

American Society of Missiology Series, No. 64

CHRIST AMONG THE CLASSES

*The Rich, the Poor,
and the Mission of the Church*

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ORBIS  BOOKS
Maryknoll, New York 10545

Introduction

What Is Classism?

Eight-year old Jocelyn and I sat on a rickety, wooden bench on the edge of the squatter community that she called home. It was Christmas season in the Philippines, so Manila buzzed with festivities, shopping, gift-giving, and special masses. Carols about snow, roasting chestnuts, and other un-Filipino holiday cheer filled the air. But in Jocelyn's community, life essentially remained the same. She asked me about Christmas in the United States this time of year.¹ I told her it was much like here in the Philippines, to which she retorted, "You mean like over there at Megamall, don't you?" Megamall, a gargantuan shopping center located not too far from Jocelyn's squatter community, imposed itself as largely as its name implied.

Her perceptiveness caught me off guard. She sensed acutely the difference between the experience of Christmas for those who could afford to shop at Megamall and those who could not. And furthermore, her comment revealed what she thought of the USA, namely, that everyone there enjoyed Christmas, since in her mind the USA *was* Megamall writ large.

"You know, not everyone is rich over there," I said. "And for us, Christmas is the celebration of the birth of Jesus, so all Christians get to enjoy Christmas wherever they live." I thought, like a good missionary, that I had successfully changed the direction of the discussion to the true meaning of Christmas.

¹ This conversation occurred in the language of Tagalog. I have translated it here for obvious reasons.

But she was determined to mine the depths of socioeconomic inequality with me. She said sweetly but sharply, “You mean *rich* Christians can enjoy Christmas, don’t you? Kuya Al, malinaw na malinaw naman—para sa mayayaman ang Pasko [It’s very clear, older brother Al, Christmas is for the rich].” *Has this eight-year-old been reading Marx or what?* I wondered.

She had a point. I knew theologically that Jesus came to preach the gospel to the poor; that is what motivated me to return to my homeland of the Philippines in the first place, to live and serve among people like Jocelyn and her family. And yet she concluded from what she saw during Christmas every year of her young life that Jesus came for the rich, Christian or not. My Christmas theology may have been orthodox, but she saw what she saw. In her view, which I could not contest, Christmas was indeed for the rich to celebrate and enjoy. I put my arm around her as I cursed under my breath both the commercialism of Christmas and the cruelty of socioeconomic injustice.

Jocelyn’s words have rung in my ears ever since, as they have served as a prophetic reminder of the reality of a class chasm that defines human existence; of the harsh fact that Jocelyn’s family is but one of hundreds of millions of families around the world that find themselves on the wrong side of classism, not just during Christmastime, but all the time.

CLASSISM

Miguel De La Torre describes sexism, racism, and classism as “the three prongs of Satan’s pitchfork.”² In the pursuit of justice as part of its mission, the church strives to champion the causes of women, ethnically marginalized peoples, and the poor, which are often intertwined and interrelated. Three injustices, one pitchfork. In the complexity of these oppressions the engaged church would do well to take on the whole pitchfork.

² Miguel De La Torre, *Reading the Bible from the Margins* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 54.

From my own experience, however—and I say this fully cognizant of the risk of violating the one-pitchfork principle—the prong of classism has posed deeper complications, indicating the great power of economics to determine much, if not all, of the other aspects of our lives, from personal attitudes to state policies. I see the pitchfork penetrating unevenly into the flesh of the world, with the prong of classism more deeply embedded in the belly of the world and therefore more hidden from sight. We ignore it because we cannot see it, but all the while it is causing massive, internal damage to the world. In the making of the United States, for example, the motivators of greed and power resulted in the slave trade as well as the genocide of hundreds of indigenous populations. Classism needed racism to build the empire. The same can be said of many empire-building efforts throughout time.

More to the point of this book, unchecked classism also does great damage to the church's witness in the world. This book aims to speak primarily to nonpoor Christians, nonpoor churches, and nonpoor organizations that sincerely desire to love their neighbor as themselves, especially those who are poor. It is directed toward those who desire to love, serve, and live like Jesus, who both taught and demonstrated how to live faithfully among the poor and the nonpoor. It aims to speak to me and other nonpoor people like me. As a follower of Jesus in the context of middle-class North America, as one who lives in a nonpoor community and worships at a nonpoor church, I long to know how to live and practice mission consistently with the conviction that Jesus "came to proclaim good news to the poor" (Lk 4:18). Those who have picked up this book probably long for the same. For this to happen, classism must be named, confessed, and eradicated.

What Is It?

What is classism, and why must the church confront it? Like sexism and racism, classism distorts perceptions about a group

of people, and as such, it justifies the neglect, ill treatment, and oppression of that group. In the same way that the church loses its missional credibility when it complies with or participates in sexism or racism, so too with classism. Our complicity in it contradicts and therefore undermines the ministry of the gospel in the world.

As with racism, sexism, and other injustices, we first intuit the meaning of classism. We feel its evil and empathize with those on the wrong end of it. Our gut knows what it is, as does our heart. And to the extent that our minds also grasp it, the more poised we are to subvert it more fully and precisely. I consulted other works that attempted to define classism, and they surely helped. But definitions of racism actually proved more helpful, which speaks to the inseparable connection between racism and classism.³

Racism can be defined as prejudice based on differences in physical characteristics. But it is more than personal bias; it is collective prejudice formed into a system of inequality that is undergirded by embedded cultural narratives (that is, popular beliefs, unchallenged assumptions, or stereotypes) regarding darker skinned people and then instituted by the powers that be at the expense of those people. Classism mirrors this description with just a few word replacements: *Classism is collective prejudice formed into a system of inequality based on socioeconomic stratification; it too is undergirded by embedded cultural narratives concerning the poor, and then instituted by the powers that be at the expense of the poor.*

Who Are the Poor?

The above definition begs the question, who are the poor? The best studies have appropriately defined poverty holistically, that is, not just in economic terms but with the full human person in view. The poor suffer levels of deprivation physically, personally,

³ Jini K. Cockroft, *From Classism to Community: A Challenge to the Church* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 2016), 5.

sociopolitically, economically, psychoemotionally, morally, spiritually, and any combination thereof. In that sense the economically rich can be spiritually poor, the economically poor can be spiritually rich, and so on. I do not disagree with this approach to wealth and poverty; in fact, in most cases I would gravitate toward what Bryant Myers has championed in *Walking with the Poor* as a family-of-definitions approach, which states that a set of interrelated definitions is needed because no single definition can possibly cover the complexity of poverty.⁴

However, in some cases the broader understanding of poverty becomes a liability. I liken it to when All Lives Matter was offered as a broadening alternative to the Black Lives Matter movement.⁵ Of course all lives matter, but because black lives seem to matter less in racist society, the Black Lives Matter message needs to be heard, affirmed, and championed—not broadened by chants of All Lives Matter or Blue Lives Matter, even if both are true.

Regarding class, yes, all poverty matters, but as Ron Sider asks:

Can we truly feel what it is like to be a nine-year old boy playing outside a village school he cannot attend because his father is unable to afford the books? Can we comprehend what it means for . . . parents to watch with helpless grief as their baby daughter dies of a common childhood disease because they lack access to elementary health services? Can we grasp the awful truth that eighteen thousand children die every day, mostly of hunger and preventable diseases?⁶

This book insists that Materially Poor Lives Matter, and it rejects any broadening attempt to dilute this truth.

⁴ Bryant Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 81.

⁵ German Lopez, “Why You Should Stop Saying ‘All Lives Matter’ Explained in Nine Different Ways,” *Vox*, July 11, 2016.

⁶ Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger: Moving from Affluence to Generosity*, 6th ed. (Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, 2015), 3.

The Nature of Class

Like race, the category of class is a social construct; economic stratification did not fall from the sky. Though it is difficult to pinpoint when and where the language of class entered the human lexicon, it was Marx and Engels who not only popularized it in the modern era, but who also discussed it in terms of struggle between the bourgeoisie (the ruling class) and the proletariat (the working class), thus clearly dispelling any notion of neutrality in class stratification. Furthermore, they proposed a social order, forged by inevitable social revolution, wherein economic classes would be abolished altogether—this was the birth of socialism, from its democratic expressions to communism.⁷

The category of class has never been neutral, and it never will be. Just as race is a construct that has provided a rationale for lighter-skinned people to enjoy sociocultural privilege at the expense of darker-skinned people, class is also a construct that has provided a rationale for the wealthiest to be entitled to the highest level of dignity, respect, and privilege (upper class), and the poorest to be deprived of such things (lower class). Those in the upper-middle class, middle class, and lower-middle class, who make up the in-between strata, enjoy gradations of privilege depending on where they are on the vertical ladder. Defining one's worth and determining one's rights or access to goods and services based on one's socioeconomic status constitutes the rotten core of classism.

The category of class touches enough dimensions of society and culture that we cannot define it in strictly monetary terms. Karen Bloomquist lists “occupation, family wealth, educational level, values, aspirations, and cultural and linguistic characteristics” as other important factors when considering the meaning of class.⁸ A more detailed list would include type and place of residence (do you own a single family home in a gated neighborhood or rent a

⁷ Ralph Miliband, *Marxism and Politics* (Delhi, India: Aakar, 2006), 18–23.

⁸ Karen Bloomquist, “The Dynamic of Class as a Theological Challenge,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 28, no. 2 (April 2001): 86.

unit in a trailer park outside of town?); mode of transportation (do you drive a Tesla or take public transportation?); musical and artistic tastes (do you like classical and Rembrandt or hip-hop and Marvel?); appearance (are you “dressed to the nines” for work or church, or are you untucked and casual?); and so on.

The undeniable association, however, as we consider these characteristics, is race. It is not uncommon in North America, for example, to hear “the poor,” and “black or Latino/a” in the same sentence, in spite of its political incorrectness. In their study of urban-suburban partnerships, Sider and colleagues assert that the term *urban* has become code for impoverished people of color, thus demonstrating the close relationship between class and race, classism and racism.⁹

That said, classism differs significantly from racism and other *-isms* in that one can theoretically move from one class stratum to another. Bloomquist avers: “Class is far more illusive than race or gender, which basically cannot be changed. The ideology of class in American society is that it *can* be changed.”¹⁰ Whereas skin color and sex cannot generally be altered (the rising number of transsexuals notwithstanding), classist society would say all the poor need is a little ambition, a never-give-up attitude, and a good work ethic to overcome their circumstances. Phrases such as “upward mobility,” “I made it to the top,” and “If you just set your mind to it, you can be anything you want” stem from this understanding of classism.

This view also breeds judgmental statements such as “The poor are lazy”; “When are you going to make something of yourself?”; and “God helps those who help themselves.” If the inalterability of skin color or gender traps people into being victims of racism or sexism, it is precisely the presumed *alterability* of one’s socioeconomic situation that breeds the indignity, disrespect,

⁹ Ronald J. Sider, John Perkins, Wayne Gordon, and F. Albert Tizon, *Linking Arms, Linking Lives: How Urban-Suburban Partnerships Can Transform Communities* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 33.

¹⁰ Bloomquist, “The Dynamic of Class as a Theological Challenge,” 87, italics added.

and bias of classism, since in an ideology of class, the poor are poor because of their own actions—or more accurately, their inactions. To sanctify this way of thinking about the less fortunate, people often cite Galatians 6:7—“you reap whatever you sow”—interpreting it to mean that the poor have simply reaped what they have sown.

EXPRESSIONS OF CLASSISM

Casteism: A Notable Exception

The caste system in India, Nepal, and other parts of Asia notoriously exemplifies classism, though it constitutes a significant exception to how I have defined it. Due to a complex combination of family origin, geographical location, function or occupation, darkness of skin, and historically laden notions of what was considered humanly pure or polluted, the caste system determined for centuries the permanent place of people in the social caste structure. One’s place in the social hierarchy of the caste system does not and will not change, thus likening caste to the inalterability of race and gender. Caste goes beyond the socioeconomic nature of class in that it is endogamous, that is, tied to clan or tribe, which comes closer to race than economic class in sociological terms.¹¹ Casteism is a case of classism and more.

Briefly, the caste system divides into four main groupings: Brahmins (priests and intellectuals), Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers), Vaishyas (merchants and traders), and Shudras (laborers). Within this system the Shudras bear the worst effects of casteism. But beneath the Shudras exists an even lower class of people, a people so low that they do not occupy any place in the system; they are “out-castes.” Known as Dalits or Untouchables, they were and are “discriminated against, denied access to land, forced to

¹¹ S. Jayakumar, “Caste,” in *Dictionary of Mission Theology: Evangelical Foundations*, ed. John Corrie (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 42.

work in degrading conditions, and routinely abused at the hands of police and of the higher-caste groups.”¹²

The caste system still frames the social hierarchy of India and other nations, though it has not gone unchallenged. Due to the extraordinary efforts of people like B. R. Ambedkar, a Dalit who rose to prominence and who principally drafted the Indian Constitution outlawing caste discrimination, the dismantling of casteism has at least been legally set. The secularization and urbanization of Indian society have also contributed to the weakening of the historical stronghold of the caste system.

However, casteism continues at intolerable levels, as horrendous abuses still occur among Dalits. Arundhati Roy reported in 2014 that “a crime is committed against a Dalit by a non-Dalit every sixteen minutes; every day more than four Untouchable women are raped by Touchables; every week, thirteen Dalits are murdered, and six Dalits are kidnapped.”¹³ Roy wonders, in the face of global outcries against apartheid, racism, sexism, economic imperialism, and religious fundamentalism, “how . . . the practice of caste in India—one of the most brutal modes of hierarchical social organization that human society has known—has managed to escape similar scrutiny and censure.”¹⁴

As I have mentioned, the caste system constitutes an exception to the assumed fluidity of one’s social class as the basis of classism and therefore requires a different kind of analysis than this book primarily tackles. But not mentioning it would be to commit the gross oversight that Roy has charged against human rights watch groups and concerned global citizens. As we confront classism in the way we have defined it in this book, we cannot *not* acknowledge the blatant evil of casteism. It too must be confronted and dismantled.

¹² Peniel Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation: Problems, Paradigms, and Possibilities* (Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2010), 5.

¹³ Arundhati Roy, “The Doctor and the Saint,” in *Annihilation of Caste by B. R. Ambedkar*, annotated and critical ed., ed. S. Anand (New Delhi: Navayana, 2014), 21.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

“The Poor Are Lazy”

Examples of the kind of classism on which this book focuses include systems of indentured servitude in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The list would also include abuses endured by thousands of overseas foreign workers, people from poorer nations who are lured to work in richer nations in Asia, the Middle East, and Europe as cheap laborers.

It would also include the place of the urban poor in North America. Matthew Desmond explains: “In America, if you work hard, you will succeed. So those who do not succeed have not worked hard. It’s an idea found deep in the marrow of the nation.”¹⁵ Based on this deeply held belief in North American culture, the stigmatization is palpable against those who rely on government welfare and food stamps, live in Section 8 housing, have an inconsistent employment record, or all of the above.

The homeless perhaps epitomize the height of social disdain, as they represent, within an ideology of class, ultimate laziness and/or destructive life choices involving some combination of drug abuse, mental disorder, family dysfunction, and antisocial behavior. The homeless and all the other poor who burden the social order simply need to change their ways, to repent, for, as William Stringfellow quipped, “When money is an idol, to be poor is a sin.”¹⁶

Bloomquist identifies the class structure in North America as a meritocracy, a social system based on aptitude—an allegedly innate quality of potentiality—as well as usefulness in society. Although North American class ideology would claim equality across the spectrum—that is, that all people have the ability “to be anything they want”—the existence of post-secondary entrance exams to measure aptitude (for example, the dreaded

¹⁵ Matthew Desmond, “Americans Want to Believe Jobs Are the Solution to Poverty. They’re Not,” *New York Times Magazine*, September 11, 2018.

¹⁶ William Stringfellow, *Dissenter in a Great Society: A Christian View of America in Crisis* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 40.

SATs and GREs) suggests otherwise. Test scores can and often do determine not just what school students attend, but their track in life. In a meritocracy some people are “more equal” than others. Bloomquist writes, “A meritocracy may fit with the American ethos . . . but classifying people on the basis of . . . aptitude is no less classist.”¹⁷ This meritocracy has had an unprecedented opportunity to spread across the world, as it has ridden the wave of what we call today globalization, which, at least in its economic ideological form, is classism on a massive global scale.¹⁸

Have Westerners, inadvertently or not, judged the world’s poor on the basis of this meritocracy? Are Westerners systemically classist? Are Western missionaries theologically classist? Interrogating the log in my own eye, as a missionary who engaged in community development for a decade in my homeland of the Philippines, did I try to implement development strategies that held to the subconscious belief that “if the poor just worked hard-enough” they could transcend their situation?¹⁹ Was I, am I, personally classist?

CHRIST AMONG THE CLASSES

Such incriminating questions point to the challenge of this book—to name, understand, and overcome classism in our lives and in the life of the church in mission. In the age of ideological globalization, in which we see Mammon’s strongest attempt yet to capture humanity’s heart, overcoming classism will require a radical reorientation. Classism constitutes the air we breathe and the water we drink; as

¹⁷ Bloomquist, “The Dynamic of Class as a Theological Challenge,” 89.

¹⁸ For a more detailed discussion of what I have called ideological globalization, consult Al Tizon, *Whole and Reconciled* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 10–12.

¹⁹ I learned about the practical aspects of community development as I served first among squatters in metro-Manila and then among survivors of the 1991 eruption of Mt. Pinatubo in the province of Zambales. It was not a part of my formal studies. My sisters and brothers in these areas tolerated me, taught me, accepted me. And, it is hoped, together we did something to benefit life in those communities.

such, we go about life largely unaware of, even oblivious to, the classist assumptions by which we live our lives. It is time to confront classism, for if we do not, we mar our witness to the good news of God's justice in the world. The church in mission needs to confront and disavow classism for the sake of the whole gospel.

Back to Basics

With this enormous challenge before us, it would behoove us to go back to basics, and by that I mean to seek realignment with the life and ministry of Jesus. To be sure, the subject of socioeconomic justice occupies an astonishing amount of space in the pages of scripture, and I could have chosen to survey what the Law, the prophets, the Pauline epistles, and the rest of scripture say about it, but such surveys have already been excellently done.²⁰ Moreover, if we believe that the person of Jesus embodies the spirit of biblical justice, then a picture of Christ among the classes from the Gospels can serve as sufficient basis for a theology that confronts classism today. What did Jesus teach about wealth, poverty, and relationships of justice and equality? What were his attitudes and interactions like with the rich and the poor of his day? And how can we reflect Jesus in our own practices and policies, so as to confront and ultimately dismantle classism in our hearts, churches, and organizations? Part One of this book seeks to address these questions and thus paint a portrait of Christ among the classes.

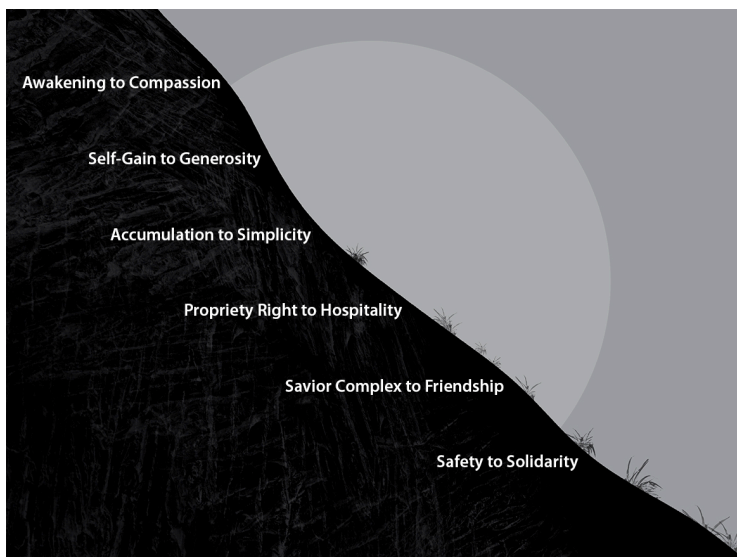
Taking Inventory

In light of this portrait, how can we become the church among the classes that reflects Christ among the classes? How can we

²⁰ See, for example, Walter Brueggemann's *Money and Possessions* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2016) and Craig Blomberg's *Neither Poverty Nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Possessions* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1999).

overcome classism in our hearts, our institutions, and our mission approaches in the world? Part Two seeks to address these questions, and as I have said, they are primarily intended for the Christian nonpoor who were born and raised in market-driven societies, but who carry a certain level of angst in their hearts regarding wealth and poverty. They sense a great chasm between the socioeconomic system in which they feel most comfortable and the one Jesus called for in the Gospels, but they do not know what to do about it. I wrote this book for followers of Jesus who long to live like Jesus: savior, lord, and friend of the poor in the world.

Toward that end, I develop six life-altering movements that create distance between us and classism: (1) awakening to compassion; (2) from self-gain to generosity; (3) from accumulation to simplicity; (4) from proprietary rights to hospitality; (5) from savior complex to friendship; and (6) from safety to solidarity. Part Two discusses each of these movements but also makes the case that all of them together make up a single movement to join Jesus “down below.”



I am using the word *below* to describe where Jesus is in relation to where we are. I view this movement away from classism toward justice as a downward one. I see those afflicted with classism (me included) as living in the clouds, oblivious to the plight of the underprivileged down below. We know from Matthew 25, and really from the overall testimony of the Gospels, that Jesus made and makes his home among and with the poor, oppressed, marginalized, and traumatized in the world. Jesus lives down there, not in the fluffy clouds far above the valley of poverty below. Our journey out of classism is a holy descent to join Jesus among the world's most vulnerable. Where am I in this descent to justice, and how can I keep moving toward where Jesus resides down below?

Of course, an inventory of this sort constitutes only the beginning of a fuller response to global poverty. This book is not a manual for poverty alleviation; it attempts rather to provide a way to align individual and organizational reality with the belief that the widening gap between the rich and the poor constitutes an affront to the God of justice. It seeks to move us closer in conformity to Christ among the classes and thus positions us to confront the evil of classism that plagues our world.

Many sermons, articles, and books on wealth and poverty do well to alert, inform, and convict middle- and upper-class audiences of their culpability and/or responsibility for the plight of the poor. But these works often leave us feeling guilty and exasperated for lack of practical ways to respond. Presenting global poverty without realistic avenues for response can and often does inadvertently cause debilitating frustration and resentment in the very people we seek to persuade. This book certainly presents the bad news of classism, but ultimately it offers ways to move toward living according to a picture of Christ among the classes—a way of life, church, and mission that reflects genuine concern for the world's suffering masses.