



Reclaiming Our Future: The Vision of Jubilee¹

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“The real question in the coming millennium, also for us as Christians, is which type of globalization we want to pursue—the type that seeks the survival of the strongest, or the type that seeks the survival of the weak?”

In the previous article I referred to the distinguished work and outstanding contribution of Stanley Stuber. I referred to him as a global citizen *avant la lettre*, who wanted to be fully present in two worlds at the same time—the world of the uniting nations and the world of the uniting churches of the ecumenical movement. For a Christian academician like him, it was beyond doubt that these two worlds were in fact just two parts of one world, for the entire globe belongs to God. It is this rich and inspiring fact that I want to take as the starting-point for this article. In my opinion, it places us straight on the right track. I described several painful paradoxes in our present society and linked them with extreme forms of dynamism in the present style of globalization. I even spoke of the presence of forms of spiritual enclosure which can hold people in a kind of mental captivity so that they personally are not even aware of their own blatant narrowness or shortsightedness. People can then become “economized.” But, as I indicated at the end of the foregoing article, this should not lead us to an extreme reaction that values only what is given or static, or denies any good at all in the whole present worldwide development of economy, technology, and international cooperation. We cannot and should not accept the opinion, which we find in some evangelical Christian circles, that the idea of globalization is already in itself evil, simply an offspring of demonic inspiration. In the line of Stuber, we could say that this looks like a straightforward denial of the ecumenical origins of the Christian church itself. For was not the church from its very beginning called to be a worldwide community that transcended ethnic, cultural,

and racial differences? Not incorrectly, the church is sometimes even described as the first multinational. Furthermore, the meaning of the biblical word *oikomene*, from which our word “economics” is derived, points to nothing less than the whole inhabited world. So let us be clear from the start: Globalization as such is not our enemy. The essential debate in the coming century has to deal with the choice between better and worse forms of globalization, and with the structural and local implications of these forms.

I will try to explain and illustrate this thesis in various ways. I want to focus extensively on the alternative economic system we find in the Torah, and especially on its inherent Jubilee focus. I also intend to look into the question of how far we can find, in the Torah, concrete models for us today. In this context, I will also address to some extent the parables on stewardship which Jesus told, and will discuss the relevance of the recognition of human rights as they were formulated by the United Nations.

But I will begin with that well-known first meeting of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1948 in Amsterdam, where Stanley Stuber was present. That meeting took place just after the Second World War. At that moment there was much political and economic chaos and turmoil all over the world, especially in Europe. In the midst of that difficult situation, the Amsterdam assembly chose a powerful central theme for its meeting: “Man’s Disorder and God’s Design.” Now “Disorder” was a word that could be understood by all. But what was meant here by “God’s Design”? Philip Potter, the ex-secretary general of the WCC, who was also present during that meeting, explained once to me that the word “Design” was taken directly from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, chapter 1. There it means the Design or Plan of God to unite, in the future, the whole of creation under the coming Headship of Christ; it is the last mystery which still has to be fulfilled on this earth. “But,” Philip added, “Do you know that the Greek word for *design* which Paul uses has the word *economy* in it? It stands for God’s Administration, God’s Economy-of-times to steer human history in such a way that finally everything and everyone on earth is brought under the kingship-rule of Jesus the Messiah. For a Pastor-King will stand at the end and fulfillment of history—that is the design.” So Philip Potter concluded: “God obviously has his own style of globalization! And we Christians are just summoned to be a part of that!”

Over the last two years, this has been a very inspiring and encouraging thought for me. It wonderfully parallels what the Christian martyr of our age, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, once wrote in his prison in Berlin.

There he referred, just as he did in his *Ethics*, to the task of Christians to live and work now in the perspective of the Last things, by sharing and caring in the present for the poor, the needy, and the refugees. For, if it is God's Design that the Good Shepherd will be King over us and even over the fullness of this earth, then even now he expects us to take care of the weak sheep—just as he did—and to heal the wounded, and pay attention to everything and everyone that is left behind, pushed behind, and lagging behind.

“Left behind, pushed behind.” I used these words in my first article. But there they stood for the one-sidedness of the prevalent present style of globalization, the misplaced “faith” that through the tunnel of hard, and often exclusive, competition happiness will finally come to all people on this earth. But I want to use these words now to indicate a radically opposed style of globalization. For the rule and horizon of God's style of globalization is not the survival of the fittest, but the survival of the vulnerable and the life of the excluded. This is not only the promise but also the standard in the Kingdom of God ever since Mary sang that ‘the poor are filled with goods, but the rich and powerful are sent away empty.’ The real question in the coming millennium, also for us as Christians, is which type of globalization we want to pursue—the type that seeks the survival of the strongest, or the type that seeks the survival of the weak? If Rauschenbusch, Kuyper, and Stuber were sitting among us, I think their decision would be clear. Did not Stuber write with great passion and precision about the inalienable rights of women, children, and refugees, about rights laid down in several UN declarations? He made a decision, in that way, to be serviceable to the weak and to their Pastor-King.

But is it possible to make the difference between the two styles of globalization even clearer? This question brings us to the relevance of the Old Testament economy, and its deepening in the New Testament, for the revitalization of our vision today. This may sound strange and even absurd, for to refer to the Torah means speaking about rules and institutions from three millennia ago which were designed for a very different, agricultural society. So what could they possibly mean for us today? Let me first draw your attention to the hidden economic cohesion between the separate rules of the Torah. Consider, for instance, that strange rule in old Israel which says that it is generally not permitted to claim interest for loans, although you do so with foreigners, and that it is even appropriate to pressure them to repay (Deuteronomy 15:3). That text appears wrong and even discriminatory, until we become aware of the fact that Israel had to uphold its own distinctive

economy in the midst of a pagan world where the payment of high interest was a common practice. Imagine if every foreign banker could just borrow Israelite money at zero interest-level without repayment, because of Israel's law. All the capital of Israel would immediately fly away to the neighboring economies. So we find here an economic-political provision to keep the necessary capital within the Israelite borders, to prevent capital flight. Said otherwise, the system was not meant to remain a beautiful utopia. It was designed to work in practice and to lead to prosperity (Deuteronomy 14:4-5). And its design consists mainly in upholding two principal orientations for the economy, which I will call the "input-orientation" and the "corrections-in-time orientation," respectively. I will try to illustrate that these two principles also underlie the social and economic teachings of Jesus.

Let us first look to the principle of orientation on inputs. Economists speak of inputs as well as of outputs. For instance, the Gross National Product is an indication of output-level for which an enormous amount of inputs is needed in terms of labor, capital, and the use of natural resources. Now we all know that economies can differ strongly to the extent in which they use market-principles or planning-principles. But their main orientation to inputs or outputs can also be very different. In our modern economies our primary orientation and main concern is the level of *output*. We want to maximize our production and income-levels, and implement, therefore, rules of strong efficiency and high productivity in the domains of input. But in old Israel, the first economic orientation went to the input-side, where labor, land, and capital were viewed as the main production-factors. This is clear from the Sabbath and Jubilee laws. *Labor* in Israel did not include perpetual slavery and people had to be included in daily work. Precautions were also taken for their health—every laborer, for instance, was entitled to enjoy rest. Also the *Land*, the vital economic factor in Old Israel, was surrounded by many protective measures. In the Sabbatical year the land was required to rest from cultivation, while fertilization continued that it might be ready for new cycles of cultivation. *Capital* was available for all people. In fact this was arranged mainly by openly discouraging any form of private accumulation of capital. One could not invest in land, because in Israel land was returned to the original owners after every 49 years. It would not be any fun for a capitalist to receive zero-sum interest year after year! So Israel was mainly an input-oriented economy. The good and healthy condition of land, labor, and capital was basic. This principle of preventive care fully included the poor and their access to the land. As passers-by, they were allowed to take what they needed from the borders of the cultivated lands.

Remarkably, we see this principle in the teachings of Jesus. He spoke about good and bad stewards and about the rule of *oikonomia*—the good care for the *oikos*, the household. But that “economic” care included concern for the land, and for all those who dwell on it and live off of its fruits. According to the norm or rule of the good *oikonomia*, they ought to receive their food in season. How remarkable and shameful it is that in our culture we have shifted all those input-related concerns to the realm of “ethics”—as a kind of afterthought for a hard economic reality. For in the biblical concept of “economy” it is exactly these concerns that are in the center. Indeed, that is the first issue to which the *oikonomos* must render account when Lord of the Land comes back. Thus, New Testament *oikonomia* has from the start an eschatological perspective. God is the Great Economist who will judge nations according to their careful or careless behavior.²

Speaking as a small economist, however, I would add that every radical orientation of an economy towards the preservation and regeneration of inputs has its price. It diminishes the possible final output-level that can be attained. But is that always bad? No, it is not bad at all, and it can even function as a blessing for very rich countries. Throughout the Torah and the economic teachings of Jesus, *shalom* is valued as more important to human happiness than a constantly rising standard of living. If the harvest is abundant and the amount of cattle is growing, the Torah says “do not set your heart on it.” Rather, be willing to give, and above all, have feasts! The family feasts in the temple, to which the widows and the Levites are also invited, are the joyful goal of the economic life of Israel. These were not festivities to honor the drive for accumulation. But they functioned in just the opposite manner, namely, to get rid of economic surpluses. For the feast went on until everyone was fully satisfied. The Israelite economy was therefore an economy of abundance and inclusion, based on limited means, rather than an economy of unlimited expansion at the price of growing scarcity and exclusion. For abundance means to have more than enough. So a society without any awareness of “enough” will never see abundance.

I think that here we reach a point of greatest practicality in biblical teaching. Over and against the extreme economic dynamism of our time that leads to exclusion and various painful paradoxes, we find here a set of patterns and ideas of economic growth which are really different from ours. Modern growth-concepts are all exclusively related to economic and financial flows. They can therefore at best be compared with the flows of traffic in a tunnel. Moving forward at the highest possible speed is the maxim there, even if the stream of vehicles is

accompanied by a lot of noise. The slowest cars, of course, must remain outside since they would hinder the other traffic. But the biblical concepts of growth is more like a fruit tree. The tree is a living stock, which grows on the basis of the inclusion of all its cells. It does so without overburdening the soil, its own environment. It ends by bearing fruit for all. But how is one simple tree capable of combining these important goals that modern “tunnel-societies” are not able to perform? Mainly, it is because trees are by nature modest. No tree gives in to the temptation to try to grow to the skies. It refrains from an ongoing vertical expansion in order to become a healthy blossoming tree and therefore sets a substantial part of its growth-potential aside in that direction.

The important lesson for all modern rich economies at the start of the new millennium is that, at the very least, some horizons or standards of sufficiency and saturation ought to be accepted. If these economies continue to strive for maximum levels of income and consumption at all costs, they will just overgrow themselves, losing more at the input side than they gain at the output side. Already our lands are eroding and the environment is being used beyond its carrying capacity. The same is true for human labor, which is often accompanied by stress and haste. In the meantime, capital flows mainly to the growth-poles in the world and is not available for the poor countries that so badly need it. All this occurs because of the drive to reach the supposed “light at the end of the tunnel” as fast as possible, namely, the highest possible level of income and consumption. But in this way, terrible paradoxes get their chance to develop on this globe. In this respect our modern growth-obsessed, and therefore burdensome, rich societies look very similar to the tower of Babel, which never was finished. Our societies would therefore do better if they were willing to learn from the far more realistic growth model of old Israel.

One contemporary illustration of this model embodied in practice is the community of John Perkins in a poor region of Alabama in the 1970s. Perkins’ community was beset by problems such as a growth in unemployment, an increase in poverty, and a lack of care for the environment. What Perkins did illustrates how a community can find ways of healing if there is a willingness to refrain from a further growth of private consumption, and so to exercise the power of restraint. Perkins simply asked the rich people in his community to consider whether they had more than enough for a decent life and to use that surplus voluntarily as an input for cooperative local efforts or projects. He asked the unemployed people at the same time to offer to the com-

munity the input of their labor. On that basis, by joint input of labor and capital, houses could again be built, care was given to the weak, and the unemployment rate fell drastically. Such a reorientation of what economists call the informal economy is indeed very similar to the economic logic of the Old and New Testaments.

But let me also say something about the second orientation in the economy of the Old Testament, the orientation to necessary corrections in time. Time, including time to rest, has always been extremely important in the Old Testament and in Jewish culture because it was created by God himself. So also in the Ten Commandments the order of things is not that we should work very hard first and afterwards enjoy our rest. Rather, the given rest comes first. It is in the context of that given rest that our work becomes meaningful. So time in the Old Testament is an instrument of ordering and of healing. And we see that also in the ordering of years in the Israelite economy. In the sabbatical years, the whole economy rests. It has to refrain from all excessively far-reaching claims. Slavery ends, but also legal claims on poor indebted people. For if only God is eternal, then no human debt may last forever. God's time breaks in from outside, into the ongoing economic processes, and does so in a healing way. The same is true, even at a deeper level, for the year of Jubilee. It is the year of the return of the land to its original, and possibly now-impooverished, families. Land is the main source of wealth in every agricultural economy. So the poor and indebted families obtain the land freely, along with the necessary tools and houses, with a year of food, according to the law. They can make a renewed economic start. The year of Jubilee starts with the Day of Atonement, and indeed, it is the redemption of economic life itself which we meet here.

This message was taken and deepened by Jesus when he made the return of the Jubilee year the center of his public speech in the synagogue of Nazareth. A new time, a new reality, he proclaimed, was breaking in and invading the old. Now I don't know how this sounds to you, but for me this biblical orientation was eye-opening. It expresses the need of all human economies for times of outside healing and correction. When the sound of the Jubilee was heard in Israel, everyone knew that the time for societal transformation had come. But transformation is not the same as revolution. The message of the Jubilee was not "what you have done until now was sinful, worthless, and therefore has to be pulled down." The economies of this world have an important function; they should do their work. And abuses cannot always be avoided. But precisely because of that fact, there is that wonderful biblical prin-

principle that, at some moments in time, basic corrections are needed in the economy and fundamental realignment must take place. If this is not done, then corruption and exploitation will indeed grow and expand to the extreme.

Let me try to translate this into our present situation. A Jubilee campaign is going on right now. Its intention is to set the poorest countries free from their unbearable debts. I am very happy with that action. But in my view it mirrors the Old Testament year of Sabbath more than the year of Jubilee. For will all those cancelled debts within some years not be substituted by new, even larger debts? If that is to be prevented, deeper economic changes are necessary. Just as in the year of Jubilee, the poor countries should have their rights of access to needed resources restored. And this is not only or even primarily access to the land, as in the Old Testament. Far more important in the new globalizing economy, perhaps, is access to capital and to the stock of international liquidities. But it is exactly here where we meet an astonishingly hard fact. Even until this very moment, the rich nations of this world have always and systematically excluded poor countries from any access to the sources of global capital. They did not allow them to have any substantial share in the so-called creation of international liquidities. The yearly growth of the amount of international money now accrues fully and exclusively to the rich countries that can create their own key-currencies, like dollars, euros, and the yen. In the meantime, poor countries can only ask the permission to borrow these. And this hard fact was the main reason for the growing indebtedness of the poor countries in the 1970s and the 1980s.

What we therefore need is a fundamental correction of our whole present international monetary system that would be the equivalent of the Old Testament year of Jubilee. It is badly needed in order to cure our present sick and one-sided world economy. Technically this change is, no doubt, possible. It can even start with special emission-rounds of money, the so-called SDRs issued by the International Monetary Fund. But the consequence for the richer countries is that they will receive less international liquidities. The change may even imply that they have to curtail the amount of the yearly growth of their own key-currencies. But will they be prepared to do so? I think only if they can be convinced of the shortsightedness and the huge price of their present extreme dynamism and consumption-orientation. Only then may they be willing to accept stricter financial restraints voluntarily. But time is running out. Too many people are starving. The words of Charles Birch are more relevant than ever before: "The rich should live more simply, so that the poor can simply live."

I entitle this second article, somewhat audaciously, "Reclaiming our Future." But after what we have just heard, we may feel almost hopeless. For as we sit here, we simply lack the power to change the world-economy or its international monetary system. So what is the real help in all these biblical references? Before you take the understandable but dramatic decision to turn off, I'd like to share with you three personal experiences I've had in the last several years. These give me courage to go on and I hope that they can do the same for you. And at the same time, they will conclude this short series of two articles.

The first experience dates from about ten years ago. I was asked by the staff of the World Council of Churches in Geneva to travel to Lesotho in Southern Africa and act as a consultant in a meeting of the All-African Council of Churches on the consequences of the Debt Crisis. I think I was almost the only white person in the room. You can imagine my growing feeling of perplexity and sadness when the land-reports were given. So many schools closed in Zambia, sick people in Tanzania sent away from the hospitals, hunger coming back in Niger. And all reports pointed to the relationship to the growing debt burdens and the structural adjustment programs of the IMF and the World Bank. These reports just sapped the energy from the people in the room. It felt hopeless indeed.

But then two things happened. First, the book of Nehemiah was read aloud, especially chapter 5 where there is an outcry by the women of Israel because of what the increase of debts is doing to their children. In response to the outcry, Nehemiah takes action by openly speaking to the heart of his rich fellow-citizens. I can still hear the murmur going through the room. "But that is exactly what happens with our children," and "If women begin to complain together, then everyone had better listen!" So this old story began to bring back to the participants a glimpse of hope. "Maybe," they said, "all these modern processes of growing indebtedness were not as anonymous as we had thought. Maybe the Lord now summons us to address our creditors and other rich actors. For are our children not of the same flesh and blood as their children?"

But ~~then~~ a second thing happened. An old wise judge stood up. He had served his country for many years as a member of the Human Rights Commission of the United Nations—an African Stanley Stuber, if you will. And he said, "Year after year we have tried in that committee to formulate the right of women, of refugees, but also of children, and the General Assembly has agreed upon those rights. So, why we should not address the IMF and the World Bank and ask them just this

one thing—to adhere in all their advice and adjustment programs to the principles already laid down in these covenants, and so respect the rights of all children to be fed, to have shelter, to be cured and to have an education?” And so it was done. This was the start of the “Declaration of Lesotho” which stated simply that international banks and institutions must respect the rights formulated by the world community.

But did it help? Let me just say this. In the World Bank Press Release of September 1995, you can find a short notice whereby the World Bank, after an evaluation of what went wrong in the 1980s, finally decided to change its accounting system. The term “investment,” which in the old system was used only for the procurement of land, machinery, farms, and the like, has now been broadened so that it now also includes expenditures for education, medical care, and environmental protective measures. They are now seen as investments in, respectively, human resources, social capital, and natural capital. This implies that the World Bank will no longer advise cutting all these kinds of expenditures simply because they do not bring in hard cash. When I read this, it was for me like hearing the prayers in Lesotho answered, prayers that asked for a deeper economic appreciation of the rights of children in this world. I learned from my fellow Christians in Lesotho two things. The first was that confronted with huge social and economic problems, Christians should remember that they are people of the Way. Their task is to go step by step, trusting that after some concrete obedient steps, the way may widen itself. It is best not to develop such huge goals and blueprints for a better world, for afterwards you will only become depressed. And the second lesson for me was that we have indeed to go behind anonymous-looking processes and see which public or private actors can be addressed on the basis of justice and morality. Public actors especially must be addressed because in our time, more than ever before, there is the necessity to build and extend new public national and international domains based on firm rules of justice. Both Stanley Stuber and that old black judge in Lesotho were pioneers in that field. But, then, their work has to be continued. People like us, therefore, should be willing to appeal to these public laws and rules. This is globalisation in the biblical style, in the style of the coming Shepherd-King.

Allow me to share with you a second experience. Some time ago, the Dutch Council of Churches was surprised by a strange and unexpected request from Shell, the big oil company. This occurred just after the so-called “Brent Spar” incident, when a large public protest arose against

Shell's plan to dump a completely obsolete oil-platform into the deeper ocean. The protest was so huge that Shell had to give in. But then Shell became insecure, "How was it possible that we so awfully misinterpreted public opinion? Do we really know what is going on?" And so the churches were asked "Are you willing to start a dialogue with us?" The Council agreed, with the condition that they also might add some points for discussion such as the violation of human rights in Nigeria. So we had three intensive sessions with Shell, which formed a strong impulse for that leading transnational to change its whole rule or code of conduct. The Council of Churches from that point on have had an open entry to Shell in the case of possible abuses.

I found this experience extremely rewarding. It was as if in our time we are challenged to transcend not only old class-distinctions but also discover where we can find new allies, even in the most unexpected places. The Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Canberra spoke in this context of the need in our time for what it called a "mission to foreign structures." But there is more. In our time we also see the willingness of several movements and non-governmental organizations to go global because they have seen the need to take joint international actions if the interests of the poor and the quality of the environment are threatened. Sometimes they are very successful, as in the case of the Concept Treaty on Multilateral Investments, the MAI treaty. The role of such movements and organizations is growing—and may even grow further—especially if they are willing to dialogue, to negotiate, and even to come to public agreements with big international actors. I see this as a real chance to re-infuse biblical values into our hard and often selfish new global reality. Such public agreements work especially when there is a willingness to restrain the level of growth of our average income and consumption levels. This is the abiding biblical lesson of the blossoming tree.

The last experience I will share with you is the most personal. It happened almost two decades ago, as I was flying during a dark night over the Sahel, at that time a place of great hunger and deep suffering. I was on my way to South Africa to assist the churches there in their struggle against Apartheid. I could not sleep. The darkness outside the plane became almost symbolic for the deep distress which I felt within me. And then (it was 3 o'clock I think) I saw one small star in the darkness, far away. Its light stood out against the overwhelming black night. But it was not twinkling, so I thought "Maybe it's a planet? Perhaps Venus? The same planet the Bible calls the morning star." But why is it called that? And then it dawned on me. I remember that the next moments

for me were filled with astonishment. For as long as I was seeing that star from the perspective of the surrounding darkness I could neglect it as a thing of no importance. But the morning star is also the first star of the coming dawn. And from that new vantage point, my whole outlook changed. For that small star is a message that the night will end. It is nothing less than the presence of the morning itself within the night. Its existence proclaims: "The night is already beaten, is on the run, and has no chance to persist." And so I began to understand what it really means when, on the last page of our Bibles, the last word of Jesus to us is simply, "I am the morning star." The darkness I saw around me—fully real, fully dominating—became for me a darkness without any future. For the light has already won.³

You understand why I tell you this. Our way of looking at this world of concrete sinful realities is often so much colored by the darkness we see. Yet it could instead be nurtured by the concrete and distinctive hope that is given to us. For the world belongs to God. God is the main Actor behind the scenes of history and guarantees its final good outcome. So, if and when we live and act out of the resources of God's coming Kingdom, it is enough. It is sufficient. For even in the darkest night this hope can inspire us to confess and embody our faith in the very way we produce and consume, in our care for the environment, and our sharing even now with the needy. For within a short time the daylight of God's rule will come—and it will fill the earth.

NOTES

1. This article was originally presented as part of the 1999 Stuber Lecture series on "Faith, Justice and Economics: Vision for a New Millennium" at Colgate Rochester Crozier Divinity School on April 23, 1999 [Editor's note].

2. See M. Douglas Meeks, *God the Economist: The Doctrines of God and Political Economy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989).

3. For the morning star as an image of resurrection, see Bob Goudzwaard, *Idols of Our Time*, trans. by Mark Vander Vennen from the 1981 Dutch original (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984; reprint ed. Dordt College Press, 1989), 98-99.