis. Even mainstream American churches avoid their prophetic calling by focusing on "moral" issues like gay marriage or the ordination of women, since confronting the critical issues of systemic inequality and exploitation would also involve confronting

⁵⁹ See Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1995), 55.

both the dominant ideology and their own comfortable and unsustainable lifestyles.⁶⁰

As Sallie McFague observes, “The sexual issues provide a distraction, allowing the churches to avoid naming the real sin: consumerism and market capitalism as forces opposed to the abundant life for all people and the planet.”⁶¹

The corollary to North American consumerism is poverty and environmental degradation for the rest of the world, and the rest of the world has not surprisingly responded by trying to grab as much as they can for themselves. But free-market capitalism cannot propose a sustainable solution: when all the world’s resources are finally poisoned or exhausted, the market will maximize its profits by selling clean water, or breathable air, or luxury apartments in some underground refuge. An individualist economic vision cannot sustain a just global society; neither can such a society be envisioned by a conservative, individualistic, morality-based theology that is as willfully blind to social injustice as was the rich man who ignored Lazarus outside his gate.⁶² The world’s only hope lies in envisioning an alternative paradigm, a just, sustainable, socially responsible paradigm with enough authority to counterbalance the dominant free market theology. In 2000, McFague called upon American churches to do precisely this: “[Churches] should see themselves as advocates for such an alternative paradigm within the public discourse. The Christian churches (and all other religions as well) should be part of the conversation for the public good – not as cogs in the wheels of the establishment but as counter-cultural voices for an alternative kind of abundant life for all members of the global family.”⁶³

Perhaps distracted by the crises of the Bush administration, the churches did not

⁶⁰ I must admit, as I write this on my notebook computer in my comfortable Seoul apartment, that I am also part of the problem. That does not mean I wouldn’t welcome a sustainable solution, even if it involved sacrifice on my and my family’s part.

⁶¹ Sallie McFague, *Abundant Life: Searching for a New Framework* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 203.

⁶² Luke 16:19-31.

⁶³ McFague, *Abundant Life*, 199.

effectively respond. Now – out of left field⁶⁴ as it were– the global justice movement, including OWS, has entered the public discourse on behalf of the public good. In response, and motivated by love and solidarity, Kim Jin-suk went to the OWS encampment in Liberty Plaza, offering her personal vision of justice and courage (and we should understand that the OWS activists were also responding to *her* occupation of the Hanjin shipyards, and to the ongoing occupations in Tahrir Square and worldwide). Asian theologians can also respond with their own visions of interdependence, creativity, and community, motivated by their own feelings of love and solidarity. Then their visions can blend with what is humane and just and compassionate in all human traditions, adding power and beauty, just as Korean traditional architecture embraces and is embraced by its natural surroundings, or as Chong Ch’ol’s Komungo, becoming the sound of a rushing stream, once blended with the raindrops on the lotus leaves, becoming musical notes, until there was no distinction between the two and each enhanced and ennobled the other, to the benefit of all.

Abstract

Realizing that religion cannot be confined to specific areas of doctrine, but is expressed through all facets of a society, and that a culture’s dominant theology has a pervasive influence on what that culture is able to envision, and thus upon all areas of life, including economics, this paper employs the methodology proposed by Bernard E. Meland to examine data from “the witness of culture” in later 20th and early 21st century America, with the understanding that this examination is also relevant for East Asia in terms of America’s reach and influence. The paper identifies two

⁶⁴ Out of left field” is an American baseball metaphor that means “unexpectedly.”

antithetical theological streams: a theology of social responsibility and interdependence in the 1950s and 1960s, and, supplanting the former, a theology of economic individualism and exploitation in the 1980s through the 2000s. This paper examines the economic and social conditions prevalent during each period, and proposes that these conditions influence and are influenced by each period's dominant theological vision. Going on to survey key ideas of contemporary relational theologians and then relate their thinking to current and historical Asian theologies, the paper concludes by proposing that relational theology, Asian and Western, is alone capable of offering an authoritative vision to counterbalance economic individualism, thus leading to possible solutions to the grave and pressing problems facing the globe.

Keywords

Relational theology, economic theology, ecological theology, globalization, Milton Friedman, prosperity gospel, religion and culture, films and theology, *On the Waterfront*, *It's a Wonderful Life*.

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