

# Organizing as the Occupation of Liberation Theology

KEVIN MINISTER

Critiques of economics have been an important part of liberation theology from its inception, not only in the articulations of dependency theory in Latin America but also in early feminist and black liberation theology in the United States. But, as Ivan Petrella's *Beyond Liberation Theology* demonstrates, liberation theology in the United States has failed to maintain a systemic economic critique.<sup>1</sup> The economic crisis and the Occupy protests, however, have forced economics back to the foreground and suggest that the urgency of an economic critique in both the academy and church has not diminished. In this article, I make four proposals for revitalizing liberation theology's economic critique. First, liberation theologies need to reengage with ongoing social movements of resistance to economic inequality; second, I contend that employing critical theories in response to these movements to challenge the ideals that sustain systemic economic injustice is essential to liberation theology; third, liberation theologies must openly resist theologies that legitimate systemic injustice; and, fourth, I propose rethinking theology through the praxis of organizing.

## ORGANIZING IN RESPONSE TO ECONOMIC INEQUALITY AS A THEOLOGICAL PRAXIS

While participating in social movements like the Occupy Movement or in workers' movements, in which I have had the opportunity to take part in Texas, the reality of economic injustice becomes inescapably apparent. The rhetoric of the 99% and the 1% in the Occupy Movement has become representative of growing economic inequality in the United States and the fact that the economy is systemically benefiting a few while rendering larger and larger portions of the population perpetually vulnerable to economic crisis, such as unemployment, inadequate wages and benefits, and the lack of affordable access to education. Likewise, working with the various movements organized with construction workers in Texas, it became clear that the famed Texas economy is built on the fractured lives of the construction workers. While the situation of construction workers in Texas exemplifies the extreme systemic vulnerability of the working class, I suggest that the recent Occupy Movement provides a national connection between the vulnerability of construction workers in Texas and workers in the United States more generally.

The cheap cost of economic expansion in Texas came in part at the expense of the economic and physical vulnerability of construction workers. Many

<sup>1</sup> Ivan Petrella, *Beyond Liberation Theology: A Polemic* (SCM Press, 2008), 82.

construction workers were working without short-term financial security, without basic safety training, often without required safety equipment, mostly without health insurance or worker's compensation, and many without adequate water or any rest breaks on which to drink it.<sup>2</sup> While there is no doubt that these practices reduce the cost of construction and enable the Texan economy to grow rapidly, the growth and productivity of the economy is generated by systematically shifting economic and physical vulnerability to the workers. The construction workers bear in their bodies the wounds of a systemic concentration of vulnerability that makes Texas' economy appear so efficient – one in five construction workers in Texas will sustain an injury serious enough to send them to the hospital (mostly without health insurance or worker's compensation) and, in Texas, a construction worker is killed on the job every 2.5 days (significantly higher than any other state even when measuring per capita).<sup>3</sup>

Construction workers and clergy came together this past March in a demonstration to carry 138 coffins (one for each construction worker killed on the job last year) through the streets of Austin and lay them on the steps of the state capital where they performed a service of remembrance. They organized to manifest the "seething presence" of the lives sacrificed in the name of economic progress and to expose the systemic causes of their vulnerability.<sup>4</sup> The vulnerability of construction workers is underwritten by an economic and legal system that provides no regulations to mandate many basic safety conditions or protections in case of injury. Systemically under-staffed regulatory agencies charged with finding, investigating, and prosecuting construction site violations exploits the tentative social and legal standing of large populations of undocumented workers, and curtails their rights to organize to protect themselves. The plight of construction workers

<sup>2</sup> Nearly half of construction workers in Texas make a poverty level income and report not having enough resources to support their families. 20% of construction workers in Texas report having been refused payment for their work, while half of all construction workers in Texas were not paid for their overtime. Despite accounting for 20% of all work place injuries in Texas (while making up only 6% of the work force), 76% of Texas construction workers have no health insurance and 55% are not covered by workers compensation – Texas is the only state not to require workers compensation for construction workers. 64% of construction workers have not even had basic OSHA safety training and almost half are required to provide their own safety equipment by their employers. 41% do not receive any rest breaks and 27% do not receive drinking water on site. Lauren Cox, et. al., *Building Austin, Building Injustice: Working Conditions in Austin's Construction Industry* (Austin: University of Texas, 2009), accessed 2.5.2012, <https://www.carpenters.org/misclassification/ALL%20DOCUMENTS/Building%20Austin%20Building%20Injustice-Workers%20Defense%20Project%202009.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> In 2009, there were 138 construction fatalities in Texas, down from 142 in 2007. This is approximately double the number of deaths in the state of California (the next highest total despite being significantly larger) and three times the number in New York. Lauren Cox, et. al., *Building Austin, Building Injustice*.

<sup>4</sup> I am borrowing the term "seething presence" from sociologist Avery Gordon who uses the term to describe the manner in which ghostly haunting manifests the presence of an absent body – often rendered absent in a violent or unjust situation – in a shocking or even deeply disturbing manner. Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997). I will return to this term in the final part of the presentation to describe the work of the Holy Spirit.

in Texas serves as one lens into the broader economy in which economic growth is underwritten by the unequal distribution of vulnerability to crisis (economic, legal, and/or physical).

The Occupy Movement has exposed this same reality on a much larger scale. Organizing in the wake of the financial crisis, the Occupy Movement demonstrated that the vulnerability to crisis had been shifted off the 1% and onto the 99%. The wealthiest 1% of Americans were in large part responsible for organizing the system of risky financial investments, yet seemed to bear few consequences from the resulting crisis while the other 99% of Americans remain disproportionately vulnerable to the fallout of economic crisis. Furthermore, the Occupy Movement revealed that the inequitable distribution of vulnerability is not only underwritten by political power but also defended by the criminal justice system and police power.<sup>5</sup>

These movements expose the manner in which economic inequality is not just an individual matter but also a social problem created by the inequitable distribution of vulnerability. Organizing around these sites of systematically concentrated vulnerability clarifies that growing numbers of people are under increasing pressure from economic inequality, some living in situations of life-threatening vulnerability. Organizing, furthermore, exposes that a small number of persons are actually benefiting not only from an unequal distribution of profits but also from shifting the systemic vulnerability to economic crisis onto others. The problem is not primarily the unequal distribution of wealth and benefits from economic production, but the unequal distribution of vulnerability in the system of production itself.

#### CRITICAL THEORIES AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS: DISABILITY STUDIES AND ECONOMICS OF ABILITY

The Occupy Movement has succeeded in bringing attention to growing economic inequality and some of its causes. The workers' movements in Texas have succeeded in accomplishing a few minor legal changes that have slightly improved the situation of some construction workers. But the Occupy Movement and the movements of workers in Texas suggest that systemic problems require systemic responses. The systemic causes of injustice, in other words, necessitate systemic analysis to expose the specific forms of idealism that justify the sacrifice of the vulnerable. In light of the Occupy Movement and workers' movement, I will utilize the economic analysis of Jung Mo Sung in tandem with disability studies to

<sup>5</sup> Consider, for example, the use of clubs and pepper spray on students linking arms on University of California campuses or against protestors who tried to obstruct access to the New York Stock Exchange. The chancellor of UC Berkeley attempted to justify these actions as necessary because he claimed linking arms and refusing to leave is not a "non-violent" action. Robert J. Birgeneau, et. al. "Message to the campus community about 'Occupy Cal'" *UC Berkeley News Center*, accessed 3.7.2010, <http://newscenter.berkeley.edu/2011/11/10/message-to-the-campus-community-about-occupy-cal/>. But the perception of linking arms in protest as a potentially violent action only testifies to the fact that very possibility of rethinking the economic status quo is perceived violence worthy of being defended by violent police powers.

expose an economics of ability that sacrifices those bodies that interfere with the efficient production of wealth.

Brazilian theologian Jung Mo Sung has argued that the growth of global capitalism is driven by the myth of unlimited production.<sup>6</sup> According to this myth, whatever major "ills" "plague" society – from metaphorical "dis-eases" of poverty and greed to literal diseases and debilities – the ideal of unlimited economic production "cures" them all ... in theory. If society can produce without limit, no person will go without whatever they desire, rendering greed and poverty problems of the past.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the myth of unlimited production offers the utopia of unlimited healthcare to all and the dream of unending medical progress in sustaining not just life, but "health." The myth of unlimited production is predicated on the presumed limitless abilities of humanity, placing value on human labor in correlation with the ability of the individual to maximize the efficient production of wealth. Society short-sells the value of those deemed less efficient producers under the long-term investment of overcoming all human limitations. A hierarchy of ability, thus, stands at the center of economic organization and the valuation of persons.

Based on the centrality of the hierarchy of ability to the free market economy, it is of little surprise that the rhetoric of disability (such as "crippling" and "healing" the economy) has mediated the public discourse about the economic crisis and provides a lens into the ideology of ability orienting economic theory and policy in the United States.<sup>8</sup> The "health" of the economy is judged by dominant economic theorists in relation to an ideal of unlimited production ability. Any economic deviations from ideal production ability are assumed to be unnaturally "hobbled" and simply in need of "healing" through either temporary "stimulus" to get the economy "back up and running" in the case of neo-Keynesian theorists

<sup>6</sup> Sung, *Desire, Market and Religion* (London: SCM Press, 2007), 35-37. Sung demonstrates the centrality of a utopia of unlimited production as the promised cure to all forms of scarcity that legitimates the present sacrifices of the poor in a number of prominent economic theorists including Francis Fukuyama, Milton Friedman, and Friedrich Hayek. Sung's more recent work suggest that even liberal mainstream economists like Paul Krugman should be included in this group.

<sup>7</sup> Sung challenges the coherence of the utopian orientation of global capitalist theory toward the unlimited satisfaction of desires. In order to make possible a utopic economy in which desires can be satisfied without limit, the economy must be able to produce without limit. But the possibility of unlimited production depends not only on hypothetical technological breakthroughs that reduce the inefficiencies of production to near zero; the possibility of unlimited production also depends on consumer demand to drive and finance unlimited production and the technological research and development necessary to make such production possible. Modern capitalist production is correlated with demand – the only way in which unlimited production becomes theoretically possible is if unlimited demand also exists. Thus, according to Sung, the central feat of global capitalist economics is to cultivate a sense of limitless desire in consumers. Sung, *Desire, Market, and Religion*, 47.

<sup>8</sup> While examples are too numerous to list all of them and include both the right and left of mainstream economic theorists, consider the title of a recent article by Nobel Prize winning economist Paul Krugman in *The New York Times*. "Is Our Economy Healing?," accessed 1.25.2012, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/23/opinion/krugman-is-our-economy-healing.html?\\_r=1&partner=rssnyt&emc=rss](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/23/opinion/krugman-is-our-economy-healing.html?_r=1&partner=rssnyt&emc=rss).

or, in the case of neoconservatives, the removal of all “crutches” that inhibit ideal economic production (e.g., workers’ rights, taxes, regulations). But such responses to economic crisis only seek to reintegrate those who have economically “fallen” back into the mythical middle-class ideal without any consideration of whether crisis might be systemic within economic theory and policy rather than just an aberration. The dominant economic theory bears an imperative to be healthy – the economy has no space for inefficiency in either worker or market.

Disability is precisely the means capitalism uses to justify the caste of persons excluded from the system of economic production. The category of disability functions as the zero point for human being calculated in terms of labor value. Those that fall below the zero point for human being in labor terms cannot function as efficient producers of labor value and thus cannot enter into the social contracts to buy and sell labor value that ground the economy. This is to say that capitalism produces a class of bodies – namely, the disabled – that are legitimately excluded from the economy because they are “invalid” economic producers.<sup>9</sup> Capitalism has no place for facing the reality that all bodies are vulnerable to injury and deterioration and inevitably will lose labor value at some point in life.<sup>10</sup>

The organization of the economy around unlimited production through the ideals of efficient productivity and wealth accumulation treats human limitation and vulnerability as an individual issue to be overcome by the workings of the free market. But, as organizing from the Occupy Movement and the workers’ movement demonstrate, the myth of unlimited production is produced by systemically shifting vulnerability off a small class of persons and onto others. The rising stock market is secured by shifting the vulnerability to economic crisis by and large to the working class. Similarly, the apparent strength of the Texas economy is made possible by passing the vulnerability of economic expansion to the workers – especially construction workers. The effects of vulnerability to crisis manifest in a variety of forms, including unemployment, underemployment, lack of afford-

9 Sharon Betcher articulately defines the relationship between disability and capitalist economics: “Our desire for health has emerged with capitalism’s normalization of the body as the basic unit of labor. While disability seems to present itself as an obvious health issue and has been publicly cross-examined in terms of its quality of life, disability – like modern civilization’s other already analytically engaged conditions of degeneracy, gender and race – has been, in fact, indexed to the totalizing subsumption of the body to labor value. What disability impedes is the efficient flow of capital.... Obeying the duty to health ... proves one of our most basic acts of economic and social compliance: Sacrificial labor (the founding social contract of modernity) and economics (the sacramental rite of consumption of the fruits of those labors) have been enfolded into the assumption to health as wholeness of individuated, abstracted bodies.” Sharon Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 161.

10 The other side of the coin is that those “persons” who possess efficient labor value at the given time are driven to prize and pursue health and wellness in all its many forms as a means to preserve their own personhood by maintaining their labor value.

able access to health care and education, and, in the case of construction workers in Texas, injury, disability, and death. This is why global capitalism has left an archipelago of what João Biehl has termed *vitas* in its wake – sites where the bodies refuse/d in the name of efficient economic production accumulate.<sup>11</sup>

The sites where vulnerability to these forms of crisis is systemically concentrated are the locations around which the Occupy Movement and the workers’ movement have organized. Even extravagant charity only serves to patch up the inevitable fallout of an economic system with no space for limitation and vulnerability in hopes that those who have “fallen” will be “healed” and reintegrated into the system.<sup>12</sup> Insofar as those who have “fallen” out of the system of production cannot “get back on their feet,” these bodies are deemed the necessary sacrifices of economic progress toward the utopic ideal of unlimited production. Assembling around these sites of systemically concentrated vulnerability manifests an alternative organization of economic production not oriented by the ideals of efficient productivity or wealth accumulation in the name of unlimited production but, rather, around shared vulnerability.

#### CHALLENGING STATUS QUO THEOLOGIES: RESISTING THEOLOGIES OF ABILITY

When employing critical theory from the site of the Occupy Movement or the workers’ movements, it becomes clear that the problems are not just political, economic, and social; the problems are also theological. Dominant theological constructions continue to cultivate the desire to sacrifice the vulnerable in the name of a hyper-able God of all riches. Likewise, the dominant organizations of Christian polity tend to reproduce the economic assembly around sites of maximized production value.

Theological models of God as an all-able producer and investor of all riches continue to dominate Christianity in the United States and are being exported

11 Named after an actual site in Brazil, “vitas” are the locations in which political and economic systems dump those deemed no longer productive to society, outside the life, flow, and values of the global economy. João Biehl, *Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005).

12 Charity is of vital necessity in the economic system in which we find ourselves and surely will always be important to maintaining the dignity of any society. But the problem with charity is that it does not address the power issues at stake in the system of production that renders some wealthy while excluding those whose bodies do not yield efficient labor value. The pursuit of illusory wholeness remains the pursuit of charity and renders social and religious power to those who benefit from the economy lending them a semblance of wholeness. Furthermore, systemically necessary charity reinforces the social and economic “fitness” of those who benefit from the economic system while underscoring the “invalidity” of disabled bodies.

around the world with globalization.<sup>13</sup> The centrality of the omnipotence of God and the popularity of prosperity gospels in American Christianity testify to the ongoing significance of these models of God as rich and hyper-able.<sup>14</sup> Even when this model of God is presented as God the ultimate philanthropist or absolute giver, the underlying power differentials remain with only an added emphasis on the charitable nature of God who seeks to reintegrate those individuals who have “fallen” back into the socio-economic status quo.<sup>15</sup>

In relation to these models of divinity, the *imago dei* looks most like Donald Trump or, perhaps in the case of God as absolute giver, Bill Gates.<sup>16</sup> God is ultimately seen as being more like the 1% or CEO's and “job creators” than like the 99% or the average construction worker in Texas who is undocumented, uninsured, and lives in perpetual vulnerability to unemployment and injury. Dominant understandings of salvation in both conservative and liberal American Christianity, thus, appeal to the overcoming of human limitations through either divine intervention or the strength of human efforts.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, the economic

13 The work of Rosalinda Hackett on charismatic Christianity in West Africa suggests that embracing the gospel of prosperity and embracing global capitalism thrive in conjunction in West Africa. Or, as she aptly writes, “freedom of spirit and the spirit of free enterprise seem to go hand in hand for many Africans.” Rosalinda I. J. Hackett, “The Gospel of Prosperity in West Africa”, in *Religion and the Transformation of Capitalism: Comparative Approaches*, ed. Richard H. Roberts (New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 1995), 210. Simon Coleman has detailed the global spread of the gospel of prosperity in *The Globalization of Charismatic Christianity: Spreading the Gospel of Prosperity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Through a rich ethnography of the global expansion of the Word of Life characterized in relation to the broader global movement of prosperity gospels, Coleman concludes that the global movement of the gospel of prosperity helps communities address a complex set of issues including the Americanization of the world and the experience of social disorganization created by the international flow of cultures, goods, and persons in global capitalism. 228-229 and Coleman, *The Globalization of Charismatic Christianity*, 239-240.

14 With more than 60% of American Christians affirming that God wants people to be prosperous, the continuing prominence of prosperity gospels in the United States testifies to deep seated belief that God is like the wealthy and Christians thus should also be wealthy. According to a poll on the prosperity gospel movement by *Time* magazine conducted for a 2006 article, “17% of Christians surveyed said they considered themselves part of such a movement, while a full 61% believed that God wants people to be prosperous. And 31% ... agreed that if you give your money to God, God will bless you with more money.” David van Biema and Jeff Chu, “Does God Want You to Be Rich?” *Time* (September 10, 2006), accessed on 8.25.2011, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1533448-2,00.html>.

15 For examples of theologies that render God as “absolute giver” as an alternative to God the “hoarder,” consider David Bentley Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), Kathryn Tanner's *Economy of Grace* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), or Douglas Meeks, *God the Economist: The Doctrine of God and Political Economy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989).

16 While theological anthropologies of giving may be preferable to those of prosperity, they continue to determine human value according to the ideals of productivity and wealth, only reorienting those values toward helping those who have “fallen” in the socio-economic system to get “back on their feet” without addressing the systemic causes that precipitated the “fall.”

17 Sharon Betcher demonstrates that this strain is prominent even in the writings of liberal figureheads like John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg. Sharon Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement*, chapter 3.

organization of both conservative and liberal congregations places the economically successful in charge of financial campaigns and teaches that spiritual growth is proportionate to an individual's giving.<sup>18</sup> Insofar as these theologies of ability remain unchallenged, they continue to legitimate the economics of ability and the organization of Christian communities that sustain the status quo.

## REORGANIZING RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES: A THEOLOGY OF ORGANIZING

Theologizing from the sites of the Occupy Movement and the workers' movement gestures towards an alternative theological framework that resists dominant theologies of ability. In this final section, I sketch a brief outline of a theology of organizing. This theology works to reorganize religious communities around sites of systemically concentrated vulnerability in order to resist economic injustice.

In opposition to theologies of ability, I contend that it will be useful and appropriate to speak of the Trinitarian God of Christianity as organizing. Catherine Keller's development of a doctrine of *creatio ex profundis* over against a doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* creates the space to conceive of a God whose relationship to creation is neither that of all-able producer or absolute giver, but as an organizer working with limited matter to pursue the livelihood of all things.<sup>19</sup> This model of creation rejects the idea of a perfect original creation that stands as an ideal to be restored and accepts the limitations of all things and the vulnerability of all things to damage, decay, and destruction. I am not celebrating chaos, in which those with greater limitations and vulnerabilities tend to be exploited. Rather, I am contending that the divine work of creation continues anywhere organizing is assembling communities – not around the pursuit of ideals – but for the equal distribution of vulnerabilities.

Through the work of scholars like Richard Horsley, it becomes possible to understand the life, ministry, and death of Jesus as a divine organizer in first century Palestine, working with communities to resist the socio-economic and religious exploitation of the peasantry in the name of imperial ideals.<sup>20</sup> The way of Jesus continues on as a way of organizing socio-religious resistance to the exploita-

18 I presented my research on capital campaigns in conservative, mainline, and liberal congregations in a paper titled “Christianity and Economic Power” in the Theology and Religious Reflection Group at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in 2011. While the specific findings are too extensive to present in this essay, I found that the literature and campaigns of financial stewardship that are organized in the majority of congregations to fund churches are remarkably similar across the board and reproduce the same economic structures of the broader economic system. For example, consider the following financial campaign literature: *The New Consecration Sunday* program materials produced by Herb Miller, published by Abingdon Press in 2002 and revised in 2007, and distributed by Cokesbury; Adam Hamilton, *Enough: Discovering Joy through Simplicity and Generosity - Stewardship Program Guide* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007); *The Capital Fundraising Manual* produced by the United Church of Christ Capital Campaign Services; *Beyond Fundraising: A Complete Guide to Congregational Stewardship* produced by Wayne B. Clark and published by the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations.

19 Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

20 Richard Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), chapter 5.

tion of those rendered systemically vulnerable. Likewise, utilizing the work of sociologist Avery Gordon along with that of theologians Shelly Rambo and Sharon Betcher, we can conceive of the Holy Spirit as the “seething presence” of the dead and excluded who witnesses to the social trauma and absent bodies that manifest the weight of systemic vulnerability. The presence of the Holy Spirit remains as a site of concentrated energy around which movements assemble.<sup>21</sup>

Rethinking the *imago dei* in relation to God as organizer, theological anthropology becomes fundamentally social and about the ongoing process of assembling the social community in response to vulnerability. Humans both as individuals and as a social collective are limited and vulnerable.<sup>22</sup> This is not a celebration of limitation and vulnerability but, rather, an affirmation of the mundane fact which theologies and economics of ability attempt to overcome by shifting maximum vulnerability to a sacrificial group. Accepting the limitation and vulnerability of humanity requires rejecting the equation of either limitation or vulnerability with imperfection, sin, or even injustice. Salvation, in other words, cannot be described as the overcoming of limitation or vulnerability. Social sin, however, remains a useful concept to describe ways of organizing society that distribute vulnerability unequally across the social body rendering some individuals and groups systemically more vulnerable than others.<sup>23</sup>

Rather than thinking of salvation as overcoming limitation, I propose a model of salvation as an ongoing process of organizing around sites of systemic vulnerability in resistance to the institutional arrangements that render some groups and individuals disproportionately vulnerable.<sup>24</sup> Organizing around sites of systemic vulnerability manifests an alternative way of assembling society not around ideals of productivity or wealth but around the equitable distribution of vulnerability. Organizing does not makeover sites of economic pressure in the image of the economic ideal, but rather transforms the system of economic production based on sensitivity to nexuses of concentrated vulnerability. Such an understanding of organizing, which resists idealism, limits the burnout organizers feel when an ideal

21 Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Sharon Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement*; Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010).

22 Deborah Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 115-116. Creamer argues that bodily limitations need not and perhaps should not be viewed as inherently negative but rather as a mundane fact of human existence.

23 Of course, limitations differ in their exact form, experience, and extent from person to person and cannot be homogenized into a single mold. Because limitation differs, different individuals will be rendered vulnerable in different manners and to different extents by different manners of organizing society.

24 Models of salvation cannot appeal to any institution as the ideal solution for the equitable distribution of vulnerability because the diversity of human limitation and *creatio ex profundis* renders society too complex to predict and in perpetual flux. Jung Mo Sung’s recent book *The Subject, Capitalism, and Religion: Horizons of Hope in Complex Societies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) is particularly helpful in challenging the idealization of salvific institutions in the face of the complex entanglement of biology and social institutions that function to a large extent as self-organizing systems.

is not reached. This model of salvation moves beyond the model of salvation as helping others to overcome via charity and dislodges the normative subject (usually upper-class, white, heterosexual, and male) from the center of religious organization.<sup>25</sup> Salvation as organizing for the distribution of vulnerability, moreover, joins in the ongoing work of the God who is organizing the world for the livelihood of all things. Furthermore, organizing for the distribution of vulnerability is following the way of Jesus to organize with those rendered most vulnerable by assembling around sites where the “seething presence” of the Holy Spirit witnesses to the absence of bodies created by the systemic concentration of vulnerability.

Conceiving of salvation as organizing, finally, demands rethinking congregational organization. How, in other words, should churches relate differently to sites of systemic vulnerability? Churches are always organizational institutions but the question becomes how congregations are currently relating to sites of systemic vulnerability and how assembling around sites of systemically concentrated vulnerability would reshape polity. Congregations can certainly make meaningful contributions to addressing the plight of workers but only insofar as they begin assembling around sites of systemic vulnerability.

Organizing congregations around sites of systemic vulnerability not only challenges the orientation of congregations around the concerns of the economically successful but also the more philanthropic model that orients congregational resources toward supporting charitable church and para-church organizations. While such charitable causes are certainly valuable, the philanthropic model continues to keep sites of systemic vulnerability at the margins of religious organizing rather than orienting polity and liturgy around sites of systemic vulnerability that threaten to challenge the very structures of religious assembly. Organizing a congregational community, for example, around the construction workers in Texas might reveal the fact that the majority of congregants are in fact members of the working-class who are rendered disproportionately vulnerable by the economic system. Such a realization might expose that the modes of economic organization even in mainline and liberal congregations tend to reproduce the same social structures oriented towards productivity and wealth. With such forms of social organization, it should be of little surprise that most congregations have little to say about the position of workers even as the majority of congregants bear the weight of the systemic concentration of vulnerability everyday (including Sundays).

Reorganizing religious communities around sites of systemic vulnerabilities opens up new space for positive interfaith relations that respect the diversity of different religious traditions. Looking to sites like the interfaith tents at Occupy encampments or organizations like Interfaith Worker Justice as focal points for developing interfaith relations around organizing resistance to common pain might

25 This dominant model ultimately leaves the wealthy and socially powerful in charge of patching up sites of extreme inequality with the hope that those in need of charity can overcome the limitations that prohibited them from benefiting from the economy in the first place. Organizing for the distribution of vulnerability fundamentally reorients both the socio-economic and the religious system of production from the pursuit of ideal efficiency and growth towards shared vulnerability and common agency.

be a fruitful trajectory for cultivating interfaith relations. Organizing interfaith relations at sites of common pain respects the genuine differences of different traditions by moving beyond academic dialogues working to find common beliefs, shared practices, or even just mutual understanding as the foundation for interfaith relations. Beginning interfaith relations from sites of common pain does not require different faith traditions to come to some theoretical agreement on beliefs or a set of common rituals that they are comfortable performing together in order to work together. The very real differences between the faith traditions need not be papered over to agree on a site of common pain and work in collaboration, each drawing from the resources of their own tradition, to organize persons around the site of common pain.

#### **ORGANIZING AS THE OCCUPATION OF LIBERATION THEOLOGY: FOUR CONCLUDING PROPOSALS**

My reflections on organizing as a theological praxis throughout this article have constructed four proposals for the future of liberation theology. My first proposal for the future of liberation theology is to engage in ongoing social movements as the foundation for doing theology. Whether from Facebook, Twitter, unions, congregations, or the streets, liberation theology does not arise *ex nihilo* in academic ivory towers but from communities organizing themselves around sites of common pain to expose systemic vulnerability. Second, I propose that liberation theologies employ critical theories to challenge the forms of idealism that sustain and legitimate systemic injustice. Employing critical theories creates the possibility of systemic social changes while subverting the tendency of theological critiques to reinscribe new forms of idealism. Third, I propose that liberation theology resist theologies and ecclesial assemblies that sustain unjust socio-economic organizations. Social injustice is not just a socio-economic problem, it is always also a theological problem. Insofar as dominant modes of theology and polity representing the unjust status quo go unchallenged, they continue to organize Christian communities in ways that legitimate and sustain injustice. Fourth and finally, I propose that in order to challenge dominant theologies and polities that sustain the unjust status quo, we must continue to develop alternative theologies from the site of social movements. The future of liberation theology must not only remain committed to liberation but also must continue to theologize in ways that call forth new ways of assembling religious communities to resist systemic injustice.