The Subject, Capitalism, and Religion
While the relationship of religion and power is a perennial topic, it only continues to grow in importance and scope in our increasingly globalized and diverse world. Religion, on a global scale, has openly joined power struggles, often in support of the powers that be. But at the same time, religion has made major contributions to resistance movements. In this context, current methods in the study of religion and theology have created a deeper awareness of the issue of power: Critical theory, cultural studies, postcolonial theory, subaltern studies, feminist theory, critical race theory, and working class studies are contributing to a new quality of study in the field. This series is a place for both studies of particular problems in the relation of religion and power as well as for more general interpretations of this relation. It undergirds the growing recognition that religion can no longer be studied without the study of power.

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Titles:
No Longer the Same: Religious Others and the Liberation of Christian Theology
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The Subject, Capitalism, and Religion: Horizons of Hope in Complex Societies
Jung Mo Sung
Also by Jung Mo Sung

*Beyond the Spirit of Empire*
*Deus em nós: o reinado que acontece no amor solidário aos pobres*
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One of the things that are becoming clearer today is that there can be no study of religion or theology in abstract terms. Studies of religion and theology increasingly consider particular contexts and concrete phenomena, although there are still some who refuse to deal with their location and claim universality.

Latin American liberation theology, the tradition in which Jung Mo Sung writes and to which he has made major contributions, has been among the pioneering methods of contextual and concrete studies of religion and theology. Nevertheless, early generations of liberation theologians still maintained a certain level of abstraction that has been challenged repeatedly. Talk about the poor in general, for instance, did not allow for an in-depth understanding of lower-class people and for an in-depth understanding of the power relations that constitute the class system. Talk about economics was often too general as well, as Jung himself has pointed out. Differences along the lines of gender, sexuality, and ethnic background have been addressed by subsequent generations of liberation theologians.

The issues discussed by Jung Mo Sung in this book are located in the context of history, life, and ultimately in the
context of faith communities. Jung himself is involved in the day-to-day struggles along these lines not only as observer but as participant, living and working in São Paulo, Brazil. His involvement in faith communities is not limited to the Roman Catholic Church and its base communities, his spiritual home, but extends to new religious communities, which include charismatics, Pentecostals, and a Japanese religious community in São Paulo, the so-called World Messianic Church in Brazil. These involvements do not make his work less astute—the opposite is the case: the depth of his insight is tied to being involved.

Jung’s definition of theology as hermeneutics of history, as an effort to understand the dynamic of human life in view of a God in solidarity with those who are marginalized, plays out in the midst of history itself. Perhaps the most important lesson here is that there is no other place in which scholars of religion and theologians can write than in the midst of history; that there is no place for us outside of history and the world. What has sometimes been called a “God’s-eye view” is not available to human beings, and even Godself seems to have renounced it again and again, particularly in the Christian tradition of the incarnation. By the same token, not even the academy provides a place outside of history and the world, contrary to the myth of academic objectivity. The decisive question then becomes not whether we are located in history or not, but where in history we locate ourselves. Since Jung is addressing this question primarily from the perspective of Latin America and the Global South, in this introduction I will address it from the perspective of the United States and the Global North.

Communities of Faith

In response to Beyond the Spirit of Empire, a book co-authored by Jung Mo Sung, Néstor Míguez (an Argentinean liberation
theologian), and myself, a colleague wondered where the church was discussed in this project. Since our book deals with theology, politics, and the future of liberation theology, this question is crucial because it asks about the location of religious and theological reflection in relation to communities of faith. This question, of course, is bigger than the question whether specific communities of faith are addressed in a particular book—the question also has to do with the scholars’ own involvement in such communities and what difference scholarship makes to such communities. Scholarship in religious studies often shies away from these sorts of accounts, but scholarship in theology is often not doing much better in identifying its social location. The good news is, however, that the current climate in both religious studies and theology is more open to this issue than in the past.

In either case, in *Beyond the Spirit of Empire* we were perhaps not as forthcoming about the church and communities of faith as we might have been. But, speaking as one of the co-authors, I wonder whether there was a certain hesitance as well in addressing this issue. The reason for this hesitance has nothing to do with a lack of connection to communities of faith and churches, but that too often even talk about churches and communities of faith serves as one more level of abstraction. While there is broad agreement that academia often confines itself to the proverbial ivory towers, too often churches and communities of faith inhabit their very own ivory towers. To be sure, the real problem with these ivory towers is not that they do not allow for connections to the outside, as is commonly assumed. The real problem with these ivory towers is that the existing connections to the broader community and to the world go unrecognized or are covered up. This was one of Antonio Gramsci’s critiques of those academics whom he called “traditional intellectuals,” who “put themselves forward as autonomous and independent of the dominant social group,” while in reality their work is tied to the status quo without being aware of it.
The unfortunate truth is that many faith communities have become tied to the status quo without being aware of it. This phenomenon can be observed, for instance, in the fact that many faith communities have become self-referential. What matters in these cases are the exclusive interests of the community and its members, its projects, and its welfare. Moreover, this self-centeredness takes on a particular shape, as the basic concerns of the community are commonly influenced by those who hold the most power and often the most wealth in the wider context in which the community finds itself. In other words, those who are endorsed by the wider context due to their social standing are commonly also the ones who determine the shape of faith communities, thus integrating them effectively into this status quo. Even so-called outreach projects, as the charitable and missionary actions of churches today are often called, frequently fail to push beyond this self-referential nature of religious communities. The problem is that frequently such outreach has nothing to do with opening up to the outside but is designed to integrate others into the community, or to shape others in one’s own image.

In this context, dealing with communities of faith and with churches does not necessarily help to make the sorts of connections that theologians and religious scholars need to make. An engagement with faith communities and churches only pushes beyond the ivory towers when we investigate how these entities are located in the world and in history, especially in regard to its struggles and tensions. It is for these reasons that in *Beyond the Spirit of Empire* we discussed the complex notion of empire and the challenges this empire poses to our world and to history, which includes challenges to religious and ecclesial communities. The difference between democracy and laocracy, for instance, applies not only to political and other communities but to communities of faith as well. In other words, the difference between a rule of the people that is focused on the elites (democracy) and a rule of the people that truly incorporates the
common people (laocracy) has implications not just for politics and economics but also for the church and for other communities of faith.

Once this broader perspective has been established, based on examinations of the tectonics of power in the larger context in which we find ourselves, it is then possible to talk about specific religious and ecclesial communities in ways that go deeper and acknowledge both the complexity of these communities (a growing concern in contemporary studies of religion) and the flow of power in these communities (a growing concern in liberative discourses of religion and theology).

In this introduction, I will discuss how desire—one of the major concepts with which Jung Mo Sung has engaged with in several of his books, including the present one—can be addressed in religious communities that are aware of how they function in a broader context, pushing beyond moralism and romanticism. The relation of religion and labor will serve as an example. This relation is important for various reasons, not the least of them is a deep affinity between the Judeo-Christian traditions and people who work for a living. Moreover, many of the power structures at the core of global capitalism are negotiated between those who have no choice but to work for a living in some form or fashion (which includes the unemployed, the casually employed, and even small businesspeople) and those whose wealth works for them. Finally, the relation of religion and labor helps us understand in the Global North some of the struggles that people of faith are living through in the Global South.

**Religion and Labor: What is Going On?**

In the global economy, both in the North and in the South, the topics of labor and worker justice are arguably among the most burning issues of our time, tied to record unemployment and concomitant pressures on those who retain the remaining jobs.
Many of the mainline denominations support issues of labor and worker justice, including collective bargaining rights. Nevertheless churches, especially in the United States, have often been highly reluctant to deal with labor and worker justice, and these issues are largely absent from theological reflection. What is the reason for this discrepancy?

Key reasons for the lack of engagement of churches and theologians in matters of labor include a fundamental lack of understanding of the relation of labor and religion. In the United States, these reasons also include a widespread misunderstanding that sees labor as a special interest concern, a pervasive lack of understanding of matters of socioeconomic class, and acquiescence to a climate of systemic increase of pressures leveled against workers.

**Common Interest**

Labor is misunderstood as a special interest concern, for instance, when it is seen as the occupation of mostly white and male blue-collar workers. Furthermore, labor is misunderstood as special interest when it is overlooked that labor is one of the pillars of life in the world today, without which there is no production, no subsistence, and no human flourishing. In response to these misunderstandings it should be noted that the working class makes up the majority of the population in the United States, and that contemporary labor includes large numbers of women, ethnic and racial minorities, and immigrants. Moreover, labor includes many white-collar workers who have little control over their work. Economist Michael Zweig has pointed out that in the United States 62 percent belong to the working class, 36 percent to the middle class, and only 2 percent to the ruling class.

This has direct implications for religious communities, whose constituencies resemble this statistics. This means that even in the United States, which has high rates of participation
in religious communities, a large part of the membership is not middle class but working class. Even the common assumption that mainline religion, and mainline Christianity in particular, is mostly made up by members of the middle and upper classes will have to be reevaluated. And while the mainline may be constituted more heavily of members of a middle class background, the question is with whose interests the interests of the middle class are aligned. The default assumption is that the middle class and the ruling class share many interests in common, but in the current climate it is becoming more obvious that this may not be the case. While both classes own stocks, for instance, the amount of stocks owned is vastly different. The so-called Great Recession that is moving into the second decade of the twenty-first century has produced a number of economic winners, but the middle class has for the most part been among the losers, paralleling the fate of the working class rather than the ruling class. In the United States, many well-paying middle-class jobs have been lost, only to be replaced with less well-paying jobs. Many middle class families know intuitively that their children will not be able to maintain their economic standing.

Class analysis is thus a crucial matter, not only in order to understand economic and political registers but also to understand religious ones. Before we turn to this topic, the implications for communities of faith need to be pointed out. At present, many communities of faith are shaped by the interests of those members in their midst who represent relative power and wealth, and these members are usually in the minority. In other words, a dominant minority is able to assure that its interests, rather than the interests of the majority of the members of the church, are pursued. Many examples could be given. Why would churches in Texas, for instance, be afraid to tackle issues of economics, labor, and even universal health care, especially at a time when so many of its members are hurting in these areas, and when the institutions themselves
are suffering economic losses? Moreover, why would churches in this context be afraid to have conversations about the so-called Employee Free Choice Act, a proposal before the United States Congress that would eliminate some of the considerable hurdles that prevent workers from forming unions?

In a climate when even the topic of universal health care is anathema in most mainline churches, support of labor issues is almost unimaginable. The strangeness of this situation can be seen in stark relief in light of the fact that most mainline churches officially support collective bargaining rights and the formation of labor unions, and that matters of health and work are key issues in the Jewish-Christian traditions. Jesus’ healing ministry, for example, provides what might be considered free health care for the least of these, and his concern for working people is hard to dismiss. All this points to the fact that the interests dominating the religious communities that block discussions of labor and health care for all are the interests of a minority rather than the majority. Here, our sense for what is common and what is special interest shifts.

**Class**

Socioeconomic class is arguably one of the most misunderstood subjects in the United States. When class is discussed at all, it is mostly done in terms of economic stratification. While there is much to be gained from information about income levels and about the distribution of income in society, what such discussions overlook is the question of how class relates to power.

When class is discussed in terms of power rather than in terms of income levels, one of the key questions is what control people have over their own work and their lives. The power people have over their work and their lives is an important clue as to their place in an economic system where some hold enormous powers and others very little. This power is, of
course, also reflected in the financial benefits of work, as those in power consistently make hundreds or thousands of times more than others. In terms of this definition, those who have little power over their work belong to the working class, which includes many white-collar workers as well. Here, work is constrained by regulations, which are increasingly determined by the ideal of “lean and mean production,” which result in increasing the speed of work and in lowering its benefits. Those who have the most power over their own work, including the work of others, belong to the ruling class. Here, work means setting the parameters for the work of others and thus the ability to control what is going on, at least to some degree.

To the middle class belong those who are in between these two groups, with some power over their work. This includes, for instance, small business people and professionals. Here, work still allows for some creativity, although even the life of professionals is more and more regulated and subject to an increasing number of “performance reviews.” Life in the middle, therefore, is not as comfortable as it looks, especially in an economic climate where the middle class is losing ground. Under pressure to work more while earning less, and receiving fewer benefits, even medical doctors in the United States are now forming and joining unions. And even the work of professors at colleges and universities is increasingly under pressure from business models that stress efficiency and evaluation of academic production in terms of measurable outcomes.

In this context, the interests of those who lack power at work matter less and less. According to United States law, corporations are not accountable for the well-being of their workers but for the production of wealth for their stockholders. If the interests of those who lack power at work are to continue to matter at all, they will need to organize in order to prevent existing imbalances of power from deepening. This insight is relevant for communities of faith and churches because these imbalances of power are reproduced not just in
the economic realm but in the realm of religion as well. To put it bluntly, the ministry of too many churches and the imagination of too many theologians are shaped by positions of power and wealth, for the most part without even being aware of it. God is invariably located at the top, wielding power from the top down in the manner of the powerful and wealthy.

Here is an excerpt from a letter I wrote to a pastor in Dallas, who wrote to me about how a recent series of presentations on religion and economics at church was well received by the majority but met with the active resistance of a small number of wealthy and powerful families:

Thanks for your note, which I received the other day. I know exactly what you are talking about, as the same thing seems to be happening anywhere I look. Anything that really challenges the current status quo, especially when it addresses power and wealth, is quickly brushed off the table. The actors are always the same: people who enjoy a certain power and wealth, although they are not necessarily the ones who benefit from the overall economic climate the most. At the same time, many of our church members are open and would like to hear and do more. They are the ones who are getting it, but unfortunately the pastors are left hanging in the middle. One way to address this would be to organize the common membership, just like labor needs to organize if it wants to make a dent.

In other words, there is a class struggle being waged from the top down, not only in society but also in the realm of religion, which has tremendous implications for the future of communities of faith and churches. Yet not all is lost: once this is acknowledged, alternatives can be envisioned.

This problem is not limited to Texas, where the interests of the ruling class exert enormous pressures on the labor movement that are unmatched in most other states in the United States.
This problem can be encountered in many other places as well, both in the Global North and the Global South. Furthermore, and more closely related to the topic of this introduction, the interests of the ruling class exert pressure on communities of faith as well, often represented vicariously by members of the middle class and even the working class who mistakenly see their interests aligned with those of the ruling class.

Since pastors and other religious professionals are dependent on these powers—through their salaries and their ranking in a system that decides on merit and the next steps in their careers—their performance is severely handicapped. Rarely are they in a position where they can present many challenges, and thus even their training in religious studies and theology is often rendered irrelevant to their profession, especially where it contains a critique of the status quo. Of course, training in religious studies and theology itself is frequently designed to adapt to these power structures, which is why those approaches that present fewer challenges, whether they insist on strict objectivity or make efforts to provide what they consider balance, enjoy a higher currency. 12

**Acquiescence**

Taken-for-granted accomplishments like eight-hour workdays, weekends off work, benefits, and basic protections for working people exist because they were negotiated by organized labor in the United States and elsewhere, which understood that common interest is built from the bottom up. “An injury to one is an injury to all” is one of the time-honored mottos of organized labor. This insight reflects the well-known words of the apostle Paul: “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it” (1 Cor. 12:26). Common interest is pursued where the weakest members and those who have been injured are taken into consideration. Since the well-being of the whole body is at stake,
we can argue that the interest of the middle and of the ruling classes is at stake in the interest of the working class as well.

Unfortunately, these accomplishments are now under attack from corporations and politicians alike, especially in the United States, where conservative politicians have launched all-out attacks against labor, with little resistance from their more progressive colleagues, and sometimes with their support. In this situation, the corporations are able to play off against each other workers in other locations around the world and U.S. workers, eroding standards of labor everywhere and discouraging worker solidarity both globally and locally. Under current law, the United States restricts the opportunities to organize new trade unions more severely than most other countries: as many as 60 million U.S. workers want to organize, while only 500,000 are permitted to do so every year. In this context of increasing pressures leveled against labor, communities of faith and churches will need to reevaluate their own positions, as acquiescence means to support this status quo.

Communities of faith in the current climate tend to look at these things from the outside, as if they were not directly affected by what is going on. One of the key insights of liberation theology, reflecting ancient wisdom, is that this is not true: religion, faith, and life can never be separated. This is especially striking in the southern parts of the United States, where this separation is often assumed in a situation where faith and life are even more closely related than elsewhere. Here, communities of faith are more directly affected by labor issues than elsewhere, as many workers are also members of churches. In Europe, by contrast, most members of the working class gave up on the church decades ago. At a recent Labor Day breakfast organized by the Dallas AFL-CIO, more than 75 percent of the 500 union leaders in attendance raised their hands when asked whether they were members of religious communities.

Such close relations of religion and labor, even when there is less direct involvement of workers in the church, carry
tremendous potential. Unfortunately, the vast majority of union leaders and their fellow workers who are members of faith communities are likely to find themselves in situations where labor issues are never addressed at any level. This situation leads to a tacit endorsement of the powers that be, which results in the increasing reduction of benefits for workers, reductions of wages, and an increasing loss of the last semblances of human decency at the workplace. Separating religion and labor in this way creates the impression not only that communities of faith have no interests in matters of labor, but that they have nothing of value to contribute. At the level of theological reflection, the same assumption is also made about God: God appears to have no interest in labor and nothing of value to contribute. When religion and labor are thus separated, the status quo wins every time.

This separation of religion and labor, which results in the acquiescence of faith communities to the status quo, has severe consequences, as worsening conditions of labor are becoming matters of life and death. Ultimately, the worsening conditions of labor in the global economy are reproduced in communities of faith and churches themselves. Benefits for religious workers, including some of the leaders, are cut back all the time. Even time-honored traditions like guaranteed pastoral appointments in The United Methodist Church, which are closely related to its appointment system and the theology that backs it up, are now under attack.

Religion and Labor: Next steps
When issues of religion and labor are discussed rather than repressed, matters are usually framed in terms of a one-way street: What might faith communities do in support of labor? The reverse question, however, is equally important, if not more so: What might labor do in support of faith communities? This leads us to the question of what happens when faith communities, theologians, and scholars of religion are introduced to the
problems of labor (which includes their own labor) and to an understanding that these problems are not natural catastrophes but socially produced.

Rather than speculating about the answer to this question, let me introduce some insights generated in the context of the work of a local Workers’ Rights Board in Dallas, Texas. This board, whose members include community leaders, pastors, teachers, academics, and members of faith communities, holds regular hearings on labor issues. These hearings bring to the surface particular labor struggles that are taking place in the local scene, a reality that is dramatically underreported in any of the news media. The mission of the Workers’ Rights Board is to address these struggles, by understanding the nature of the conflict, meeting with workers and employers and their representatives, working on matters of labor rights with politicians, and many other avenues. Yet perhaps the most important mission of the Workers’ Rights Board is to develop a deeper understanding of these conflicts, both for the members of the board who seek to investigate what is going on and what the deeper roots of the problem are, and for the wider public. Thus, one part of the mission of the Workers’ Rights Board is to publicize these labor struggles in various ways: the hearings are open to the public and the media are invited, board members write letters to the editor and news reports on the hearings that are distributed to media outlets, and findings are disseminated in other ways as well. Finally, these issues are beginning to find their way back into communities of faith and the theological production of the members of the Workers’ Rights Board who are involved in faith communities, whether they are members or leaders or academics.

To give a specific example: Learning about the plight of immigrant construction workers, for instance, who are forced to work in the extremely hot summers in the Southern United States without water and safety equipment, creates a basic understanding for the situation of labor in our context, as
well as a sense for the life-and-death urgency of labor issues. Furthermore, learning how these concerns are often played down and shrugged off by the employers when they are approached by delegations of the Workers’ Rights Board and workers, creates a new feel for the power differentials at work in labor from the perspective of those who hold little formal power. And dealing with the media, which often fail to report on these grave violations and never discuss their real causes, creates a sense of the marginal place which these issues occupy in our society.

It is only in this context that theological and religious reflections on the importance of labor begin to make sense. One of the first surprising discoveries that communities of faith make in this context is that the causes of labor and workers have been at the core of many religious traditions. In Christianity, for instance, Jesus’ parables present a perspective that takes seriously the concerns of workers, including service workers, fishermen, peasants, and working women. The parable of the unforgiving servant, to name but one example, makes sense only from the perspective of labor: in the unusual situation where a master gives up control over the servant by forgiving debt, the logical response for the servant would be to forgive the debt of his fellow servant. After all, solidarity among servants is much more valuable for the well-being of the community than a little pocket money (Matthew 18:23–34).

The Jewish religion presents the traditions of Moses in terms of divine solidarity with laboring slaves. God’s mysterious revelation, speaking out of a burning bush, makes sense only in this context, as the mission given to Moses is a specific one: “The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt” (Exodus 3:9–10). Islam, too, promotes the fair treatment of workers and insists on the importance of fair pay (see, for instance, the Qur’an, Sura LXX). Issues of labor are
indeed of central importance to many faith communities. In the Christian traditions that understand Jesus as divine, this connection of labor and religion is part of the inner sanctum, beginning with the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ: Here, Godself is born as a day laborer in construction (Mark 6:3; this is what the Greek word often translated as “carpenter” means), and the first to acknowledge this miracle are day laborers who tend the sheep of other people (Luke 2:8–20).

Throughout the history of the Christian church, there have been movements embodying relations of religion and labor. Even in the United States there is a long tradition of religion and labor that often goes unrecognized, for instance, in the Roman Catholic Worker movements, the Social Gospel, and in more recent organizations like Interfaith Worker Justice (IWJ) and Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice (CLUE). Even in unlikely places like Texas there have been prominent religion and labor movements in the past. In the early 1900s, Christian socialist camp meetings attracted 10,000 people in Northeast Texas and Southeastern Oklahoma. Today, the Dallas Workers’ Rights Board and various other organizations like the Worker Defense Project in Austin and another Interfaith Worker Justice-related worker center in Houston continue the religion and labor tradition, which include efforts to work with particular faith communities. All of these traditions help rediscover some genuine truths about the Christian faith that are mostly forgotten in contemporary Christianity.

The question of why to engage labor and religion in the first place can now be addressed at a deeper level. We are obviously not dealing with a special-interest topic here, as the question is not merely what to do about labor issues. The question is how attention to labor issues and struggles might help us to reform communities of faith and churches in such a way that they become more faithful to the core of their own traditions. Understanding that all of us are invariably engaged in these issues, whatever social class we belong to, we are now able to
examine on a broader scale what various religious traditions might contribute to more just relations of labor and what more just relations of labor might contribute to religious traditions and theologies. Many religious traditions reveal deeper levels of meaning when retold from the perspectives of labor, as many of them originated in such contexts.\textsuperscript{16}

Even the theological question of God, often considered to be an abstract metaphysical question, is raised here in new ways. If God takes sides in the hermeneutics of history, as various religious traditions hold, the question of God needs to be rethought in the context of labor. Without having to identify God and labor, there are some major lessons to be learned here. As several Christian theologians have reminded us in recent years, many of the biblical traditions portray Godself as a worker, beginning with the creation stories in the book of Genesis.\textsuperscript{17}

**Conclusion: Reevaluating Desire**

We are now ready to return to a key issue that Jung Mo Sung raises from a Latin American perspective. When Jung notes the problem of consumption and limitless desire—in the United States we talk about consumerism as an attitude that makes consumption appear limitless—he digs deeper than the common popular critiques in the North. Consumption, he notes, is not primarily about what some have called “materialism,” that is, the acquisition of more and more material goods. Consumption has to do with the ideals and higher values that we pursue, as the things that we acquire do not take on the roles of ends in themselves. Buying a new car every two years for instance, a common practice in the recent history of the United States, is more about ideals like feeling safe and secure and manifestations of self-appreciation and love than about the actual car itself. These ideals are crucial for the formation of personal identity, as consumers define a sense of their
self-worth and the character of their personalities in this way. Subjectivity, another major concept in Jung’s work, is closely tied to this dynamic. What is more, our deepest desires are shaped and reshaped in this context of consumption.

This analysis of consumption and desire helps us understand the all-pervasiveness of the problem. The success of a capitalist economy depends to a large degree on producing desire and the concomitant ideals that keep people focused on consumption. Moreover, the production of limitless desire and consumption is not only one of the main pillars on which a capitalist economy rests; Jung also notes how this relates to faith in the market and the resulting absolutization of the market, which can be observed not only in the Global South but also in the Global North. Communities of faith are not immune to these dynamics and the idolatrous faith that is produced here.

In this context, one of the most common critiques of consumerism in the United States, often pronounced from within faith communities and churches, only makes things worse. The complaint that people are “materialist,” that they constantly seek to acquire more stuff, covers up the deeper motivations and the role of faith and ideals in consumerism. What is commonly called “materialism” is not really a focus on material things but a focus on misguided ideals and misguided faith, a certain “spiritualism,” as material things are acquired not for themselves but in the search for higher values and ultimate truth. Moreover, the use of the notion of “materialism” in this context covers up the deeper problem of the absolutization of ideals that are not absolute, and thus idolatry—the worship of false gods. When Jung talks about the spiritual or spirituality, he seeks to present alternatives to this problem, as the spiritual that he promotes is not the lofty absolute of false consciousness but worked out in the midst of the struggle for life where God is at work.

On the basis of what has been said in this introduction, a more appropriate response to consumerism and desire can now be imagined through the relation of religion and labor. Here,
desire can be seen in a new light and, as a result, can be kept in check to some degree. While Jung is right that desire is shaped in consumption, related to a utopian horizon that has become an idol, the perspective of labor and production is what helps us see that desire itself is not ultimate reality. Rather, desire in a capitalist economy needs to be produced in order to keep the world of production going. Without the relentless production of desire via the ever-expanding advertising industry, the production of goods and services would stagnate. In other words, the success of capitalism is dependent on the ongoing production of desire and an aggressive enticement of consumerism in order to maintain an increase in production. This is why blaming consumers for their consumerism, the typical approach in the United States pursued frequently by well-meaning communities of faith, is putting the cart before the horse.\textsuperscript{18}

Even an understanding of consumerism in terms of a search for ideals and ultimate values does not go far enough if it overlooks the need to keep production going. It is at this point that an alternative view of production, as it emerges from the world of labor, might help. While production is still one of the major places for the creation of profit in a capitalist economy (despite the role of virtual capital and stock markets) and thus part of its mythology, production looks different from the perspective of those who have little power in the process because they have little else to bring to the bargaining table than their labor. Here, some major insights can be gained and new spiritualities, grounded in real life, develop. Through listening to perspectives from labor, even the members of the Workers’ Rights Board discussed above, although they are not employed in production themselves, are beginning to understand the limits of production and the consequences of production that becomes meaner and leaner all the time. These limits have to with the limits of workers, the limits of exploitation, and the limits of nature and the environment of which we are becoming more aware today.
If production is, thus, not without limits, neither can desire be without limits. When this is taken into account, we begin to understand that both unlimited production and the satisfaction of unlimited desire are impossible and ultimately harmful and deadly. As religion gets back in touch with labor, these insights become clearer again. Godself is not the warrant for unlimited desire, unlike the “invisible hand of the market” that guarantees apparently unlimited success. Faith communities that are developing an understanding of these mechanisms and their limits can help make a real difference in reshaping desire.

Desire does not have to be given up at this point, but it is reshaped in light of its limitations. Moreover, from the perspective of those who labor in production and those who stand in solidarity with them, desire can now be linked to what people really need. These needs include not only the basic ones like food, shelter, and clothing, but also the need to engage in constructive labor and to produce new spiritualities, grounded in real life. Such labor can then be valued again for what it is: not a mere tool for the production of economic surplus by those who hire labor, but a way of life that mirrors divine production which is geared at sustaining the life of communities and the globe as a whole. Such labor ultimately creates more hopeful desires, which can flourish by engaging their limitations.

Notes

1. I want to thank Ph.D. students Kevin Minister and Peter Jones for their valuable contributions to this chapter.
3. This was part of the response of Nancy Bedford, as part of a panel reviewing Néstor Míguez, Joerg Rieger, and Jung Mo Sung, *Beyond The Spirit of Empire: Theology and Politics in a New Key*, Reclaiming Liberation Theology Series (London: SCM Press, 2009), at the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion in Atlanta in October 2010.


In 2006, the average CEO made 364 times more than an average worker in the United States, down from over 500 times a few years earlier. At the same time, the difference between the salary of an average worker and the top twenty private-equity and hedge-fund managers in the United States is much higher: these top-investors earned 22,255 times the pay of the average worker.

11. For good reasons, only 5.4 percent of workers in Texas were members of unions in 2010, compared to 24.2 percent in the State of New York and 17.5 in the State of California. See: http://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.t05.htm.

12. The problem is, thus, not just that the church would restrict pastors from teaching what they learned in seminary, as Jack Good, *The Dishonest Church* (Haworth, NY: St. Johann Press, 2008) has pointed out. The problem is also that the seminars submit to these pressures and adjust curricula and theology accordingly.

13. See Michael Payne, “Unionization: A Private Sector Solution to the Financial Crisis,” Dissent (Spring 2009): 59. The AFL-CIO estimates that 60 million workers would like to be organized in unions, while opponents of the Employee Free Choice Act reduce this number to a still sizable figure of 25 million workers.

14. For more information, see: http://wrbdallas.blogspot.com/.

15. My own work as a theologian has been greatly informed by this work.

16. This is one of the key points of my book *No Rising Tide*.


18. See also Rieger, *No Rising Tide*, chapter 4.
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Registry of the Texts’ Origins


Chapter 5: An enlarged and modified version of the article, “Ética e economia,” written in honor of Fr. Carlos Josaphat, for his seventieth birthday.