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Religion and Class

Abstract

While analyses of gender, ethnicity, and race have become widely accepted and are put to use in religious and theological studies, this is not the case with the notion of class. Despite the fact that race, gender, and class are often mentioned together, there is very little sustained reflection on class. Reflections on race and gender in religious and theological studies, while addressing issues of power, rarely include reflections on class. In the rare cases when class is addressed, especially in the United States, it is connected to notions of poverty, social stratification, or income differentials, which are insufficient at best and misleading at worst. Of course, investigating class does not mean turning one's back to matters of gender, ethnicity and race. The intersectionality of these various factors is non-negotiable, yet without deeper understandings of class the analysis of the other factors is likely to suffer.

Keywords

Class, Religion

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While analyses of gender, ethnicity, and race have become widely accepted and are put to use in religious and theological studies, this is not the case with the notion of class. Despite the fact that race, gender, and class are often mentioned together, there is very little sustained reflection on class. Reflections on race and gender in religious and theological studies, while addressing issues of power, rarely include reflections on class. In the rare cases when class is addressed, especially in the United States, it is connected to notions of poverty, social stratification, or income differentials, which are insufficient at best and misleading at worst.

Of course, investigating class does not mean turning one's back to matters of gender, ethnicity and race. The intersectionality of these various factors is non-negotiable, yet without deeper understandings of class the analysis of the other factors is likely to suffer.¹

Bringing Class into Focus

Each of the terms religion, theology, and class, is heavily contested. It is hard to say which topic is touchier at present. Both in public discourse and in the university there is a considerable amount of worry and concern when it comes to each of these notions. Moreover, not only is there a great deal of perplexity on how to deal individually with religion, theology, and class, there is also a great deal of emotion, as all of them have both staunch opponents and ardent defenders.

In this climate, universal conceptual definitions are difficult to establish and to maintain. As a result, the few contemporary studies that address more than one of these notions, like, for instance, studies of religion and class, deal with specific issues and particular phenomena rather than with grand theories.² The good news is that this has led to a growing sense of the complexity of notions of religion, theology, and class, and that there is now a deepening awareness of the importance of context and particular historical settings. Even theologians are increasingly becoming aware of matters of complexity, as can be seen, for instance, in the development of various contextual theologies.

Perhaps more than anyone else, however, it is sociologists who keep reminding us of complexity. The celebrated work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu is a case in point regarding the study of class. Bourdieu has explored how class shapes up in the context of different kinds of capital. In order to complexify the notion of class, he distinguishes several forms of capital, including financial, technological, commercial, social, cultural, and symbolic capital.³

Nevertheless, the growing complexity of matters of religion, theology, and class is now so vast that we can make progress only when we understand that no study can do everything. In order to make a contribution, we need to develop a focus and we need to give the rationale for it.

¹ An earlier and extended version of this chapter appeared as introduction to *Religion, Theology, and Class: Fresh Conversations After Long Silence*, New Approaches to Religion and Power, ed. Joerg Rieger (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), reproduced with permission of Palgrave Macmillan.

² Sean McCloud and William A. Mirola, "Introduction," in *Religion and Class in America: Culture, History, and Politics* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 2, propose studying class in terms of an approach that focuses on "analyzing religion as it is lived by individuals in a concrete time."

³ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Social Structures of the Economy*, trans. Chris Turner (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 194–195. That material conditions and cultural representations work together in shaping class is at the heart of what little current work there is in religion and class. See, in particular, Sean McCloud, *Divine Hierarchies: Class in American Religion and Religions Studies* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), and McCloud and Mirola, eds., *Religion and Class in America*.

Bourdieu's efforts to demonstrate the complexity of the notion of class, for instance, find their focus in a response to efforts to think too narrowly about the topic, particularly by neoliberal economists and their reductionist views of the world.⁴ At the same time, Bourdieu understands what many of his followers as well as those who follow in the tracks of German sociologist Max Weber often tend to overlook, namely that complexity is not arbitrary and that the various forms of capital also have a focus: "Financial capital is the direct or indirect mastery . . . of financial resources, which are the main condition . . . for the accumulation and conservation of other kinds of capital."⁵ Complexity, and the Weberian modesty that goes with it, does not have to mean that all things are equal.

While affirming the complexity of the study of class, here are some key issues that are commonly neglected and overlooked in many of the current debates.

First of all, contemporary investigations of class need to be located in the context of global capitalism, the economic system that has dominated so much of our histories in the past two centuries. With this focus, we are able to investigate particular relations between economics, religion, theology, and class in our time. Moreover, this focus allows us to look at structures rather than at individuals. As economist Michael Zweig has noted, problems "arise not because some people are rich but because private profit and the power of capital are the highest priorities in the economic system."⁶ How does class shape up in a global capitalist economy, and what are the implications for religion and theology?

And, in order to avoid the misunderstanding that economics is merely about money or income levels, we need to ask how power shapes up in capitalist societies, and how this affects class, religion, and theology.⁷ Ellen Meiksins Wood has reminded us of the invisibility of power in capitalist societies, noting that, "in non-capitalist societies, it is not usually difficult to identify the locus of power."⁸

Second, class needs to be considered as a relational term. This focus opens a whole new perspective in a context where class has mostly been debated in terms of stratification or social grouping.⁹ Rather than studying each class in itself, as strata that corresponds to income levels or

⁴ This is the main debate in Bourdieu, *The Social Structures of the Economy*. Neoliberal economics, he states, has produced an "economic common sense" that fails to grasp what is really going on (10). It presents us with "the universalization of a particular case, that of the United States of America" (11).

⁵ Bourdieu, *The Social Structures of the Economy*, 194; Bourdieu also notes that when individuals perceive each other in terms of their status, they misperceive the economic and cultural capital that undergirds this status. See Elliot B. Weininger, "Foundations of Pierre Bourdieu's Class Analysis," in Erik Olin Wright, ed., *Approaches to Class Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 101. For an account of a neo-Weberian approach, see Richard Breen, "Foundations of a Neo-Weberian Class Analysis," in Wright, ed., *Approaches to Class Analysis*, 31–50.

⁶ Michael Zweig, *The Working Class Majority: America's Best Kept Secret*, second edition (Ithaca: ILR Press, 2012), 74.

⁷ Alejandro Portes, *Economic Sociology: A Systematic Inquiry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 79: "Classes are defined by differential access to power within a given social system."

⁸ Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Empire of Capital* (London: Verso 2003), 10. Wood emphasizes the hiddenness of power in capitalist societies: "In capitalist societies, it is even possible to have universal suffrage without fundamentally endangering capitalist economic power, because this power does not require a monopoly on political rights."

⁹ The concept of stratification has often gotten its authorization from the work of Max Weber, who analyzed class in terms of status, which includes income, wealth, occupation, and education. Yet, as Kevin J. Christiano, William H. Swatos, Jr., and Peter Kivisto, *Sociology of Religion: Contemporary Developments*, second edition (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008), 133, point out, Weber might be understood as complementing and enriching Karl Marx's tradition at this point, rather than as opposing it. Unfortunately, the concept of stratification has often been

particular historical and sociological markers of individual classes, this allows us to investigate how classes shape up in relation to each other, with an eye to the question of how economics, religion, theology, and class are related in the formation and maintenance of class structures. Insights into the interrelationship of classes are among the things most sorely missing in contemporary discourses on class.

The most common discourses at present focus on income levels, a move that conceals class relationships because each class can be considered on its own terms. It is no wonder that sociologists who follow this model end up with lists that contain more and more unrelated classes.¹⁰ Insights into the relational character of classes are not new, and while Karl Marx can help us think about class as relational, already Greek and Medieval philosophers were aware of the fact that classes were related, as were the Hebrew prophets. In the eighteenth century C.E. the fathers of capitalism, like Adam Smith and David Ricardo, had a sense of the relationality of the classes in early capitalism.¹¹

Third, in thinking about class in relational categories, we also need to address the matter of conflict. This is the touchiest question when it comes to the study of class, and it makes not only scholars nervous. With this focus, we find ourselves in proximity to what in sociology has been called “conflict theories.” The concern is less with theoretical correctness, however, than with the observation of actual and deep-seated conflict between the classes. Working people around the globe experience class conflict every day, in the form of depressed wages, the reduction of benefits, and increasing pressure to perform—all while profits for investors and bonuses at the top of companies are on the rise.

The observation of conflict would not be complete, of course, without a reflection on matters of power. In a context where conflict is frequently considered everybody’s fault (variously described as “bickering” or as a lack of effort by all involved parties to get along), we need to examine conflict in terms of imbalances of power and who is gaining and who is losing. Conflict is, therefore, not simply rooted in competition but in the structures of capitalism itself, as even a theologian like Karl Barth understood quite well.¹²

All three focal points are, of course, contestable. First, when class is considered in its capitalist context, the reproach is often one of “determinism,” as established economic structures make it fairly predictable who gains and who loses. But investigating how capitalism shapes class and religion—the fact *that* economics influences class and religion would be disputed by

used in this latter way. While, for the most part, the lower classes are studied in terms of stratification, there are few analyses of the wealthy.

¹⁰ Richard Breen counts as many as seventeen classes in “Foundations of a Neo-Weberian Class Analysis,” in Wright, ed., *Approaches to Class Analysis*, 43–44; and 43, n. 6. For an example of how the middle class is defined in terms of income levels, see two otherwise very different sources: Special Report, “Bourgeoning Bourgeoisie,” *Economist*, February 12, 2009, http://www.economist.com/node/13063298?story_id=13063298&source=hptextfeature – . Accessed July 16, 2012.

¹¹ Both Adam Smith and David Ricardo distinguished three classes, based on their source of income through wages, profits, or rent of land; Ricardo added that the interests of these classes were not merely contradictory but irreconcilable. See Chris Lorenz, “Representations of Identity: Ethnicity, Race, Class, Gender and Religion: An Introduction to Conceptual History,” in Stefan Berger and Chris Lorenz, eds., *The Contested Nation: Ethnicity, Class, Religion, and Gender in National Histories* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 47–48.

¹² Barth notes the difference between simple forms of competition and the conflict that is built into the labor contracts of capitalism. Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, vol. III part 4 (Zollikon: Evangelischer Verlag, 1957), 620.

few¹³—does not mean endorsing determinism. Our concern, in any case, is not to establish determinism—that is, a claim how things will always be of necessity—without alternatives.

We want to know not only how class and religion are shaped by capitalist economic structures, but also what difference class and religion can make in engaging these structures and transforming them. While it is not hard to show that working people have gained relatively little from neoliberal capitalism since it took over in the 1980s and that the gap between the classes in the United States has widened dramatically since the Great Depression,¹⁴ we do not consider this situation inevitable or natural.

Second, that class is a relational term is hard to dispute. Only the staunchest individualists would be able to maintain an absolute disconnect between the classes. But the actual ways in which class is discussed amount to a rejection of the relationship between classes. When theorists of stratification discuss income levels and extend the numbers of classes numerically, for instance, they are not addressing the question of how these various levels are related. Furthermore, even the best recent investigations of religion and class study classes in isolation from each other.¹⁵

At first sight, this may be considered a more scholarly approach, as it allows in-depth investigations of small-scale phenomena, like individual working-class congregations and their histories. Furthermore, these recent investigations of religion and class have presented valid reasons for rejecting problematic ways of relating classes and religion and class.¹⁶ Nevertheless, we maintain that the broader horizon of class as a relational term is needed to understand core problems. Even an individual working-class church, to stay with our example, does not exist in isolation from the dominant class, and investigating the relationship between dominant and subordinate classes would be conducive to a deeper understanding not only of class itself but also of religion in particular contexts.¹⁷

Third, talk about tensions between classes is never easy, but in the United States today it has easily become the single most explosive issue. The frequently heard charge of “class warfare,” hurled against anyone who offers even the slightest critique of powerful corporations or wealthy individuals, clashes with billionaire Warren Buffett’s repeated acknowledgment that

¹³ Christiano, Swatos, and Kivisto, *Sociology of Religion*, 123: “Few would dispute the assertion that people’s social class locations have a bearing on their religious beliefs and practices. Similarly, most are prepared to agree that religious allegiances and commitments are capable of shaping the ways people act in the economic and political realms.”

¹⁴ Income inequality, while not telling the whole story, is an indicator here, as we are dealing with income inequalities in the United States that have not been seen since the Great Depression. Stacy Curtin, “The American Dream Shrinks: Average Net Worth Falls 40% From 2007–2010,” *Daily Ticker*, June 12, 2012, <http://finance.yahoo.com/blogs/daily-ticker/american-dream-shrinks-avg-net-worth-falls-40-160150749.html>. Accessed February 18, 2013. The title speaks for itself; at the same time, the wealthiest 10 percent of families actually saw their net worth rise, from \$1.17 million to \$1.19 million. Keep in mind, of course, that income inequality stands for a more fundamental inequality of power and influence, topics that are crucial for a deeper understanding of class, as we shall see.

¹⁵ See, for instance, McCloud and Mirola, eds., *Religion and Class in America*.

¹⁶ McCloud, *Divine Hierarchies*, offers a valid concern over interpretations of class and religion that assume deprivation as the basic engine (i.e., that religion can be fully explained on the basis of a sense of deprivation by the lower classes).

¹⁷ Here, we need to point out another issue that is frequently overlooked. If Martin Luther King was right that we need to study the effects of racism not only on blacks but also on whites, we need to study class not only in its effects on the subordinate classes but also the dominant classes.

there is such a thing as class warfare and that his class is winning it,¹⁸ and with the Occupy movement's notion of the tensions between the 1 percent and the 99 percent. To be sure, Buffet's statement was supported by a few of his peers, but the majority rejected his argument. Although most Americans, and religious people in particular, do not dare to raise the issue of class warfare, more and more people are in agreement that there is tension between the classes.¹⁹

In the postmodern academy, talk about tensions like class struggle is often rejected in favor of more general notions like "otherness" and "difference"; the free flow of difference does not seem to allow for abrupt confrontations and conflicts. Nevertheless, it is odd that the existence of class struggle is contested precisely at a time when the gap between the tensions and extremes keeps growing. And even though some in the middle class still feel safe and are dedicated to seeking balance, the traditional safety nets of the middle class, like pensions, savings accounts, secure jobs, benefits, and the value of education are vanishing, resulting in the question not only of whether class struggle is real after all (who gains from disappearing safety nets?²⁰) but whether it is inevitable to take sides. If this is correct, we will have to reevaluate our understanding of class as well as religion.

Bringing Religion into Focus

If fresh investigations of class are long overdue, this is even more the case for investigations that bring together religion and class. While in the United States class is often hidden and invisible, connections between religion and class are more hidden and invisible yet. Religion and theology are abundantly studied, but often as isolated phenomena, with little sense of how matters of religion and theology are connected to other topics. To be sure, such compartmentalization lightens the workload of scholars and, on the surface, adds value and importance to contested fields like religion and theology. Theologians, in particular, feel they gain precision and control in this way.

However, such compartmentalization into isolated fields of study is based on artificial constructs like "religion" in general.²¹ Not only does compartmentalization prevent deeper insights in religion and theology, it also pushes these fields further into the corner of special interests. Some may, of course, be concerned that we are attempting to create artificial

¹⁸ Ben Stein, "In Class Warfare, Guess Which Class Is Winning," *New York Times* (November 26, 2006), <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/26/business/yourmoney/26every.html>. Accessed July 16, 2012.

¹⁹ Even so-called progressive mainline churches are hesitant to address the matter of class struggle. Nevertheless, according to a Pew study in December 2011, two-thirds of Americans believe that there are "strong conflicts" between the rich and the poor in the United States, ahead of racial issues and issues of immigration. There was a 59 percent increase compared to a similar survey in 2009, when only 47 percent believed there were strong conflicts between classes. The perception of class conflict surged most among white, middle-income earners. At the same time, the belief in upward mobility has not changed, and 43 percent believe that the rich are wealthy because of "their own hard work, ambition or education." This number has remained constant since 2008. According to this article, Rick Santorum criticized Mitt Romney for using the phrase "middle class," since the term would supposedly divide society. Santorum prefers "middle income." See Sabrina Tavernise, "Rich-Poor Gap Seen as Top U.S. Clash," *New York Times*, reprinted in the *Dallas Morning News*, January 12, 2012, 6A.

²⁰ The battle against Social Security, for instance, has been funded by the Koch brothers to the tune of millions of dollars. See the film *Koch Brothers Exposed* by Robert Greenwald. For more information, see www.kochbrothersexposed.com. Accessed July 16, 2012.

²¹ In religious studies, the universal notion of religion has been called into question from many directions. An important critique shows how the notion of religion has shaped up as a category of Western thought. See Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

constructs, when we identify links between religion, theology, and class. But it is hard to dispute that these subjects are always linked in people's lives, whether this is recognized or not. The problem is, therefore, not the attempt to identify these links and how they function, but ignoring them altogether.

Since no religion is practiced in a vacuum and pure religion does not exist, the question is not whether but how religion shapes up in relation to other expressions of life. Class plays a particular role in this regard, as it shapes our lives to the core.²² At the same time, we are not claiming a deterministic relationship or a one-way street between class and religion. Religion is not only shaped by the world and by class but also shapes them in turn.

In other words, religious traditions do not develop in a vacuum but in relation to the tensions of life. These tensions include larger political and economic constellations as well as smaller communities and personal lives. Tensions between the classes combine all of these levels, as class structures that are produced at the macro levels shape life at the micro levels as well, including communities and people's deepest emotions and most strongly held beliefs. As a result, we can no longer study religion and theology without keeping in mind the tensions of life. Otherwise we are not only going to miss a deeper understanding of the subject matter, we may miss critical components of religion and theology as well.

This brings us to a revision of the concepts of religion and theology. Religions and theologies never deal with matters that are separate from other expressions of life, like political or economic ones. Religions and theologies, whether they realize it or not, deal with all of life, politics and economics included. They do so in light of particular and often deeply rooted religious and theological traditions, which are embodied not only in historical texts and ideas but also in communities and shared ways of life. This means that religion and theology, like class, cannot be defined in general terms once and for all but need to be studied in particular historical contexts, in consideration not only of individual expressions but of broader relationships and—this is still mostly overlooked—the flow of power. In addition, this definition puts to rest a definition of religion as a matter of ideas, as well as questions (usually but somewhat misleadingly presented in terms of the theories of Karl Marx and Max Weber) whether religion is merely the result of material conditions or whether it is able to shape these conditions in turn.²³

What is at stake can be exemplified in terms of Christian images of God. Traditional theological notions of God as king, for instance, need to be understood not as universal concepts but in the context of the historical circumstances in which they were developed and maintained. From the very beginning, Christian images of God's power have shaped up in the context of the Roman Empire. Often, these images resembled the image of the Roman emperor and his power, especially after Emperor Constantine declared Christianity to be the official religion of the Roman Empire. Consequently, many theological notions of God as king were informed by the power of the upper classes.

Only when this perspective is recognized can we begin a search for alternative images of God's power, which took shape at the same time, and their significance. The problem with the failure to investigate the flow of power is that mainline theology for the longest time completely

²² Representatives of the New Working Class Studies have pointed out, for instance, that since we spend the largest block of our waking hours at work, we need to study in depth how work shapes our lives as a whole. See, for instance, the essays in John Russo and Sherry Lee Linkon, eds., *New Working Class Studies* (Ithaca: ILR Press, 2005).

²³ Labor historians have shown in many cases the difference religion made. For a short overview, see McCloud and Mirola, "Introduction," *Religion and Class in America*, 8–10.

neglected the fact that alternative notions of God as king existed, which envisioned God's power not in terms of the empire but in terms of revolutionary movements inspired by Christ and his disciples.

This example from historical theology illustrates the significance of studying religion in its particular expressions in a capitalist world. The focus of the study of religion and theology is, therefore, no longer a general one, valid for all times. Images of God's power may once again exemplify what is at stake. When contemporary Christians talk about God's power, the power of the CEO of a successful corporation is often what is envisioned. When this definition of power is taken for granted, as it often is, the discussion is confined to an endorsement of such a God by people who consider themselves theists or a rejection by others who claim to be atheists.

Yet what if God's power were not defined in terms of the ruling class but of the working class? This question is not as odd as it may sound, as the God in the biblical traditions is often described as a worker: in the second creation account in Genesis 2:4–25, God crafts the human being out of clay and plants a garden. In the creation stories of the Psalms, God's labor is celebrated (Psalm 8:3 describes the heavens as the work of God's fingers, in Psalm 65:9, God is said to water the earth, etc.). And in the first creation account in Genesis God is said to establish what in capitalist societies was established only by unionized workers: a day of rest after several days of work—that is, the weekend.

In sum, focusing on religion and theology in terms of alternative class positions and thus alternative flows of power will bring to the surface unconscious assumptions and broaden our horizons. Moreover, this focus will enable us to present some proposals for the next steps in the study of religion and theology.

Urgency

The social phenomenon that makes the topic of religion, theology, and class particularly relevant is what might be described as a growing polarization between the classes, which has grave implications not only for the working class but also for the middle class, as large numbers have lost substantial chunks of their livelihoods or face an uncertain future as jobs and benefits continue to be cut back.

In addition, a glance at the very bottom of the system shows how class turns into a literal struggle of life and death. In the United States itself, 35 million people were not able to buy enough food in 2006 before the economic crisis hit, which amounts to 10.6 percent of the population. In 2011, that number had grown to 14.5 percent of the population. The US Department of Agriculture is aware of these households that went hungry and calls them “food insecure.” Moreover, in the city of Dallas, a full 39 percent of inhabitants were considered to be financially insecure in 2012.²⁴ The numbers globally are even more dismal, as various chapters in this book point out. At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that there is a class that is doing quite well, not only in the United States but globally.

In the United States, such a severe polarization between the classes has not been seen since the Great Depression. It is considerably greater than class polarization in the Roman Empire: In Ancient Rome, the top 1 percent controlled 16 percent of society's wealth, compared

²⁴See, for example, <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Publications/ERR49/>, <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/headlines/2011/09/food-insecurity-1-in-6-americans-struggles-to-buy-food/>, and <http://www.feed3.org/email/022112.html>. Accessed January 28, 2013.

to 40 percent in the contemporary United States.²⁵ Ironically, while many believe that class is less a hurdle in the United States than elsewhere, past or present, the opposite is the case. The gaps between the classes are tremendous and in terms of income inequality the United States ranks behind any of the other wealthy nations, slightly ahead of Hong Kong and Singapore.²⁶ Unemployment is at record levels and affects even those in the middle class who had assumed their positions to be secure; minority groups are even more heavily affected. The official data, which underestimate the real numbers, state that the unemployment was at 7.4 percent for whites, 14.4 percent for African Americans, and 11 percent for Latinos and Latinas in July 2012.²⁷ Furthermore, the option to move up the ladder—the so-called American dream—is less an option although many people hold on to it. In these matters, the United States is behind England, hardly a country known for its reputation of social mobility.²⁸

However, although almost everybody agrees with the popular sentiment that “the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer,” and the numbers confirm it,²⁹ there is little examination of what this means and even less investigation of what the root causes are. The opposite appears to be the case: in times of economic inequality religious prosperity movements are on the rise, promising social mobility that is illusionary. While this might be expected from the quarters of those who seek to uphold the precarious status quo, it is striking that even among those who profess some interest in the so-called intersectionality of race, gender, and class, class inequality still tends to be underreflected.

In addition, it seems that the invisibility of class in the United States has also begun to affect its neighbors. In Mexico, for instance, class has been addressed for many years in public discourse. Today, however, the absence of class discourse is noticeable and seems to be linked to migration. As sociologist Pablo Vila has argued, the absence of class discourse that affects the borderlands, on both sides of the border, in particular “is linked to a metaphorical displacement through which moving up the social scale is equated by many people to moving from one country (Mexico) to the other (United States).”³⁰ Poverty is seen as tied to geographical regions—Mexico versus the United States—rather than to class.

²⁵ See Jillian Berman, “U.S. Income Inequality Higher than Roman Empire’s Levels: Study,” *Huffington Post*, December 19, 2011, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/12/19/us-income-inequality-ancient-rome-levels_n_1158926.html. Accessed February 18, 2013.

²⁶ See Kevin Watkins and others, *Fighting Climate Change: Human Solidarity in a Divided World*, United Nations Human Development Report 2007/2008 (New York: United Nations Development Programme, 2007), 281, http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/HDR_20072008_EN_Complete.pdf. Accessed July 16, 2012.

²⁷ See <http://www.cbpp.org/files/7-6-12-ui-stmt.pdf>. Accessed July 16, 2012. In addition, the income gap between young and old is at its highest level ever. Hope Yen, “US Jobs Gap between Young and Old Is Widest Ever,” *AP Press Report*, February 9, 2012, <http://finance.yahoo.com/news/us-jobs-gap-between-young-050926726.html>. Accessed July 16, 2012.

²⁸ Journalists Janny Scott and David Leonhardt, “Shadowy Lines That Still Divide,” in Correspondents of the *New York Times*, *Class Matters* (New York: Times Books, 2005), 1–26, give some of the numbers. They report, in 2005, that more people believe in the American dream than ever before, although studies show that social mobility is less and less an option. They quote economist David I. Levine: “Being born in the elite in the U.S. gives you a constellation of privileges that very few people in the world have ever experienced,” while “being born poor in the U.S. gives you disadvantages unlike anything in Western Europe and Japan and Canada” (14).

²⁹ See Chad Stone, Hannah Shaw, Danilo Trisi, and Arioc Sherman, “A Guide to Statistics on Historical Trends in Income Inequality,” March 5, 2012, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, <http://www.cbpp.org/cms/index.cfm?fa=view&id=3629>. Accessed July 16, 2012.

³⁰ Pablo Vila, *Border Identifications: Narratives of Religion, Gender, and Class on the U.S.-Mexico Border* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), 170. Vila notes how strong the American Dream is even in Mexico, where people experience the dark side of American capitalism more severely (179). This dream is further reinforced by returning

To be sure, many scholars shy away from topics of urgency, because they are afraid that this might add an undue bias to their work. These scholars adhere to the classic and abstract academic values of objectivity and critical distance. Yet these attitudes reflect a luxury that we no longer have, and which probably never existed. Scholarly work is hardly produced in a vacuum, despite the adage of the “ivory tower.” In the current economic situation, only very small percentages of the population are not affected by economic downturn, and experiencing such downturn can serve as a reminder of the impossibility of abstract objectivity and distance.³¹ Even those who consider themselves middle class, broadly conceived, have experienced an erosion of their personal finances, their social capital, as well as their cultural capital.

Due to the relationality of class we need to pay particular attention to the matter of power. Accordingly, some of our classic academic values need to be reframed in light of a new question: How does the power of scholars shape up in relation to the growing power differentials in current capitalism? Scholars might benefit from the realization that they are producing their reflections on class—or their strange silence on the topic—as their own class position is increasingly under pressure.

If scholars themselves are affected by the urgency of the topic of class, what about the matters of bias and objectivity? If closing one’s eyes to class relations can no longer be seen a valid option, do we simply have to confess our respective biases and live with them? As history has shown repeatedly, in situations of grave power differentials, attempts to stay neutral often meant siding with the powers that be. The history of religion and the university in Nazi Germany is one example among many others for how attempts to stay neutral meant to support the status quo. If sides are not taken consciously and self-critically, they are taken unconsciously and uncritically, often without the awareness of what is really going on. Nevertheless, this taking of sides should not be understood as a mere reinforcement of existing biases; rather, it is the result of a critical study of the relationships of class, the flows of power, and our own place within them. Bias can be dealt with properly only when it is acknowledged and subjected to self-critical reflection. In terms of the study of class and religion this means that scholars need to take into account their own conflictual locations.

A final indication of the urgency of the topic of class is that the classes are not distributed evenly. Although most Americans tend to think of themselves as middle class, the majority of Americans belong to the working class, if class is defined not in terms of income levels but in terms of the power people have at work and over their lives. According to economist Michael Zweig, 63 percent belong to the working class, 34 percent to the middle class, and only 2 percent belong to the ruling class, which is in a position to call the shots and thus benefits the most from the existing class structures.³² As sociologist Alejandro Portes has pointed out, all but those 2 percent “must work for a living, and this common trait makes [them] share a basic subordinate position.”³³ Due to its structural lack of power, which continues to grow as the ruling class consolidates its power and wealth, the middle class has more affinities with the working class than it commonly realizes.

migrants, who return with cars and other trappings of success, thus raising their own class status, but refuse to report on the problems (192). Vila notes, however, that lower class Anglos on the US side of the border are able to see the class issues (205–228).

³¹ In Joerg Rieger, *No Rising Tide: Theology, Economics, and the Future* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), I talk about the “logic of downturn.”

³² Zweig, *The Working Class Majority*, 36.

³³ Portes, *Economic Sociology*, 84.

In times of urgency such as ours, the question of class has often been addressed with new vigor. After the Great Depression, for instance, when the gap between the rich and the poor was enormous and most struggled while a few benefited, a wide-ranging reorientation took place. Not only were new social nets established in the New Deal, which addressed the failures of the Great Depression, workers gained new power by organizing themselves in unions. Even the churches were supportive, as religion and labor alliances developed and the social creeds were expanded.

Today, however, times are different. The question of class is still not addressed, despite a great deal of urgency. Instead, conservative positions, protecting large corporations and the interests of the ruling class, have picked up steam again, despite the fact that their proposals were the ones that had the upper hand since the 1980s and were in force when the economy collapsed in what is now called the Great Recession. In this context, any question that is raised about the role and increasing fortunes and power of the ruling class at a time when everyone else is hurting is defamed as instigating class struggle.

Alternatives

An analysis of religion, theology, and class that deals with relationship and tension, and that acknowledges bias and social location cannot merely be interested in gaining knowledge and understanding. To be sure, gaining knowledge and understanding are important goals and remain valid enterprises at a time when most scholars of religion and theology have become weary of age-old efforts at trying to explain religion, which usually amounts to explaining it away. Yet, for the same reason that there are no unbiased positions, there are no unbiased efforts at gaining knowledge and understanding. There are always motivations that drive the effort to know and to understand something, and there is always a flow of power enveloping the scholar, whether this is accounted for or not.

If efforts to investigate and understand particular situations are not to become tacit endorsements, an awareness of alternatives is required. Rather than assuming that the way in which religion and class shape up at present is “the way things are”— God-given, supported by nature, or simply by historical accident—we need to consider alternative ways in which religion and class function. We do not assume that the famous saying by Jesus that “you always have the poor with you” (Mark 14:7) endorses a static view of class. For good reasons, as economist Erik Olin Wright has noted, the most controversial question asked by social theorists is: “What sorts of transformations are needed to eliminate economic oppression and exploitation within capitalist societies?”³⁴

Moreover, these alternatives are not based in wishful thinking or utopian ideas but in observations of alternative ways in which religion and class shape up. These alternative ways are often overlooked, either because the focus of scholarship is on dominant ideas or, equally problematic, because the relationship between classes is overlooked, so that minority positions are considered as mere niche-phenomena that do not need to be taken seriously in their potential to contest the dominant positions. One advantage of understanding class as relational is that dominant and subordinate positions always have to be understood in relation to each other, and that the dominant class always needs the subordinate class, which accounts for some of the power of the subordinate class.³⁵

³⁴ Erik Olin Wright, “Conclusion,” in Wright, ed., *Approaches to Class Analysis*, 191.

³⁵ As Erik Olin Wright, “Foundations of a Neo-Marxist Class Analysis,” in Wright, ed., *Approaches to Class Analysis*, 24, has pointed out, this is a different sort of relationship than others in the past. The colonialists’ claim

An understanding of class in terms of tension and struggle can help us understand the production of alternatives. Examining the flow of power in this regard leads to an understanding that power does not always flow from the top down, but that alternative forms of power emerge from below and from elsewhere. The study of class not only requires an account of domination but also of resistance, rooted in the agency that emerges from those involved in the class struggle.³⁶ This brings us to a topic that is perhaps more neglected than any other in contemporary discussions of class. Even those who focus on class as a relational term and who understand the conflictual nature of class frequently focus on distribution, not production. Both notions, distribution and production, have the advantage of pushing us beyond the common focus on consumption, which tends to cover up relationships between classes.³⁷

Clearly, distribution of resources is important in the tension between the classes, as some have and, therefore, keep getting more than others, but what is distributed in a capitalist economy is a surplus that had to be produced. What distinguishes workers from other people in this regard is that they belong to the class that is at the heart of production. CEOs and managers can work all day and night, but they will not produce anything without the labor of workers. A focus on production allows us to take into account what contributions the various classes make to the common good through their agency and their labor, and how these productive contributions are valued by society.

When we talk about alternatives, taking production into account as relevant to class and relationship between classes allows us to consider the contributions of the various classes as well as the role that religion and theology play in valuing these contributions. On the one hand, this will require investigations of what role religion and theology play in upholding the current status quo that values elite leadership; it is not surprising that much religious discourse these days is about leadership. On the other hand, this will also require fresh investigations of the differences that classes that are usually considered as subordinated or oppressed can make.³⁸ Michael Hardt

that “the only good Indian is a dead Indian” cannot be applied to workers in capitalism, as the statement “the only good worker is a dead worker” does not make sense.

³⁶ Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Retreat from Class: A New “True” Socialism*, revised edition (London: Verso, 1998), 17, analyzes the consequences of a lack of class analysis on the left: “In the end, we are left with little more than the shop-worn vision of the ‘counter-culture,’ bearing witness against the ‘system’ in an enclave of the capitalist wilderness.” Not only is this approach quite vague; it fails to note significant movements of resistance. As Wood notes, “the critical question concerns the source and agency of revolutionary change” (21).

³⁷ The focus on consumption not only covers up class relations—more people have refrigerators and color TVs than ever before, it is often pointed out—it also makes it look as if things are going quite well and as if life is constantly improving. Opponents of class analysis claim the “centrality of consumption,” and a “growing level of affluence” across the board. Jan Pakulski, “Foundations of a Post-class Analysis,” in Wright, ed., *Approaches to Class Analysis*, 177. Erik Olin Wright, “Foundations of a Neo-Marxist Class Analysis,” in Wright, ed., *Approaches to Class Analysis*, 25–27, describes how the question of class and distribution is deeply rooted in Weberian Class analysis. For a theological argument to pay more attention to production in a context where the central term is distribution, see Rieger, *No Rising Tide*, 116–121, and 137–138.

³⁸ In my book *No Rising Tide*, 113–114, I made the following observation: “In this connection, we can turn our view to alternative forms of production that develop as a result of the repressions of the status quo: factory workers, for instance, by having to collaborate and share time on the factory floor, can produce alternative means of solidarity and resistance. This might be possible for other working people as well, including those who traditionally consider themselves middle class: collaborative projects are also common in the work of those who produce ideas, and office workers who work in communal settings, for instance, can meet around the proverbial water cooler. Resisting desire can be organized and strengthened in these settings, whenever those who have access to some alternative desires meet. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri may be too optimistic that such organization is now happening everywhere in what they call the ‘multitude,’ but their argument reminds us that we need to look more broadly for places where

and Antonio Negri clarify that “labor cannot be limited to waged labor but must refer to human creative capacities in all their generality. The poor [...] are thus not excluded from this conception of class but central to it.”³⁹ The focus on production creates, thus, a broader horizon for the investigation of religion and class.

Progressive Religion and Class: Overcoming Some Roadblocks

Over several decades, progressive religious communities in the United States have developed concerns for issues of gender, race, ethnicity, and more recently sexuality. While class is mentioned occasionally in this context, it is rarely examined in depth and even more rarely pursued as an agenda for resistance and liberation. As a result, the focus on gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality determines how progressive religion deals with class, and this has created substantial confusion. Examining this confusion can help us to develop a clearer sense of the particular role that class plays in religion, while gaining greater clarity for the connection class has with issues of gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality.

One of the biggest hurdles to understanding class is progressive religion’s concern for inclusion, which is theologically supported by portraying the divine as inclusive of all humanity. However, while inclusion is a common way to address matters of gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality, it makes little sense when dealing with issues of class. If class is not a matter of God-given diversity or other natural differences between people but produced in a conflictual relationship, whereby the power and success of one class is built on the back of the other, “celebrating diversity” would be counterproductive. Celebrating diversity in terms of class would make things worse by endorsing differences that are produced and conflictual, and which benefit some more than others.

Differences of class can, therefore, not be endorsed religiously or theologically. This insight raises an interesting question that cannot be further explored at this time: Might this insight help us rethink how we deal with differences of gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality, and what sense it makes to endorse them religiously and theologically? In any case, an understanding of class and power helps us see that when differences are celebrated and endorsed uncritically, the status quo may win out.⁴⁰

At the practical level, progressive interfaith coalitions are now addressing class issues through the problem of wage theft.⁴¹ This is, no doubt, an important issue. One theological rationale for these projects is that all religions believe in justice. Projects opposing wage theft appeal to the moral sensitivities of religious people and foster righteous indignation about an economic practice that is clearly wrong. No one would argue in favor of wage theft, which is commonly experienced by low-income immigrant workers employed in the construction and service industries. At the same time, these projects can easily be used to justify the status quo of dominant forms of religion, theology, and class, if people assume that all will be well when wage

such organization takes place, with the expectation that transformations in the forms of production can lead to transformed forms of desire.”

³⁹ Hard and Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 105. The authors note that the term multitude is a class concept (103).

⁴⁰ In a patriarchal context, for instance, the position of men is not really challenged by adding women and celebrating their supposedly God-given differences, especially when these differences reaffirm old stereotypes about women, and when the stereotypes about men are not called into question.

⁴¹ See Kim Bobo, *Wage Theft in America: Why Millions of Working Americans Are Not Getting Paid—And What We Can Do About It* (New York: New Press, 2009).

theft is finally eliminated and when workers are paid what they are promised. As a result, unless framed carefully, the focus on wage theft can become a hurdle to developing a deeper understanding of religion and class.

A more reflective approach to this topic would begin with the question of class: What class is most likely to be subject to wage theft? In light of this question, it could be pointed out that wage theft is not a universal problem that affects everybody, and that it is at least indirectly supported by the capitalist class structure as well as by certain religious assumptions (e.g., that lower classes are further away from God and, therefore, matter less, or that “illegal” immigrants may not be protected by the law). If wage theft were approached in this way, commonly accepted forms of religion and class would be open to question and it would be possible to envision transformation of religion and class.

Another hurdle to understanding class are certain liberal religious efforts to be nonjudgmental. As a friend wrote in an e-mail, “You may be aware . . . that progressives have moved away from the use of the term class because the phrase ‘lower class’ is so laden with negative connotations in our society, opting for more emphasis on income levels.” The problem with the discussion of income levels is, as pointed out above, that it ignores the relation between the classes and the concomitant power differentials. Accepting the negative stereotypes of society rather than fighting them, class is defined in terms of a deficit of income. This position allows for the study of inequality (inequality studies is a growing field), but not for the study of class as that which produces inequality,⁴² and it certainly does not allow for a critique of the ruling class that benefits from it all.

Furthermore, the “lower” class is left to blame itself or to find other channels for venting its anger. No wonder that the role of religion in this context is commonly reduced to providing social aid and welfare to those “less fortunate,” with the goal to raise them up to higher levels. No questions are raised as to how religion is part of the problem by endorsing structures by which fortunes are made, and how religion might contribute to alternatives.

It is now clearer how a lack of understanding of class that overlooks the relations between classes and class conflict is not only insufficient but also misleading. The biggest problem that all these liberal religious positions have in common is that class is ultimately seen as a matter of special interest, rather than an issue that affects the community as a whole and the practice of religion and theology more broadly conceived. When class is understood as stratification according to income levels, it becomes the special interest of those classes that are suffering deficits. When class is understood in terms of social problems like wage theft, it becomes the special interest of those whose wages are stolen. And when class is understood in terms of inclusion, it becomes the special interest of those classes who happen to be excluded.

To be sure, liberal religion encourages the classes who consider themselves to be “more fortunate” to lend support and to help, but there is little sense that solidarity between the classes can be anything more than servicing the special interests of the “less fortunate.” This invites not only patronizing attitudes but prevents critical investigations of class and of religion. There are important lessons to be learned here for how we approach gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality as well.

Surprisingly, much of liberal religion and its conservative counterparts differ very little in terms of the underlying assumptions about religion and class. Both understand that there is a

⁴² See also the critique that Portes, *Economic Sociology*, 127, offers of the concept of inequality, since it “does not provide sufficient analytic purchase because it does not fully clarify among whom inequality occurs and what are its basic structural causes and effects.”

problem when people are “less fortunate,” and both seek to help, using the tools of religion. Here is, of course, where they differ, as conservatives deal with the problem through individual improvement and moral exhortations like “show up for work on time, work harder, be more compliant with what is expected of you,” in short: “pull yourself up by your own bootstraps.” The liberals, on the other hand, deal with the problem by developing social programs that are designed to lift people up to the next stratum, like head-start programs, education, and so on. The underlying idea, however, is the same: both liberal and conservative religious communities seek to help integrate people back into a class system that is not questioned as such, just like their religious beliefs are applied but not examined in terms of what they actually accomplish and what images of the divine they propose. Not surprisingly, God often looks very much like the system in which religious communities operate.

In this context, liberation theologies have offered alternatives that have not yet been appreciated in the United States—despite a time when these theologies had high currency—because liberation theologies and liberal theologies have often been confused here; in this framework, both are supposedly concerned about matters like “helping” the less fortunate, “empowering” them, “improving” their social standing, and so on. Yet the agenda of liberation theology is different from this liberal agenda, as it is concerned with understanding the flows of power (both dominant and alternative) and what accounts for inequality and class struggle, with taking sides with the “least of these” not in terms of endorsing special interest but in terms of a common interest in which both people and the divine shares, and with rethinking what religion means in all of this.

If the Occupy Wall Street movement as it took shape in the United States has understood anything, it is that there is a fundamental tension between the 1 percent and the 99 percent. Here, we have for the first time in a long time a broad public understanding of class as a relational matter and in terms of conflict: there is a tension, usually covered up, between the 1 percent and the 99 percent that cannot be addressed by mantras of inclusiveness, social welfare, or well-meaning suspension of judgment. While awareness of the tension is not the same as a full-fledged analysis of class, this awareness notes one thing that is most lacking in the current context, namely a sense that there is a class that benefits from the current structures, and that not even the middle class is a part of it.⁴³

Religion and theology can benefit from an understanding of class at these deeper levels. Awareness is slowly building. Even some conservatives are beginning to understand that our current predicament is not just a matter of a lack of religious conviction, morals, and values, but deeply rooted in the material conditions that shape our lives.⁴⁴ Class is at the heart of it, as here these various elements are coming together.

For too long we have ignored or played down the importance of class and the economic structures of capitalism, as if becoming more spiritual and less materialistic would help.⁴⁵ The way forward for both the study of religion and theology is by acknowledging the various factors

⁴³ See Joerg Rieger and Kwok Pui-Lan, *Occupy Religion: Theology of the Multitude*, Religion in the Modern World (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2012).

⁴⁴ See, for instance, the response by conservative evangelical theologian Albert Mohler on some comments made by Marxist economist Richard Wolff; <http://www.albertmohler.com/2012/02/02/the-family-torn-apart-richard-wolff-on-economics-and-family-life/>. Accessed February 18, 2013

⁴⁵ This is implied by David Brooks, who now blames 1970s materialism and economic determinism; see <http://www.free-eco.org/insights/articles/the-materialist-fallacy.html>. Accessed February 18, 2013. I would contend, however, that the challenge is not to be less materialistic and more spiritual but to focus on material and spiritual realities in new ways.

that go into the production of religion and theology (spiritual, material, and otherwise), and by pointing out the alternatives that are produced as religion and class enter into different alliances.