

Authors' theology grounded in class struggle

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Joerg Rieger and Kwok Pui-lan



OCCUPY RELIGION: THEOLOGY OF THE MULTITUDE

By Joerg Rieger and Kwok Pui-lan

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In *Occupy Religion: Theology of the Multitude*, authors Kwok Pui-lan and Joerg Rieger seek to convey the "subversive and transforming power of the God incarnate" at work in the midst of 21st-century income inequality. Think of it as liberation theology 2.0.

True to the theology it proposes, this book does not take a top-down view, but rather observes how the divine is emerging from the ground up. The authors provide an offering for our own reflection, resonance and participation. Because much of the content is experiential, readers without a formal theological background will find the language and ideas accessible. Having participated in the Occupy Wall Street movement in New York City with other people of faith, I found the reading a helpful articulation of my experience, both historically and theologically.

Beginning with the mimetic spread of Occupy Wall Street in 2011, the book recounts the movement's events within the early months, spotlighting the experiences of faith communities in various cities. This in itself is refreshing, since the participation of people of faith has been overlooked in much of the mainstream reporting, even though it was Catholics United who provided the famous "golden calf" in the likeness of the Wall Street bull, and the very first tent allowed to stay up in New York's Zuccotti Park was part of the Jewish holiday of Sukkot.

Rieger and Pui-lan unapologetically ground their theological framework in class struggle. The authors argue that empire has co-opted our view of God. Our dominant theological worldview is of God at the top of a ladder-like structure. It sets up the 1 percent as the ideal for which all should strive, with projects of charity for the "less fortunate" serving to glorify the compassionate nature of empire.

A theology of the multitude requires first the acknowledgement that empowered neoliberal capitalism intentionally produces an elite rich. Whether consciously or unconsciously, members of the 1 percent set themselves up as God by using domination to build empire. The 1 percent exacerbates their complicity with this

unjust system by maintaining their God-like status, which separates them from the concerns of the majority of people. In my own experience in Occupy Catholics circles, there was a resistance to articulating a conditional relationship between God and rich persons. But Rieger and Pui-lan bravely assert that this structure does create a conditional relationship between God and the excessively wealthy. The 1 percent cannot be in right relationship with God without being in right relationship with the whole of God's beloved. There are no spiritual loopholes for the rich in this theology.

This is an admittedly mostly Christian perspective drawing from some fresh sources for those of us in the United States. Of special interest is that in using the word "multitude," the authors draw from Korean liberation theology, or *minjung* theology, meaning the mass of people. *Minjung* theology focuses on the experience of class in society as a product of empire-building's distribution of access to power. The middle class serves as a protective barrier between very rich and the very poor, but in an unsustainable economic model, the growth-based systems of the rich are forced to siphon opportunity from both the middle class and the poor. When Occupy pointed this out with the slogan "We are the 99 percent," Rieger and Pui-lan describe how a top-down theological worldview assisted the 1 percent in crying "class warfare" in an effort to bring the middle to their defense. The middle class has been conditioned into thinking that its interests are bound in ascending both economically and spiritually.

In contrast to ascent, the authors show that "deep solidarity" is happening, a sort of descent to the deeper level of soul as people across the world are increasingly identifying with one another's experiences of oppression. From Cairo to Barcelona to Detroit, our fate is bound together by our sharing one planet.

Missing from this book is a discussion of the yearning for intergenerational solidarity that I observed among young Occupy activists. Young occupiers often expressed a deep desire for authentic elders who could help them understand the historic roots of their efforts and mentor them through the blind spots and errors that can result from a lack of life experience. Indigenous and faith leaders from the civil rights movement sometimes filled this gap, but connecting elders with the next generation often proved difficult, ironically, because we live in a societal structure designed to repress wisdom unless it can be commodified.

This is recommended reading for people of faith who are interested in, as the "Occupy Love" slogan says, "Creating the more beautiful world our hearts know is possible."

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