



Resurrecting Jubilee



**A Faith-Based
Call for a
Debtors' Movement**

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The Occupy Movement represents at least one major spiritual challenge to all our faith communities. What do our traditions have to say about money, debt, and power? Why are our houses of worship largely silent on issues of economic justice? We live in a society where the Christian Right justifies a hate war against homosexuals by citing two passages from the Bible taken out of context, but where do they stand on usury laws, which the Bible clearly (and far more frequently) condemns? Where is that same moral outrage at predatory lending, or the debt system that keeps so many resources stuck in the hands of a privileged few? Between Islam's explicit ban on usury, and Buddhist and Hindu notions of eliminating karmic debt, where is the national conversation on money, debt, and power as necessarily spiritual issues? For Jews and Christians specifically: whatever happened to Jubilee?

In case they never told you about this part of the Bible in Sunday school: Jubilee was a kind of spiritual antidote to the creeping notions of private property and self-sufficiency that inevitably entered the human mind and lead it astray. From a Biblical perspective, we do not own the land or the fruits of the land that we tend; we are merely stewards called on to tend the land wisely and justly. From a Biblical perspective, God alone owns the land, and all the stuff produced by the land. God alone is our supplier and our sustainer. So, to drive the principle home, YHWH commanded that every seventh year both the land and the people must be given a sabbatical (Deuteronomy 15:1), that they might rest and remember God's sufficiency in all areas of their lives.

But something even more radical took place at the end of seven sabbatical years (that is, every fifty years; Leviticus 25:10). Jubilee was declared: all debts were cancelled; the economy was reset to zero; and financial inequities were erased. Now, for the moment, it doesn't matter whether you'd agree to such a plan or not; if you are anyone claiming any kind of Judeo-Christian spiritual tradition at all, you have to grapple with the fact that this is not the proclamation of a Socialist, or an Anarchist, or an Occupier: This is Moses, in the Torah, telling us that there should be no permanent underclass that is perpetually in debt. Similar calls to economic justice abound in all spiritual traditions. This means that, from a Faith-based perspective, you can't just shrug your shoulders and say, "Well, the poor are poor because they're too lazy to work." Instead, you must recognize the underlying systems of oppression that keep people locked in poverty, and you must remediate them.

So where do our Communities of Faith go from here? First we can educate ourselves about how debt operates today—not just personally, but politically. We can hold teach-ins and study groups; we can host lectures and debt clinics. Through this we can start to lift the veil of shame around debt, and encourage people to share their stories in small groups and even in our worship services. We can learn for ourselves how debt keeps individuals, communities—especially communities of color—and even whole nations trapped in cycles of economic bondage, and how it's only going to get worse if we don't do something about it.



It's the "doing something about it" part where Faith and Community are most needed. If our Communities of Faith are going to remain relevant in the 21st century, we need more than just a liturgical moment reflecting on debt. When you pull at the thread of debt, you threaten to unravel so much more than just our economic system; you threaten to unravel all of our illusions of private property and self-reliance, and, through these, the entire culture of Empire. A new kind of Liberation Theology is needed; one that not only takes debt seriously, but one that understands that all of our local and international justice struggles are connected by a counterfeit spirituality worshiping Money and Power. We must call for nothing short of a transformational Debtors Movement.

It's high time we picked up the torch of the Civil Rights Movement and the Poor People's Campaign, and remember where they were headed. To appreciate the full scope of such a prophetic call, and to remain faithful to it, won't be easy: it will demand new partnerships, and new coalitions that push each of us out of our ideological safety zones and issue silos. But the time has come for a multi-faith, multi-sector, multi-racial Debtors Movement that moves beyond the various symptoms and gets to the main disease. Such a movement may, at any given time, articulate new laws and policies requiring debt forgiveness both foreign and domestic. But we must remember that all calls for forgiveness are always calls from a Higher Law, and that fidelity to this one must often mean disobedience to the other. We must dream beyond the economy of our time, gathering new and unique visions for each of our beloved communities, where love and trust build local economies of interdependence and mutual aid, and the heavens that we all dream of are lived in the here and now. The time has come for revival, resurrection, and a revolution of values for all our people. Seriously: let's call for Jubilee. ■

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