

## Rethinking religion, theology, and what really matters: the ultimate concerns of essential work

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### Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown new light on the nature of inequality as a global problem and highlighted the importance of essential work. This has implications for reassessing what really matters in people's lives, related to what systematic and constructive theologians, following Paul Tillich, have called matters of "ultimate concern." What do such reassessments mean for rethinking the role and function of religion, with a view towards what religion can contribute to the formation of feasible alternatives? The article concludes by spelling out some vital lessons for the work of theology and related fields.

### Keywords

*Religion; ultimate concern; essential work; inequality*

This article begins with the situation in the United States from the perspective of a Euro-American theologian. The solutions proposed here apply to the international context not because European or American thought can claim normativity but because the future is shaped by the solidarity of people everywhere who have to work for a living, the so-called 99 percent of which the Occupy Wall Street Movement spoke almost 10 years ago.<sup>1</sup>

The three main points are as follows. First, COVID-19 has thrown new light on the nature of inequality, which is a global problem, but also rampant and rising in the United States. This has implications for reassessing what

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1 For a theological engagement with the 99 percent see Joerg Rieger and Kwok Pui-lan, *Occupy Religion: Theology of the Multitude*, Religion in the Modern World (Harrisburg: Rowman and Littlefield, 2012).

really matters in people's lives, related to what theologians, following Paul Tillich, have sometimes called matters of "ultimate concern." Second, what might these reflections tell us about the role and function of religion? Is the proper place of religion somewhere on the spectrum of the status quo and the powers that be, as both conservatives and the mainline assume in their own ways? Or is religion's role transformative, providing alternative ways of life? Finally, some lessons for practical theology will be explored from the perspective of constructive and systematic theology, which is also engaged in practical efforts to transform the church and the world.<sup>2</sup>

## **Inequality and ultimate concern**

2020 was a difficult year for most people around the globe. It was marked, among other things, by the traumatizing experience of COVID-19, which affected all, but some more than others. In the United States, COVID-19 affected Native Americans, African American, and Latinx people more severely than anyone else.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, COVID-19 affected in particular the many frontline workers and all those who are now called essential workers, many of whom belong to racial and ethnic minorities.

Inequality is one of the key issues about which many Americans are surprisingly oblivious. Among the G7 nations, the United States is by far the most unequal, tied with many developing nations.<sup>4</sup> In the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, economic hardships have only risen. In 2020, one in four Americans experienced what is called euphemistically "food insecurity," which means lack of sufficient food to eat and hunger. Worse yet, 29.5 percent of all households with children were food insecure.<sup>5</sup>

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2 For one example of such engagements see the Wendland Cook Program in Religion and Justice at Vanderbilt University ([www.religionandjustice.org](http://www.religionandjustice.org)).

3 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Risk for COVID-19 Infection, Hospitalization, and Death by Race/Ethnicity." [Online]. Available: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/covid-data/investigations-discovery/hospitalization-death-by-race-ethnicity.html> [Accessed: 12 March 2021].

4 Katherine Schaeffer, "Six Facts about Economic Inequality in the US," *Pew Research Center, February 7, 2020*. [Online]. Available: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/02/07/6-facts-about-economic-inequality-in-the-u-s/>.

5 Christianna Silva, "Food Insecurity in the U.S. by the Numbers," *National Public Radio, September 27, 2020*. [Online]. Available: <https://www.npr.org/2020/09/27/912486921/>

The legacies of racism, ethnocentrism, and sexism are major contributors to this situation, as racial and ethnic minorities as well as women are experiencing economic inequality to a greater degree and in greater numbers. But – and this may come as a surprise – anti-Black and anti-Brown racism in the United States also hurts many white people, as several scholars have pointed out in recent contributions.<sup>6</sup> Because they mistakenly believe that white supremacy benefits all white people, many white Americans side with white corporate power and mostly white politics, which rejects basic support for the working majority, including healthcare. Nevertheless, reaping the most significant benefits of white supremacy are not the white majorities but the elites.

At the top of the world, mostly white American billionaires gained 1.3 trillion USD during the crisis, while unemployment rates remain high across the board.<sup>7</sup> This is not some strange aberration or an accident; this is how racialized capitalism works in the United States, and similar things are happening elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> While the Biden administration in the United States is seeking to mitigate some of these inequalities, the basic principles that keep producing inequality remain in place. Unfortunately, mainline churches in the United States are often not helping as much as they might, as they may protest racism, sexism, and even poverty, but not the related structures of economic inequality.<sup>9</sup> Worse yet, more often than not, religion – whether conservative or liberal – is part of the problem, as it worships wealth and power consciously or unconsciously, as well as a white

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food-insecurity-in-the-u-s-by-the-numbers.

- 6 See, for instance, Keeyanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #Black Lives Matter to Black Liberation* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016), and Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (London: Verso, 2012).
- 7 Chuck Collins, “Update: Billionaire Wealth, U.S. Job Losses and Pandemic Profiteers,” *Inequality.org*, February 24, 2021. [Online]. Available: <https://inequality.org/great-divide/updates-billionaire-pandemic/>
- 8 For the notion of racial capitalism see for instance Cedric Robinson *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, revised and updated third edition (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2021).
- 9 An examination of church programs as well as seminary curricula, as well as theological literature, shows surprisingly little engagement in questions of economic inequality and class. The motto of a prominent anti-poverty program at a major seminary in the United States is “fight poverty” with little indication of how poverty and wealth are related.

Christ, a white god, and a white church. Even many efforts at becoming more inclusive do not change this bedrock, if inclusion means welcoming others into the dominant system.

If economic inequality is a key problem, how can we address it in our search for solutions? It can be argued that the new classification of working people that has emerged during the pandemic points in promising directions. In the United States, we are now talking about “essential workers,” referencing the kind of work without which society would stop functioning. This includes people working in agriculture and food production, in grocery stores, essential services, and health care.

The challenges faced by essential workers point to a fundamental analytical observation: inequality is not a natural catastrophe that happens for no reason and would, therefore, be beyond human control. Much of the increasing inequality we are facing today is rooted in a skewed view of labour and in a related miscalculation of the value of working people. Those who do essential work are not compensated appropriately, while others reap the benefits of their labour and then go on and speculate on the financial markets with the profits that were produced by working people. Rampant inequality is not an accident or a secondary economic problem; in neoliberal capitalist systems it is produced as the few are building their success on the backs of the many.<sup>10</sup> In a book written in the days of the Great Recession of 2007-2009, it has been argued that the fundamental problem today is not distribution, or the lack thereof, but production and how we value it.<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, many contemporary theological critiques of the economy continue to overlook precisely this point and move directly to a critique of financial capitalism or the monetary economy without considering work and labour.<sup>12</sup>

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10 In the United States, there some growing recognition of this in relation to large corporations like Walmart or Amazon, whose CEO Jeff Bezos is now the wealthiest person in the world.

11 Joerg Rieger, *No Rising Tide: Theology, Economics, and the Future* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009).

12 See, for instance, Kathryn Tanner, *Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism* (New Haven, Ct.: Yale University Press, 2019) and Devin Singh, *Divine Currency: The Theological Power of Money in the West* (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 2018).

Of course, as we are becoming more aware of the potential and the contributions of essential workers, we also need to address the kind of work that is less essential. This includes not only people in corporate hierarchies but also people working in churches and the academy. How much of what we do is truly essential for the flourishing of humanity and the planet, and in which ways? The disciplines of practical theology might help us enter into a deeper discussion about what is and is not essential about the work we are doing, as we shall see.

What is most important in this argument is that so-called essential workers are not merely victims; they are also the often-overlooked agents who have the potential to bring about another world. Moreover, the concerns of race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, all come together in the lives of essential workers, and there is ample evidence that the roots of all these oppressions are effectively addressed when working people organize.<sup>13</sup> Such organizing includes labour unions but also informal associations of workers that realize that there is power in numbers, and there is even some emerging religious support for working people's movements. In the United States, we are currently witnessing the emergence of small but promising religion and labour coalitions.<sup>14</sup>

These observations are linked to the question of what really matters in people's lives. This is what theology since Paul Tillich has sometimes called people's "ultimate concern". According to Tillich, "Our ultimate concern is that which determines our being or not-being. Only those statements are theological which deal with their object in so far as it can become a matter of being or not-being for us."<sup>15</sup> For Tillich, it was the concerns of German idealism, combined with the insights of existential philosophy, that determined his understanding of the ultimate concern. As a result, he

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13 David Madland, "Combating Pay Gaps with Unions and Expanded Collective Bargaining," *Center for American Progress Action Fund*, June 28, 2018. [Online]. Available: <https://www.americanprogressaction.org/issues/economy/reports/2018/06/28/170469/combating-pay-gaps-unions-expanded-collective-bargaining/>.

14 See, for instance, Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice in Los Angeles (CLUE: [www.cluejustice.org](http://www.cluejustice.org)), and the Interfaith Network for Worker Solidarity (IN4WS; [www.in4ws.org](http://www.in4ws.org)).

15 Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 14.

focused on matters of anxiety, meaninglessness, and despair,<sup>16</sup> which are still considered fundamental theological problems in many places today. Particularly the struggle with meaninglessness, is frequently seen as the central topic of theological reflection.

To be sure, it has at times be argued that people's bellies need to be filled before they can worry about experiences of meaninglessness. But this still accepts that meaningless is the ultimate problem, superior to more mundane matters. In this article, I am challenging these assumptions and argue that worker and labour should be considered matters of ultimate concern instead, despite the fact that it has hardly occurred even to the 99 percent who have to work for a living that work is a significant topic of discussion, and it would occur to even fewer people that work has anything to do with what they might consider the "deeper things of life," like religion. Work and labour are still undervalued not only in politics and economics but also in much of theology.<sup>17</sup>

At the most basic level, it is hard to dispute that work and labour, both human and even nonhuman, are among the fundamental building blocks of life on planet Earth. Without reproductive labour, which is often relegated to women and to nature, life would not exist as we know it. Without the reproductive nurture of life, life would fail. Human beings could not survive without parenting, the soil would not be able to produce plants without bacteria, minerals, and rain, etc. Picking up Tillich's terminology we might say that, without reproductive labour, there would be no being, only nonbeing. The theological weight of this point is all the more important, as reproductive labour is generally devalued in capitalist economies, and it is generally underpaid or considered an "externality".

Moreover, since working people are spending the bulk of their waking hours at work, work and labour are where some of their most formative relationships are located. In addition, much of people's energy and creativity are invested in their work and labour. For all of these reasons, work, and

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16 Ibid, 49.

17 The theological attention given to the topic rarely addresses labor and work as matters of ultimate concern. An exception is Joerg Rieger and Rosemarie Henkel-Rieger, *Unified We Are a Force: How Faith and Labor can Overcome America's Inequalities* (St. Louis, Mo.: Chalice Press, 2016).

labour shape the majority of the world's population to the core. Work is not just important to those who actually have jobs. Work is just as important for those who do not have opportunities to work full time, the unemployed, people with disabilities, and all those who work in the informal economy.

From the perspective of theology proper, work is the way divine activity is frequently presented in the Bible, in contrast to popular images that see God mostly at work as dominant ruler. In the Hebrew Bible, God often performs everyday work, including work attributed to women, like pottery and sowing.<sup>18</sup> In the stories of creation in the book of Genesis God is the one who plants a garden and who forms Adam from clay. These are not merely innocuous anthropomorphic images of simpler times, as there is a clear message: God works alongside working people rather than the powerful, who tell others what to do. In fact, in the prophetic tradition of Israel, God is concerned that kings and others who exercise unilateral power over people present problems to the community.<sup>19</sup> In the New Testament, a significant part of the narrative of the Synoptic Gospels is that Jesus was raised as a construction worker in a family of construction workers. This is not only Jesus's past; even during the time of his ministry he never "moved up and out" and never turned his back on working people.

Given all this, why has the broad topic of human work so rarely been considered a substantial part of theological study and our so-called "ultimate concern"?

## **The place of religion**

These considerations bring us back to the topic of religion. Ever since the Roman Emperor Constantine elevated Christianity as the dominant religion of the Roman Empire, Christianity has been one of the essential tools of maintaining dominant power. In the United States today, dominant power is still significantly maintained with the help of Christianity. This kind of Christianity – which differs substantially from the faith of Jesus –

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18 For a book-length argument of this topic see Robert J. Banks, *God the Worker: Journeys into the Mind, Heart, and Imagination of God* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson Press, 1994).

19 1 Samuel 8:1-21.

functions as a sort of “blind” faith that accepts the status quo at face value without probing or questioning, because it considers it created by God.

We see this blind faith not only in many churches that have a history of following authoritarian leaders like former US president Donald Trump, despite the fact that they fail to embody basic religious values like compassion, decency, or morality.<sup>20</sup> We also see this blind faith in the world of finance where, as could be observed during the COVID-19 crisis, performance indicators hardly seemed to matter in the valuation of the stock market.<sup>21</sup> And we see this blind faith in a culture that fails to deal with its racism, ethnocentrism, and sexism because it refuses to become aware of what is really going on.

This blind faith has been one of the main concerns of my own work on religion and economics, informed by economists’ arguments that neoliberal capitalism has become a form of religion whose task it is to preach big ideas without the need to investigate reality. As economist Robert Nelson has argued, the task of top economists is no longer to engage in economic analysis and calculation but to keep the faith before people that the economy will ultimately work for all.<sup>22</sup> This is the meaning of the adage, coined by US President Kennedy, that “a rising tide will lift all boats”. Economics as religion amounts to a kind of blind faith that accepts things at face value without asking questions and without much effort to observe what is happening in people’s lives and in the world. This kind of religion now defines what many people mean when they talk about religion, including the Christian religion.

Unfortunately, even scholars of religion and theology often follow this trend. Some theological efforts that seek to rehabilitate faith by considering its effects in shaping people and the world – like the work informed by

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20 Nazi Germany provides another example of churches following authoritarian leaders. The most prominent example is the *Deutsche Christen*, but the mainline churches rarely distanced themselves from fascism either.

21 Noel Randewich, “Resurgent Wall Street Disconnected from Reality on the Ground,” Reuters, May 21, 2020. [Online]. Available: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-markets-disconnect/resurgent-wall-street-disconnected-from-reality-on-the-ground-idUSKBN22O39D>.

22 See, for instance, Robert Nelson, *Economics as Religion: From Samuelson to Chicago and Beyond* (Penn State University Press, 2002).



the so-called Yale School of theology that goes back to the work of George Lindbeck and Hans Frei – may serve as example, because the reverse question how faith shapes up in relation to life is rarely investigated.<sup>23</sup> Moreover for many scholars in religion and theology, raising questions about how faith is shaped by external factors appears to conjure up spectres of determinism.

Fortunately, there are other definitions of religion that provide alternatives. Religion can be understood as informed ways of life or reflected practices rather than as faith. In the book of Acts in New Testament, for instance, Christians are called the people of “the way” rather than people of “the belief” or “the idea.”<sup>24</sup> And when an imprisoned John the Baptist sends his disciples to Jesus, wondering if he is the one or if they should wait for someone else, Jesus responds not with a call to have faith in him or to believe categorically and blindly but with the invitation to “go and tell John what you hear and see.” Evidence matters, and in this passage, it is the healing of the sick, the raising of the dead, and the bringing of goods news to the poor (Mt 11:5–6).

If religion – Christianity included – does not need to be grounded in blind faith and big ideas but can be understood as alternative ways of life, it should come as no surprise that different forms of religion are emerging and reasserting themselves in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic and growing economic inequalities, overt and covert racism and ethnocentrism, and sexism. The systematic and constructive theological task, then, is not to define Christian faith categorically and abstractly, but to look more closely at where transformation and alternative ways of life manifest themselves and see what is Christian and religious about them.

In the study of religion, the topic of “lived religion” has addressed similar concerns.<sup>25</sup> Informed by sociological methods like ethnography and

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23 See, for instance, George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984).

24 See, for instance, Acts 9:2. In Luther’s German Bible the Greek word “odos” which literally means “way” is mistranslated as “Lehre” doctrine or teaching.

25 For a recent overview of the study of lived religion since the late 1990s, see Kim Knibbe and Helena Kupari, “Theorizing Lived Religion: Introduction,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 35:2 (2020), 157-176.

moving beyond the study of religious texts, these approaches focus on how religion is practiced rather than systems of belief. In these approaches, universal definitions of religion are abandoned in favour of observations of specific religious practices in particular contexts. Ethnographic methods are increasingly used in the study of theology as well, especially in liberative approaches. Ada María Isasi-Díaz, for instance, the late founder of *Mujerista* theology, insisted that theology consider “lo cotidiano” (the everyday), with special attention to the everyday lives of Latinx women.<sup>26</sup> These approaches are valuable because they not only avoid problems in the study of religion and theology tied to false universals that are often the mark of dominant approaches;<sup>27</sup> they can also provide deeper understandings of religion and produce insights that may be more helpful to its practitioners. While these approaches are valuable, none of them are focusing on work and labour as central religious or theological categories.

Efforts to re-evaluate and reclaim relations of faith and labour not only add important aspects to the study of religion and theology – as one more interesting topic – but present us with a realm of inquiry and discovery that is promising for various reasons. In addition to the theological importance of the topic, the historical weight of the topic also needs to be considered. Relations of religion and work profoundly shaped American history, by abolishing slavery in the nineteenth century, and in the twentieth century winning American working people the eight-hour workday, weekends off work, protections for women at work, and the end of child labour. While labour unions and other worker-based movements played key roles in these developments, they could not have won without religious support. Moreover, religion and labour also played some role in the histories of worker-owned cooperative businesses, which were essential in the development of African-American communities and their ultimate concerns.<sup>28</sup>

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26 Ada María Isasi-Díaz, “Lo Cotidiano: A Key Element of Mujerista Theology.” *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology*, 10:1 (Aug. 2002): 5-17.

27 Tomoko Masuzawa, *Invention of the World Religions: or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

28 Jessica Gordon Nembhard, *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice* (University Park, Pa.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014); for the religious perspective as addressed by Gordon

In the recent literature, some analysis has been offered of how the subject matters of religion and theology have been determined by big money.<sup>29</sup> What is still mostly lacking, however, are investigations of how religion and theology were shaped from the other end by the lives and struggles of working people. For theologians considering labour and work as matters of ultimate concern, such investigations may lead to what lies at the heart of religion, and even scholars of religion may find valuable insights about the nature of religion.<sup>30</sup>

Constructive and systematic theology can learn from the study of religion and labour, as God-talk is reoriented from philosophical or theological speculation based on ideas to talk about what is actually happening in the lives of people, beginning with those places where the pressure is greatest. To be sure, this particular focus could add important nuances to the current study of lived religion, especially through the introduction of an examination of matters of pressure and power. An investigative focus sharpened in this manner would be especially appropriate, for instance, in the study of the Abrahamic religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, where images of God as (essential) worker rather than as CEO – or at least as essentially involved with essential workers – are not uncommon, found for instance in the creation stories of the Hebrew Bible and the Qur'an and in the divine solidarity with the Hebrew slaves that is part of all Abrahamic traditions as well.

In turn, images of God's proximity to work and workers can inform contemporary theological work as well. It makes a substantial difference whether God is envisioned as heavenly CEO or as doing menial labour (planting gardens and fields, weaving, baking, cooking, sewing, cleaning), often performing the work that patriarchal society forces on women. These

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Nembhard and others, see "Cooperatives and Religious Communities." [Online]. Available: <https://www.religionandjustice.org/interventions-forum-coops>

29 Kevin Kruse, *One Nation under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), and James Hudnut-Beumler, *In Pursuit of the Almighty's Dollar: A History of Money and American Protestantism* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

30 For a historical account of religion and labor that throws new light on the Social Gospel movement see Heath Carter, *Union Made: Working People and the Rise of Social Christianity in Chicago* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

theological discourses<sup>31</sup> cannot easily be reconciled, as images of God as worker conflict with images of God as emperor or tyrant. Addressing such discursive conflicts has the potential to guide us both into the world of new ideas and into the world of new ways of life. This is where systematic, constructive, and practical theology meet.

If religion is thus interpreted in solidarity with those who have become known as “essential workers” during COVID-19, people of faith may have a chance of participating in what is essential in ways that may be surprising and fresh. Note also that these workers force scholars of religion and theology to deal with all pressures of life, as they are always already a diverse group, made up of all races, genders, nationalities, and religions.

In sum, the point is that to practice religion as ultimate concern means to participate in essential matters in essential ways. Religion can be re-evaluated here, as it does not have to be defined in terms of the affirmation of dominant reality or of trying to reform dominant reality. For both theologians and scholars of religion, religion can now be understood in terms of the challenges to dominant reality.<sup>32</sup>

## Some lessons for the work of theology

Some of us have become known as theologians and activists. I detect various nuances in this combination: for some, this means that we are not as serious about theology as we should be. For others, it means that we are not committed enough to activism. Parallel to this, it has been pointed out to me that much of my own theological work apparently is close to the field of ethics, not necessarily a compliment when coming from fellow systematic and constructive theologians. Nevertheless, there are connections between theology and action that can no longer be ignored and demand more sustained reflection.

First, any theology is necessarily practical, as no one can claim to be thinking merely from the neck up. Religion, even when this is not explicitly

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31 This notion of discourse embraces Michel Foucault understanding of the materiality of discourse.

32 See, for instance, Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

acknowledged, is always lived religion. Theology may think of itself as located in ivory towers, but these towers are never located in a vacuum. As a result, practical engagement always feeds into theology, whether theologians realize it or not. The real question is not *whether but what* practical engagements, are shaping theology, and here it is necessary to investigate what the options might be. The question is which practical engagements are essential, which are not, and which practical engagements might be detrimental to our work. What parts of lived reality are most likely to point towards ultimate concerns? Is work and labour merely a way of filling hungry bellies so that they can graduate to the question of meaning, or is there something in work and labour that touches the core of human existence and its relationship to the divine? If work and labour are indeed related to our ultimate concern, what difference might these activities make to the transformation of the world, to which many religions aspire?<sup>33</sup> Work is a primary place where working people have some power, if only for the reason that corporations would cease to exist without someone doing the work. In the US wars against Native Americans, the dreadful motto was “only a dead Indian is a good Indian.” By contrast, today no employers can make such statements that about their employees because they are needed for production to continue. So, what are people going to do with whatever power they have? This is the question of agency and how to reclaim it, and it connects back to the question of ultimate concern and addresses the old questions of the meaning of life in unsuspected ways.

Second as theologians, whether practical, systematic, constructive, historical, or biblical, investigate what practical engagements matter most, which ones need to be reinforced and which ones need to be challenged, additional guidelines suggest themselves. Too often, scholars of theology and religion follow personal preferences, and some theologians orient their work in relation to some perceived needs of the church. Unfortunately, personal preferences may be misleading when it comes to matters of importance, and the needs of churches are frequently determined by those who have the deepest pockets. If the church is the body of Christ,

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33 The Mission Statement of the Global United Methodist Church, for instance, which is central in the denomination's *Book of Discipline*, is “*To Make Disciples for Jesus Christ for the Transformation of the World*” (emphasis mine). [Online]. Available: <https://www.umc.org/en/what-we-believe>

which suffers with those members who suffer, as Paul put it in 1 Cor. 12:26, theologians might be well advised to pay closer attention to what is going in the lives of those who are struggling. The respective theological fields are transformed if the “ultimate concern” is tied not to some philosophical formula, manipulated by the dominant interests of the time, but to the struggles of the working majority.<sup>34</sup> Work can, therefore, not be dismissed as merely another special interest topic. Under the conditions of neoliberal capitalist exploitation, exacerbated but not caused by COVID-19, work is a place of tremendous suffering and struggle for large numbers of people. This is true even for increasing numbers of academics and pastors in the United States, who once upon a time were proud of their status as members of the professional middle class but who have lost many of their middle-class benefits, economic, political, and religious. As more people become aware of their affinity to the working majority,<sup>35</sup> theology can join the move from minority politics (often assumed to be the location of “the marginalized” of whatever provenience) to majority politics. For the conversations about lived religion, that are of great relevance to practical theology, this means that reflections on power need to be added as necessary methodological components.

Finally, how can theological perspectives be broadened so that they are better able to capture “that which really matters”? What has been said so far implies that ultimate concern and religion are not primarily about meaning but about transformation. For theologians who have spent much of their careers reflecting on meaning, this is a major shift, which has implications for every area of theology and for every aspect of what is now called practical theology: counselling, preaching, education, ministry, evangelism, mission, social action, etc. Pastoral counselling may serve as an example. Consider the work pastoral theologian Bruce Rogers-Vaughn, whose book *Caring for Souls in a Neoliberal Age* examines clinical depression and other struggles of the soul in light of the pressures of neoliberal capitalism, with an eye towards resistance. In this project, counselling is no longer about individuals finding meaning or contentment

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34 Never forget that 99 percent – the vast majority of the population – have to work for a living.

35 See Michael Zweig, *The Working Majority: America's Best Kept Secret*, second edition (Ithaca, NY: 2012).

but a matter of investigating larger tectonics of power that distort people's innermost lives in order to transform that which causes these distortions.<sup>36</sup> Or consider the work of Marlene Ferreras, who also teaches in pastoral care and counselling. Ferreras' dissertation investigates the lives of Mayan women in Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula working in high pressure situations in Maquiladora factories, focusing on relations of culture, class, and theology. In a forthcoming book, she makes a compelling case for the indigenization of pastoral theology, which aims not at another form of meaning-making but at resistance to the distortions of work under capitalism and a more just society as well as a more just church.<sup>37</sup> In these examples, pastoral care is no longer primarily a matter of helping individuals adjust and find a purpose in life; pastoral care engages the structures that shape lives, and its core concern is wholistic transformation. What this might mean for other practical theological disciplines will require further discussion and negotiation.

## Conclusions

If it is correct that matters of ultimate concern are substantially linked to matters of work and labour, even traditionally more theoretical fields like systematic and constructive theology will have to become more self-consciously practical disciplines. When investigating traditional doctrinal statements, for instance, like the ancient assertion of the Council of Chalcedon that "Jesus is both human and divine," theologians can no longer dwell in the lofty world of ideas alone – whether Platonic philosophy, German idealism, analytical philosophy, process theology, etc. – but will have to investigate the practical implications of such a statement in people's everyday lives, for good or for ill. What difference does it make, for instance, that this divine-and-human Jesus was born into a working family and that he spent his entire life in solidarity with working people, and that

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36 Bruce Rogers-Vaughn, *Caring for Souls in a Neoliberal Age, New Approaches to Religion and Power* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

37 Marlene M. Ferreras, *Insurrectionist Wisdoms: Toward a North American Indigenous Pastoral Theology*, Environment and Religion in Feminist-Womanist, Queer, and Indigenous Perspectives (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, forthcoming, April 2022).

the majority followers are living in similar contexts? Chalcedon itself is missing these kinds of reflections, but its concerns might be reconsidered, revitalized, and perhaps reclaimed in this way today. In the future, even arcane theological discussions of angelology will need to be informed by the account of the angels of Christmas Eve singing for a few day laborers herding other people's sheep rather than for the religious and political elites in Jerusalem or Rome.

It is time to explore such questions more rigorously as part of the academic work of all areas of theology, and this time some of the concerns of practical theology might be leading the way.

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