Is Plutocracy Sinful?  

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Confronting extreme inequality requires disrupting the ways that cultures legitimate concentrations of wealth and curtailing the political advantages that wealth confers. Can theology do that? Belief-centered critiques of capitalism as sinful largely fail; however, certain forms of practical economic dissent, when undertaken as spiritual practices, can corrode the interior disciplines of plutocratic culture.

A confounding feature of economic inequality is that it seems to generate, almost as if by its own genius, political structures and cultural ideas that intensify the dynamics that produce it. Even as the concentration of wealth narrows, with ever more accumulated by ever fewer, the influence of wealth seems to broaden, capturing democratic politics as well as the imaginations of many citizens. Emerging with extreme inequality, in other words, are patterns of regard that legitimate it. Curtailing extreme inequality therefore requires disrupting the political advantages of wealth along with cultural imaginations that legitimate wealth’s concentration. Confronting inequality requires reckoning with plutocracy.1

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1 In this argument I focus on “extreme inequality” and “radical inequality”: situations in which many do not have sufficient resources to live decently or to survive (respectively), while a few accumulate massively more than needed. For definition of the latter, see Thomas Nagel, “Poverty and Food: Why Charity Is Not Enough,” in Food Policy: The Responsibility of the United States in Life and Death Choices, ed. Peter G. Brown and Henry Shue (New York: Free Press, 1977), 54–62.
Does Christianity possess that capacity? Certainly the theologian can draw upon traditions warning against typical vices of the rich in order to prevail upon the wealthy to consider as their own the needs of the poor, or to appeal for a distributive politics that better respects the dignity of every person before God. Or, appalled by contemporary failures in those measures, she can rehearse sarcastic barbs from the prophets, like Amos’s line about people willing to exchange the poor for a nice pair of shoes, or Hosea’s about rushing after (olive) oil while the land starves. Insofar as the inequalities generated by contemporary capitalism conform to timeless patterns of greed-blinded violence, people of faith can denounce plutocracy as sinful. Does that help confront contemporary extreme inequality?

It is not obvious how it does. Suppose I summarize the wrongness of extreme inequality by a non-religious criticism of domination. Inequality becomes wrong, in this frame, when it unjustifiably harms persons. Contemporary patterns of extreme inequality harm persons through arbitrary domination. Plutocratic domination is unjustifiably harmful (a) because it determines too much of how a person’s life will go by the unimportant criteria of their relative wealth, and thereby offends the moral equality of persons; (b) because it determines how effectively people can participate in governance and so injures the political equality of persons; and (c) because it creates political conditions that inevitably lead to economic exploitation and other material injuries, like disproportionate exposure to environmental risks. In other words, economic inequality is characterized by plutocratic domination when basic social conditions are so shaped by patterns of wealth concentration that everyone’s freedom is undermined.

Defending that interpretation would require much further specification, but an outline is sufficient to raise this question: What would be added by calling plutocratic domination sinful? My hesitation here is tactical. Within cultural practices that celebrate the freedom of economic exchange as glorious, sighing over unequal outcomes of those exchanges in religious murmurs will sound like misplaced moralism. The practices central to financial capitalism not only organize flows of wealth; they also exert normative force in shaping perceptions of how the economy works and what explains success within it. People whose minds are shaped by the culture of financial capitalism, including young people impressed with the prestige of money-making careers, will likely hear sin-talk as the sort of tender-mindedness that belongs in a religious sphere of spirituality and love, but not in the
hard-nosed economic sphere where interests must compete against one another. The frame of plutocratic domination has the advantage of criticizing the structure of that economic sphere, making the outcome of greed-fueled contests accountable to, if not love, at least the minimal notion of justice implicit in the idea of free economic competition. Calling extreme inequality sinful, on the other hand, could counterproductively signal to the culture of financial capitalism that seeing the wrongness of inequality depends on sentimental religious notions of greed.

Why does talk of sin seem out of place in the economic arena? Its relevance was undermined in the great reversal of modern economic thought, which discovered selfishness, avarice, and competitiveness as engines of wealth. When public provisioning was no longer thought to rely on some order of love but rather to emerge from pursuits of self-interest, capitalist cultures began to see the old sins (passions) as natural human propensities (interests) that drive the basis of emergent goods. Whatever consequence they might have for individual character, greed and selfishness came to appear socially virtuous, in the sense that they drive production of common goods. In the transition from ancient philosophy to modern thinking, observes Melissa Lane, greed “went from being viewed as a signal vice, to a tolerated evil, to an accepted and sometimes even celebrated pathway from individual to social good.” The transition involves not just a reversal of valences (greed becomes good), but the disconnection of personal character from common goods. No longer do common goods seem to depend on people seeking what is objectively good for them as persons; now they seem to emerge from the play of people pursuing whatever subjective interests they may have.

So when people of faith deploy sin language to condemn economic phenomena, it not only sounds sentimental; it sounds like a refusal to grasp the basic logic by which economic goods emerge. Simply expanding the concept to “social sin,” as the social gospel movement

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did, will not work, because once sin was naturalized into the production of economic goods, the concept of sinfulness lost proof of economic salience. Just as personal greed might be the sort of thing that drives economic growth, so a dose of inequality might be necessary for the social benefits of innovation or an entrepreneurial culture.

Now within Christian communities it may well work to name inequality as sin and motivate responses in the name of love. Some Christians will want to know how their political commitments align with their faith or how their economic lives appear when interpreted within an account of Christian life. For them, the way that sin language directs attention to desire and the will may illuminate the pastoral significance of inequality.

But who else really cares? However those theological accounts go internally for communities of faith, I am asking what potential they carry for corroding the legitimacy of extreme inequality within pluralist, post-Christian, plutocratic economies. Inept Christian interventions, perhaps preaching inequality as a matter of greed, could unwittingly function to make growing social uneasiness with inequality seem like misplaced moralism. Religious sighs over inequality could have the perverse effect of alleviating unease over inequality by reassuring a plutocratic culture that its self-doubts are vestiges of now-irrelevant religious moralities.

My point here is not to rule out religious engagements with inequality, but rather to insist on their making a practical difference. I propose an acid test: Do they corrode the cultural legitimacy of extreme inequality? I am skeptical about belief-centered critiques of market logic, yet argue that certain forms of spiritual practice can be properly corrosive, can enhance the critique of plutocratic domination, and, most encouragingly, can make alliance with other forms of practical dissent from plutocratic culture.

Spiritualities of Wealth

Some acidulous critics deploy religious analyses to interpret economic thought as a kind of belief in special, transcendent things. Perhaps, they say, institutions that praise economic freedom as glorious, venerate growth as divine, and make so many human sacrifices are best analyzed in religious terms. Revealing contemporary economics as a form of political theology, this strategy attempts to denaturalize
inequality by displaying the contingency of the ideas which permit and produce it.⁴

The risk of this strategy is that it requires a high initial investment of credulity: the reader must be willing to reimagine economic institutions in terms of religious belief structures. It is difficult, however, to have a theological argument with people who refuse the notion that they have special beliefs, and especially with economists who think that they are objectively describing natural systems. If a reader does not make the loan of imaginative credibility, the religious strategy may confirm perceptions that moralist critics simply refuse to accept economic realities. Religious deployments can unwittingly reinforce the very naturalism that they want to dislodge. If I argue that public decisions to underfund global food programs for children in order to protect putative processes of wealth accumulation conform to the logic of a child sacrifice cult,⁵ hoping that I can thereby open space to recommend the more child-friendly religion of Jesus, economists are less likely to recognize the cultural contingency of their ideas about economic growth than to flatly reject the comparison with religion. A theological intervention focused on belief structure is liable to reaffirm cultural perceptions of economics as a natural science.

Confronting inequality within a plutocratic culture that does not recognize its values as religious or even contingent involves a harder task: How to corrode practical assumptions that are not recognized as beliefs? We need some way of reaching the social imaginary that permits extreme inequality—the understandings, stories, and emotions carried by everyday economic practices.⁶ Fortunately, beliefs may not play as significant a role in shaping that imaginary as religionists often assume. Suppose we think of beliefs (economic and religious)

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⁴ Theological criticism of economic thinking appears in William Cavanaugh, Vincent Miller, and Philip Goodchild, and with special glee in the economist Robert Nelson. Kathryn Tanner’s strategy in Economy of Grace (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2005) differs by instead showing how theology is a form of economic thought and then using the analogical similarity to fund comparisons.


as products rather than sources of embodied practice and everyday behavior.\(^7\) If Christian interventions into inequality can get beyond beliefs and cognitive judgments to unsettle primitive, internalized dispositions to the world, then they can in fact do something that the austere analysis of domination cannot: they can touch the deep springs of human behavior. If Christianity can make a difference, it must happen through a subtle form of spiritual warfare: corroding the spirit of plutocratic capitalism with alternative economic practices that unsettle the imaginary permitting extreme inequality.

The sense of “spirit” I have in mind follows Max Weber. Weber denaturalized capitalism—which already in his time seemed to govern culture as its indispensable infrastructure—by asking a question about the imaginary of wealth: How is it that individuals came to think that they have a duty to work toward increasing wealth? From a certain remove, it is not obvious why people should work beyond what is required to meet their own needs. That is also a crucial question for confronting the problem of inequality: What drives people to keep accumulating wealth so far beyond personal need and in the face of compelling, basic needs of others?\(^8\)

Weber’s answer is “spirituality,” in a certain sense. Weber saw that capitalist cultures succeeded by making pursuit of money into a duty and a vocation, as depicted in his drily hilarious analysis of Benjamin Franklin as expositor of American religion. Franklin’s writings record how life is experienced when disciplined by the pursuit of wealth as an exercise undertaken for its own sake, which he recommends as a kind of spiritual practice. Once the pursuit of wealth became a kind of asceticism, a practice undertaken to discipline desire and become a certain kind of person, then, observed Weber, economic culture obtained “the most powerful lever imaginable with which to bring the spread of that philosophy of life which we have here termed the ‘spirit’ of capitalism.”\(^8\) Even when cultures shrugged off theological beliefs about grace and vocation that were initially important in shaping the capitalist spirit, they retained the spiritual exercises that drive behavior, motivate interests, produce anxiety, and generally continue to supply the subject-shaping moral energy that sustains capitalism.

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Extreme inequality is fueled by spirituality, then, insofar as plutocratic politics are permitted by interior disciplines of imagination, emotion, and autobiography that pattern personhood according to the pursuit of financial wealth. Corroding the legitimacy of extreme inequality is then a kind of spiritual contest, which must be undertaken by cultivating an alternative set of person-shaping practices.

Just because it is spiritual, however, does not mean it is necessarily a job for the conventionally religious. For example, Peter Sloterdijk redevelops “asceticism” as “anthropotechnics” in order to bring into view how everyone is trained (or viewed as untrained) by some regime of practical exercises. The culture of consumer capitalism, Sloterdijk sees, offers a pervasive form of practical training. Dissenting ways of patterning persons (including religious ones) emerge from different regimes of practice—with the difference that the self-consciousness of dissenting practices helps reveal how everyone is trained by some set of exercises.9 The dissenting spiritualities do not necessarily need to directly attack the spirit of plutocracy; they corrode it by pursuing non-monetary goods intrinsic to becoming a certain kind of person.

But why turn to spirituality at all, religious or not, when so much of the problem seems to lie in policies that grant the wealthy unjust advantages? State and banking policies at the national level have conspired to favor the rich; international treaties typically enforce structural opportunities for the strong to exploit the weak at a global level; conveniently weak global governance permits the largest holders of wealth to compound their advantage through tax evasion. A number of modest proposals, variously acceptable to different political philosophies, could potentially ameliorate extreme inequality, including among them a tax on financial transactions (once supported by Lawrence Summers), a global tax on capital (Thomas Piketty), a guaranteed basic income (endorsed by some libertarians), a capital endowment for adult citizens (Anthony Atkinson), and a global resources dividend (Thomas Pogge).10 If modest policy interventions could make a difference, why bother with deep asceticism?

For two reasons. First, because pursuing financial wealth as a spiritual practice legitimizes the institutions and policies organized to support it. When growing wealth is a culturally prestigious vocation, it is easier for wealth-builders to accrue political power. Second, because a key element of political assent to plutocracy lies in the way people internalize their economic fate. Even when people see the determinative power of financial institutions and macroeconomic policies, many still attribute their failures and successes to their own actions, and they internalize anxiety about how to succeed in the conditions set by those institutions and policies. Curtailing extreme inequality requires undermining the interior claims that citizens permit the culture of plutocracy to exert.

In other words, inequality is produced by a regime of discipline that runs reflexively between states and souls, policies and persons. As states increasingly measure their financial health by credit worthiness (rather than by other measures of economic well-being), their policies shift to please creditors while their citizens work to internalize their new liability to holders of lendable wealth. Policies pleasing to creditors typically favor private wealth accumulation (which debt servicing directly builds) and low or evadible taxation. Those policies are abetted by a difficult set of personal exercises people undertake in order to cope with the new economy: taking responsibility for one’s own fate, while at the same time letting the new precarity motivate a fearful drive to succeed; investing one’s identity in one’s work, while evaluating the worth of work by the outcome of competitions against everyone else; improvising a life narrative, while adapting to flexible, constantly disrupted conditions of livelihood. As persons allow their selves to be remade by the way wealth is pursued within financial capitalism, they give spiritual assent to the legitimacy of plutocracy.11

Another, complementary discipline is imposed upon the affluent. Development of extreme inequality depends on the wealthy maintaining a kind of spiritual discipline: they must steadfastly ignore the

11 This paragraph is indebted to unpublished lectures of Kathryn Tanner and to Richard Sennett, The Culture of the New Capitalism (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2006).
Is Plutocracy Sinful?

claims of others’ need on their resources in order to keep building wealth. Adam Smith’s real genius, writes Duncan Foley, was in offering a quasi-religious balm for anxiety about the suffering that private pursuits of wealth must ignore. Smith should be remembered as a “theologian of capitalist social relations,” says Foley (intending no compliment), because he offered a kind of theodicy. Smith explained why private pursuit of wealth is not to blame for the neediness of others, and is in fact the only best way to eventually help them. (Call it plutodicy, then.) By offering a story in which private pursuit of self-interest leads to common goods, Smith—or what people made of Smith anyway—permitted the fortunate to think both that they have earned their fortune and that their entitlement serves the common good. Maintaining inequality depends on the wealthy learning those dispositions. If, like most theodicies, it is not quite convincing, the role of this half-story lies in securing practical dispositions toward suffering.12

Again, beliefs about inequality do not matter as much as practical dispositions to the world, which, while buoyed by legitimating narratives, emerge from a constellation of more primitive sources. Attempting to describe the culture of American capitalism, William Connolly refers to “resonance machines”: combinations of political interest, religious practice, and financial power that, folded upon one another, generate a shared “spiritual disposition to existence.” In U.S. financial capitalism, Connolly discerns spirits of resentment, entitlement, and belligerence. Resonance among those dispositions to existence, combined with the prestige of institutions cultivating them, shapes the way many citizens feel about inequality. Developing different economic policies, Connolly suggests, may begin by nurturing alternative spiritualities, which can generate “counter-resonance machines” that might reshape market relations.13 Practices from many different political and religious sources might align to cultivate different dispositions to existence, perhaps shaped by gratitude, celebration, or sufficiency. That is one way to understand the Occupy movement. Even if the alternative economic spiritualities do not become majority dispositions, their counter-resonance can unsettle the

cultural landscape. Practices of differently pursuing real wealth can weaken the ethos that permits extreme inequality and thereby begin to open cultural space for seriously considering those needed policy interventions.

Here lies the potential significance of Christianity to counter inequality. Connolly (no Christian himself) takes hope from faith-based microeconomic experiments, like the Bruderhof community, observing that here “this Christian minority challenges the dominant spirituality of American capitalism with an ethos that turns and twists the capitalist assemblage in a distinctive direction.” 14 Insofar as it cultivates a distinct kind of personhood through economic practices (which may actually be rare), Christianity cultivates selves different from and out of joint with the sort of self that is required to maintain extreme inequality. So, as Kathryn Tanner puts it, Christianity can give rise to “free-spirited experiments in ways of living effectively resistant to contemporary capitalism through redirection of the very means of controlling the conduct promoted by it.” 15 Christian practices can cultivate a spirit other than the spirit of plutocracy.

Now the potential alliance of Christianity with a landscape of economic dissent becomes visible. Around the world, in many economies, people are developing alternative economic spiritualities through intentionally different practices. These include small experiments in cooperative trade, local food networks, and intentional recoveries of “work/life balance” that revalue time, relationships, and leisure. They also include more comprehensive commitments to alternative practice regimes, as in the surprising return of regard for agrarian lifestyles and value for craft work. Where work is measured by skill rather than its market potential, it is valued for the way it helps persons realize a range of goods important to a human life. 16 When, in the minds of young people, farming begins to rival the financial sector in prestige, cultural regard has clearly become unhinged from money-making. Dissent from plutocracy is widespread and desires for deeper forms of wealth are evident in many scattered projects.

14 Connolly, Capitalism and Christianity, 111.
15 Tanner, unpublished manuscript.
16 For description of some of the dissenting landscape, see Juliet Schor’s address to the Trinity Institute included in this issue, “What Can We Do about Economic Inequality?” and her book Plenitude: The New Economics of True Wealth (New York: Penguin Books, 2010).
Theology may have a role to play helping dissenters from plutocracy find deeper practices. The weakness of practices like Slow Food or Fair Trade is that they do not claim the entire life of their participants in the comprehensive way that Christianity seeks to do. On its own, Fair Trade may become a consumer identity easily assimilated into market culture. Because one’s whole self is not at risk in Fair Trade shopping, it is not deeply behavior-shaping and it would seem superficial to call it a spirituality. However, when interpreted from within a comprehensive set of practices shaping the self in pursuit of God, as Luke Bretherton does, the proximate goods one can realize within political consumerism may come into view. Bretherton explains how Christians can undertake Fair Trade as a way of “opening up crevices and fissures within capitalism that are amenable to loving relations.” Love names a relational good that global trade can realize, and in fact must do so, in order to function as part of the practice of life with God. Outsiders need not commit to Christian practices of self-formation in God in order to appreciate how those exercises identify and defend a proximate good of mutual relations.

By naming the goods that Christian practices train people to seek, theology may then help defend and deepen a pluralist association of practices that register spiritual dissent from plutocracy. As part of that endeavor, naming the sins of plutocracy may, after all, make some practical difference to confronting inequality.

Inequality as Exclusion and Theft

From within an alliance of dissenting spiritualities of wealth, specifying how plutocracy is sinful may help participants in all those practices better resist the interior disciplines of plutocracy, and could help articulate the goods apt to be realized within different economic spiritualities. I do not mean that Christian thought has a solution for extreme inequality. If the root source of the plutocracy that legitimates contemporary inequality is “spiritual” in the way I have suggested, that just means that the relevance of Christianity (or any other discipline of life) to the question of inequality lies in the extent to which its practices counter the spirit of plutocracy.

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17 That is Tanner’s worry.
Before explaining two ways that plutocracy appears sinful, permit me one more caution. Practices of life do not counter the roots of inequality by rallying support for slogans like “counter the spirit of plutocracy.” Criticizing plutocracy as sinful must avoid the sort of cheap economic contrarianism that suppresses questions of practical difficulty. Anti-plutocratic theological claims sometimes permit themselves a facile ignorance about the importance of generating financial wealth for the rest of their moral commitments. Whatever its involvement in personal vice, wealth creation does essential work for modern market civilizations—some of it humanitarian work, some of it work on which liberal commitments and Christian mission projects depend. Where ancient worlds usually assumed that overall wealth was basically static, the modern market world assumes that wealth can expand indefinitely, and that societies have a fundamental obligation to grow it. On that assumption arose a quite different cultural infrastructure of ideas about the relationships between welfare and freedom, debt and opportunity, private pursuit and public benefit. Consider just this reversal of conventional wisdom: while biblical figures constantly want to get the poor out of debt, many Christian microcredit organizations think that getting the poor into debt is the best way to liberate them. The practical sense of those projects depends on relations of freedom and capital within individual pursuits of welfare that rest on assumptions about wealth generation. A crucial question for dissenting spiritualities of wealth is then: What proper role does material wealth play in practical pursuits of true wealth? Accounts of economic sin must help answer that question.

1. Inequality as Exclusion from Social Life

The magisterial line of Catholic social thought has consistently interpreted inequality in terms of exclusion. The groundbreaking encyclical Rerum Novarum (1891), while quite cautious in its middle way between capitalism and socialism, described property as a social relation that is crucial for realizing human dignity. Property and its various accumulations, the implication goes, bear significance by including or excluding persons from the sociality that realizes their humanity. That

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Is Plutocracy Sinful?

notion was developed over a century of economic teachings into support for market capitalism qualified by economic rights and person-based evaluations of economic conditions. Property is “under a social mortgage,” in John Paul II’s metaphor.20

In light of that teaching, writes Pope Francis in Evangelii Gaudium, firmer limits must be set to the “economy of exclusion and inequality.” Contemporary inequality has become systemic violence; it kills by a form of social abandonment. Even worse, writes Francis, global acceptance of narratives told about market growth generate a “globalization of indifference,” perpetuating apathy toward the poor and encouraging affluent citizens to accept the violence in exchange for consumer thrills. Discernment of how to live a Christian life within this context requires “choosing movements of the spirit of good and rejecting those of the spirit of evil.”21

Criticizing inequality as exclusion invites persons to participate in market relations insofar as they help persons realize basic goods of human dignity and common life. When persons cannot meaningfully participate in the market relations that organize common life, they not only miss out on opportunities for wealth generation, they experience a form of social expulsion. Isolation from economic relations becomes a multiplying driver of exclusions: from decent schools, from political participation, and from many of the social relations through which one realizes one’s humanity. Calling inequality sinful in this way shames dynamics of isolation that citizens might otherwise accept and begin to moralize as natural. In the U.S., as citizens are shut out of economic life they are also blamed for their poverty, humiliated by public services, and warehoused in unprecedented number in prison, where they are further indebted by the criminal justice system. Naming the vengeful “spirit of evil” driving that exclusion can disrupt the naturalizing mindset.

What practices, or “movements of the spirit of good,” does the critique of exclusion open for everyday life? It suggests that efforts to broaden inclusion in economic relations or experiments in overcoming economic isolation may be ways of pursuing a form of social wealth. That is one way to understand microcredit initiatives that offer debt to the poor. Critical questions must be asked about those initiatives, but those questions can be considered within attempts to

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20 John Paul II, Sollicitudo Rei Socialis (1987), section 42.
21 Francis, Evangelii Gaudium (2013), sections 51 and 53.
defeat exclusion by opening a kind of social relation central to modern life: debt. If access to debt supports forms of creativity that open humanizing pursuit of further goods, then perhaps indebtedness is important for pursuit of true wealth?22

Resisting the globalization of indifference may involve risking practical ventures to defeat exclusion and overcome isolation. This view suggests that Christian practices for pursuing real goods should adopt a pragmatic agnosticism about markets and wealth generation in order to find practical ways to undermine the way plutocracy dominates, excludes, and kills. That does not imply uncritical acceptance of conventional economic prescriptions. It assumes, on the contrary, constant demand for empirical evidence of the effectiveness of market practices—like debt, the selling of debt, and the securitization of debt—as measured against criteria that matter for human dignity. Which criteria are those? Benchmarks like those developed under the intellectual aegis of the capacities approach, including the United Nations Development Programme’s multidimensional poverty indicator, seem helpful. Criteria valued by current market practices—GDP and stock indices—seem viciously distracting. Practicing vigilant demand in asking what an economy is doing pushes a fundamental question that plutocratic societies would like to avoid: What is an economy for?

Theology need not rush to supply an answer. In conditions where it is obvious that the economy advantages the wealthy and excludes the poor, asking the question may be destabilizing enough. More significant than particular beliefs about what an economy should do may be spiritualities of agnostic disregard for economic deities whose veneration tends to suppress the question. It is not easy to suspend practical belief in economic deities in the midst of ways of life structured in prostration to debt and to economic growth. Shaming economic exclusion as sin helps practitioners withhold regard for those goals, that they may ask for better knowledge of what they do for the excluded.

2. Radical Inequality as Theft

The ancient Christian theme of unjust wealth as a form of theft from the poor, and thus from God, has seemed outmoded since ancient assumptions that total wealth is static were overturned, and since the discovery that self-interested uses of private property drive

22 But see David Graeber, Debt: The First 5,000 Years (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Melville House, 2011).
Is Plutocracy Sinful?

wealth creation. However, in conditions of radical inequality—this new historical moment in which there are sufficient resources to meet the basic needs of all humans, yet many do not survive because wealth is concentrated in the hands of a few—the idea of theft has returned. The World Council of Churches has been working on formulating a “greed line,” a threshold above which possession should be regarded as unjustly held because it properly belongs to the needs of others.23 Above the greed line, wealth becomes forfeit.

The key point here is treating greed not only as a spiritual vice relevant to an individual’s relationship with God, but also as a measure of structural relations. Developed as the complement to poverty lines, the greed line attempts to judge when wealth accumulation has become so excessive that it causes harm. Some formulations of the greed line also key it to ecological limits, thereby linking economic inequality to ecological fragilization. In counterpoint to the UNDP’s multidimensional poverty indicator, Michael Taylor develops a multidimensional greed indicator—combining information such as ecological footprint, poverty ratio, corruption index, and bank assets ratio.24 The result indicates the extent to which inequality represents destructive concentrations of wealth.

What practices does a greed line support? First of all, it sharpens exercises of self-examination at personal, corporate, and national levels. Whereas accountability for wealth holdings is often considered within the weakly elastic frame of “stewardship,” by developing thresholds at which levels of material wealth amount to theft the greed line significantly raises the stakes. Bad stewardship of possessions becomes complicity in a crime against humanity. (Thomas Pogge has made a strong case that extreme poverty is most appropriately understood as a massive human rights violation.25) A greed line curtails the self-justifying liabilities of stewardship with serious moral vulnerability.

Second, such self-examinations should transform practical patterns of regard toward wealth. Just raising the possibility that wealth may represent theft changes postures toward it. It might suggest that institutions stop fawning over the very wealthy and instead send individualized notices of overdue debts to the common wealth. Churches might desist from stewardship appeals and instead issue public guidance for appropriate disposal of wealth—like the graduated tables of obligation that Peter Singer publishes, but with even stronger warrant.\textsuperscript{26} To facilitate public accountability, perhaps tax returns should be made public (as they are in Norway). If private wealth holdings cannot survive disclosure to democratic deliberation, their legitimacy seems doubtful.

The point of those exercises is neither to vilify the rich nor to prick their hearts in hopes that they give a bit more; it is to corrode the legitimacy of extreme property concentration in the first place. The greed line attempts to establish at what point the basic needs of the poor render forfeit the excessive accumulation of property—no matter how people came into that wealth, whether they deserve it, or how good they are as persons. Yet evaluations of character are not irrelevant to interpreting how those distributions come about. What we have so far failed to learn from the financial crisis, writes Melissa Lane, is that the excessive greed of bad actors was an expression of a system made in their image.\textsuperscript{27} The shady mortgage brokers, cynical investment houses, and get-rich-quick house-flippers were all taking advantage of an economic environment structured to accommodate the pursuits of agents who could assume that they had no accountability to the good of the whole economy. Their recklessness and ignorance was just an exaggerated expression of assumed irresponsibility built into everyday economic life. When that systemic irresponsibility jeopardized the global economy, we should have discovered that character is not negligible to our macroeconomics; character shapes economic systems, which in turn reinforce how agents will act.

Lane goes on to observe that ecological fragilization appears similar: the pile of poorly understood and recklessly incurred financial debt is like the looming pile of poorly understood and recklessly

\textsuperscript{26} Peter Singer, \textit{The Life You Can Save} (New York: Random House, 2009).
\textsuperscript{27} Lane, \textit{Eco-Republic}, 25–29.
incurred overdrafts on planetary resilience. In both criticisms—inequality as exclusion and as theft—extreme inequality represents permission for individual accumulation to happen without accountability to conditions of the broader economy of life. The same systemic irresponsibility behind the financial collapse lies behind ecological fragilization: humanity’s pursuit of growth within enterprises permitted to conduct themselves in ignorance of their ecological consequence is recklessly driving other species to extinction and eroding the planet’s biological reserves.

Inequality helps drive ecological fragilization because the enterprises of human exploitation of earth are owned and governed by the world’s wealthy. Because the wealthy are generally less vulnerable to environmental problems, they tend to be more willing to risk incautious ecological bets. Those most invested in the fossil-fuel industry, for example, tend also to be the least vulnerable to climate impacts, and, unsurprisingly, the least interested in mitigating its risks. As economic inequality correlates with inequalities in environmental vulnerability, it distorts perceptions of ecological risk.

The greed line aims to remove the conceit of non-accountability: wealth-building pursuits can no longer rely on assumed irresponsibility for their collective consequence. If property holders insist that they are entitled to their possessions, the greed line retorts that they have no God-given right to also be irresponsible for them. In conditions of need, property can become theft from the poor and in conditions of ecological impoverishment, the pursuit of property can become stealing from the earth. Wealth may become forfeit.

Conclusion: Pursuits of True Wealth Corrode Plutocracy

Inequality arises from the human desire to have ever more—on that the Catholic encyclical tradition and the World Council of Churches agree. They also agree that the desire to have ever more is right and natural. Christian thought interprets the unboundedness of human desire as evidence of a deep human need for infinite wealth—for God. Material greed is, in this theological light, failed desire: not wanting too much, but looking in the wrong place. The only therapy is to learn to pursue real wealth—in relationships, in beauty, in virtue,

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28 Lane, Eco-Republic, 30.
and finally—claims Christianity—in God. Yet any practice that tutors desire for some real good, and so toward real wealth, any practice that keeps persons restless for real wealth by unsettling satisfaction in lesser goods, could be said to belong to the movement of the spirit of good.

In the many forms of dissent from plutocracy—the pluriverse of experiments large and small seeking real wealth in soil, in art, in food, in justice—there are practices that, in their accountability to some sense of the good, raise the question: In what lies true wealth? Many of the practices producing extreme inequality cannot survive that question. The questioning itself is corrosive—and need not even be formal and explicit to be so. Implicit questioning of life in plutocracy happens in everyday economic spiritualities. Again, by emphasizing spirituality I intend no mystification of inequality; alternative economic spiritualities open space for sober political measures. There exist, I noted, a number of modest proposals to ameliorate the most excessive inequalities, from a tax on capital to basic income proposals. I am hardly competent to say which would work, but clearly none can be seriously entertained without countering the spirit of plutocracy.

A many-faced spirit of dissent from plutocracy is emerging within many different practices and projects around the world. Recognizing these faces as its own, as part of the movement of the Holy Spirit, theology can help keep these spiritualities sufficiently weird and excessive, innovative and disruptive. For what is most important is not naming plutocracy as sinful, but maintaining strategies of self-formation that keep opening possibilities of dissociation from its spirit.