



Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion

**Informality, Illegality, and Improvisation:
Theological Reflections on Money, Migration, and Ministry in
Chinatown, NYC, and Beyond**

Amos Yong
ayong@regent.edu

Part of
New Overtures: Asian North American Theology in the 21st Century
(Essays in Honor of Fumitaka Matsuoka),
edited by Eleazar S. Fernandez

Fumitaka Matsuoka, the honoree of this essay and the volume within which it appears, has long been at the forefront of encouraging the North American church and its theological establishment to think about racism vis-à-vis the multidimensional complexities of

globalization.¹ He has thus identified the need to “revisit our relationships in light of complex histories” in order to retain the credibility of Christian faith and of our faith communities in a racist, pluralist, and globalizing world.² Both the truth-telling of heretofore neglected or silenced voices and the reconciliation between those in the center with those on or outside the margins are needed for the church to effectively engage the public square. Such a prophetic posture is central to the peace witness of the ecclesial tradition, the Church of the Brethren, which has long informed Matsuoka’s teaching and thinking.³

In this essay I want to heed Matsuoka’s call by reflecting on the realities of Chinese undocumented immigrants to New York City (NYC) and through this begin raising questions for consideration about contemporary discussions in theology of mission and its interface with theology of economics. More precisely, I want to shift the terms of the discussion away from either development or liberation⁴ (or other dualistically constructed categories like capitalism or socialism) in order to take a fresh look at the issues through the lens of the informal economy. My hunch is that an informal economic perspective will be suggestive for thinking creatively,

¹ Matsuoka’s most poignant books are *Out of Silence: Emerging Themes in Asian American Churches* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1995), and *The Color of Faith: Building Community in a Multiracial Society* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1998).

² Fumitaka Matsuoka, “The Changing Terrain of ‘Globalization’ in ATS Conversations,” *Theological Education* 35:2 (1999): 17-25, quotation from 22.

³ E.g., as reflected in the following Matsuoka essays: “*Jesus Christ Our Lord* from a Missiological Perspective,” in Richard A. Kauffman, ed., *A Disciple’s Christology: Appraisals of Kraus’s Jesus Christ Our Lord*, Occasional Papers 13 (Elkhart, Indiana: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1989), 28-37; “Race and Peoplehood,” *Brethren Life and Thought* 44:3 (1999): 33-46; and “Reflecting on Theological Education at Bethany Theological Seminary,” *Brethren Life and Thought* 49:1-2 (2004): 108-16.

⁴ Which is not to slight the import of either of these projects, explicated superbly in Thia Cooper, *Controversies in Political Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2007).

liberatively, and normatively (i.e., theologically) about the interface between religious life and contemporary globalization. Toward these ends, four primary tasks are undertaken, corresponding with the four main sections of this essay, that of 1) situating the reflections concretely within the complex and largely silent recent history of Chinatown, NYC; 2) identifying the global and transnational economic structures and their religious links that constitute the backdrop of Chinatown; 3) critically mapping the informality of the Chinatown economy onto that of the apostolic experience of the earliest messianic believers; and 4) considering innovative and improvisational forms of ecclesial ministry and praxis for the church that is *in* but not constrained by the informal sphere. The goal throughout is to re-examine the relationship between race/ethnicity, religion, globalization, and economics by focusing on the informal economy. I will conclude with some broad reflections on a pneumatological theology of economics, mined from the discussion in section 3 on the apostolic narrative of the book of Acts; I will also return to one of the central themes of Matsuoka's lifework as it has been shaped by the Brethren and Mennonite traditions, the theme of the shalom – the peace, justice, and righteousness – of the coming reign of God.

One caveat before proceeding. I come to this work as an Asian evangelical and pentecostal systematician rather than as a scholar of Asian American Christianity or of globalization, migration, or economics.⁵ My interests thus are in registering more specifically Asian American perspectives in an Asian American evangelical theological conversation which

⁵ Which is not to say that I am oblivious to such scholarship – I have written briefly about recent developments in my “Asian American Religion: A Review Essay,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 9:3 (2006): 92-107 – but only that this is a narrowly focused case study of a unique Asian American experience, undertaken for explicitly theological purposes related to the task of evangelical theology.

has heretofore been dominated by and large by white or Caucasian methods, concerns, and contributions. Looking at the Asian American experience in Chinatown, NYC, will be a helpful springboard to engaging these theological matters. My intention in the following is therefore to open up previously unasked questions in evangelical missiology and theology related to globalization and the economy rather than to provide definitive responses to issues raised by consideration of NYC's Chinatown. Along the way I seek, from the perspective of the evangelical commitment to scripture, to invite a re-reading of the early Christian experience in order to tease out how such a fusion of apostolic and contemporary Asian American immigrant horizons might precipitate fresh trajectories for evangelical missiology and theology of economics.

Informality and Illegality in Chinatown, NYC

Kenneth Guest is an anthropologist at Baruch College's Weissman School of Arts and Sciences in New York. His *God in Chinatown* is an ethnographic exploration of the relationship between religion and the globalization and immigration processes between the region of Fuzhou, on the southeast coast of the People's Republic of China, and the ethnic Chinatown enclave of New York City.⁶ The religious diversity among the Fuzhounese of New York City is refracted in Guest's study through a Buddhist temple, a Daoist temple, two Roman Catholic parishes, and two Protestant congregations. The latter receives more extensive coverage: the Church of Grace derives from the Chinese Christian tradition of John Sun's Home of Grace, and the New York

⁶ Kenneth J. Guest, *God in Chinatown: Religion and Survival in New York's Evolving Immigrant Community* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2003). I rely mainly on Guest in this essay because my major interests are finally theological and he provides a useful springboard for reflecting in that mode on the Asian American immigration experience.

House Church has connections with the Little Flock churches of Fuzhou. An important thesis the book argues is that religious matters are not subservient to a more “fundamental” socio-economic domain; rather they inform those domains from within, and in doing so, reflect realities both in Fuzhou and NYC.⁷ Hence, religious beliefs and practices bridging multiple nationalities and ethnicities mediate the construction of alternative identities, in part in response to the perennial human quest for meaning, but also in response to the broader discourses of the ethnic enclave in dominant American society. Throughout, Guest combines theoretical analysis, ethnographic observation, and testimonial narrative to underscore how the Chinatown enclave provides a site for mobilization of social capital for immigrants in terms of connecting existing social networks, enabling the exchange of information and (financial) resources, and supporting the processes of legalization.

My focus in this essay is specifically on Fuzhounese illegal immigrants,⁸ and their transnational quest to “realize America in their hearts.”⁹ Undocumented immigration from Fuzhou began in the mid-1980s and continues to the present. Most undocumented Fuzhounese

⁷ The centrality of religion for immigration is documented also with regard to the very different experiences of middle-class Taiwanese in Southern California by Carolyn Chen, *Getting Saved in America: Taiwanese Immigration and Religious Experience* (Princeton, New Jersey and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008).

⁸ It is difficult to know for sure how many Fuzhounese live in NYC, given the undocumented status of many of them. In the early 2000s, Guest noted popular estimates of 60-70,000 in NYC, while also saying: “The 2000 Census has identified 700,000 Asian in New York City, just under 10 percent of the population. Chinese are the largest group with 361,000 residents, followed by 214,000 South Asians and 86,000 Koreans. In the 1990s Chinese ranked third only to immigrants from the Dominican Republic and the former Soviet Union among New York City’s new arrivals” (*God in Chinatown*, 16-17).

⁹ This is the title of Fumitaka Matsuoka and Eleazar S. Fernandez, eds., *Realizing the America of Our Hearts: Theological Voices of Asian Americans* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2003), which illuminates the longings and aspirations of Asian migrants to America.

begin their trek as youth¹⁰ and find their way to America usually through organized international smuggling syndicates. The going rates in the late 1980s had tripled by the early 2000s to over \$60,000, with up to 20 percent due up front and the rest upon arrival.¹¹ Immigrants thus incur indebtedness to their families and relatives or, if the latter are unable to pay the bill, become indentured servants to the smugglers or their local brokers (at best) or are beaten, even maimed, as punishment (at worst).

Of course, Fuzhounese immigrants brave the journey to America in search of a better life. But upon arrival, they find a highly stratified ethnic enclave. Unless one has connections, one finds him- or herself defined by their region or city of origin, dialect, socio-economic class status of one's family "back home," or educational achievements. This stratification persists even within churches found in the enclave. The result is that most immigrant youth find themselves in the working class, with limited English skills, and owing large sums of money to their families of relatives in Fuzhou, or to the smugglers (known as snakeheads) or their brokers. As Guest thus notes, "Save for a limited number who successfully apply for political asylum, all remain undocumented, outside the mainstream, working in the informal economy."¹²

Many, if not most, struggle to survive working (and sleeping) in restaurants, garment shops, and other non-registered businesses. They work six days a week – and not atypically pick up hours on their "day off" for other "employers" – for more than 12 hours a day and are paid

¹⁰ Kenneth J. Guest, "Liminal Youth among Fuzhou Chinese Undocumented Workers," in Tony Carnes and Fenggang Yang, eds., *Asian American Religions: The Making and Remaking of Borders and Boundaries* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 55-75.

¹¹ Guest, *God in Chinatown*, 28, 67.

¹² *Ibid.*, 31.

sometimes as low as \$2.00 per hour. The majority are without medical insurance, child care, or any other benefits.¹³ The most hard-working and entrepreneurial pay off their debts faster than others – and even after that many continue to remit funds to their families – and some even eventually make their way up the socio-economic ladder, gradually obtaining promotions to higher paying positions. As Guest puts it, on the one hand, “Fuzhounese immigrants, particularly undocumented immigrants, are extremely creative actors working to manipulate a system stacked with disadvantages.... At the same time, this isolated ethnic enclave is a trap for many Fuzhounese who, marginalized by language, culture, and class from both the mainstream U.S. economy and the Chinatown elites, have no way to escape.”¹⁴

So why then do so many continue to make the journey illegally to America? No doubt, those who “make it” send reports and remit money back home regularly in ways that build up the hopes and dreams of those without other viable options.¹⁵ The fact of the matter is that the opportunity to earn even US\$2.00 an hour – usually for much more than forty hours a week – is more than what many can make if they stayed and worked in Fuzhou.¹⁶ This is especially the case since rural Fuzhounese confront a depressed economy and then are at a disadvantage if they move to the city as legal employment is in many cases limited to city residents. Further, the expansion of the human smuggling network combined with the pull of the U.S. labor market

¹³ Ibid., 42.

¹⁴ Ibid., 43.

¹⁵ For further discussion of this transnational dimension, see Kenneth J. Guest, “Transnational Religious Networks among New York’s Fuzhou Immigrants,” in Helen Rose Ebaugh and Janet Saltzman Chafetz, eds., *Religion across Borders: Transnational Immigrant Networks* (Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira Press, 2002), 149-63.

¹⁶ Guest, *God in Chinatown*, 41.

make emigration more attractive, even without legal papers. Last but not least have been the executive orders entered that have been favorable to immigrants. Fuzhounese are undeterred by their lack of documentation since on at least two occasions in the last half generation, they have been the beneficiaries of changing immigration laws: the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, under the presidency of Ronald Reagan, which granted amnesty to those who could demonstrate their arrival in America before 1982, and the presidential orders of George H. W. Bush in 1989 and 1990 which granted asylum to Chinese students in light of the Tian An Men Square massacre and China's population control policies. There is always the hope that another executive order will legalize their status and make it possible to attain the American dream.¹⁷

Within the wider transnational and global context, however, people emigrate illegally for many other economic reasons that they may not be able to clearly articulate. What they feel most palpably is the high unemployment or under-employment realities of their home region; and what they hear about is the lure of employment and upward socio-economic mobility options in America, while seeing the "proof" of such in the comparatively affluent families who are on the receiving end of remittances sent home from relatives or family members working overseas. Yet global market demands and labor supplies are structured by trade agreements between nations, and by demographic shifts, especially aging populations of receiving countries versus growing populations of developing countries.¹⁸ Further market-determined exchange rates that do not favor developing nations drive the unemployed or under-employed to look for work elsewhere,

¹⁷ Ibid., 66-67.

¹⁸ See Mary DeLorey, "International Migration: Social, Economic, and Humanitarian Considerations," in Donald Kerwin and Jill Marie Gerschutz, eds., *And You Welcomed Me: Migration and Catholic Social Teaching* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 31-53.

while structural adjustments imposed on developing nations usually involve a decline in their social welfare protections. Last but not least, transnational corporations increasingly monopolize economic production, leaving free enterprise to float perilously in the informal economy. These economic factors in the background lead us to probe more deeply into the nature of economic informality, a reality within which Fuzhounese immigrants to NYC in a significant sense live, move, and have their being.

The Informal Economy and Globalization

By definition, the informal economy exists outside the regulated and legislated (formalized) economy. An extremely heteronomous domain, a phenomenology of the informal economy, globally considered, would include at least the following kinds of economic agents and activities: street vendors, rickshaw/cart pullers, shared transportation, recyclers, petty traders/hawkers, small item producers, (very) small business owners (often at street corners rather than in their own rented or owned buildings), casual living arrangements, home-workers (garment and shoe makers, embroiderers, assemblers, etc.), piece-rate workers, sub- and sub-sub-contractors, off-site data processors, farm- and agricultural-workers, unregistered/undeclared workers, cooperative partners and partnerships, and part-time, temporary, and self-employed workers. As should be clear from this very brief enumeration, informal economic activity cuts across explicitly economic initiatives but in many cases also connects these with other social, communal, and cultural relationships and interactions.¹⁹

¹⁹ A classic analysis of the informal economy is Hernando de Soto, *The Other Path: The Invisible Revolution in the Third World*, trans. June Abbott (New York: Harper and Row, 1989).

While there is some overlap between informal economic transactions and premodern economies, the former is now acknowledged to be a more or less permanent feature of the present global market economy.²⁰ Of course, informal economic activity is especially noticeable in regions (and nations) working to enter the global economy and during periods of economic crisis and recession in developed nations. But as we have now seen with regard to the Chinatown enclave in NYC, informal economic activity exists in the very heart of the western world as well. Hence it is clear there is enough continuity between the formal and informal economies, rather than a strict demarcation between them, that even in industrialized environments upwards of one-fourth of all economic activity occurs in the informal sector.²¹ In fact, economists are suggesting that we move beyond any rigid conceptual dichotomy between the formal and informal economy.²² The most active theoreticians working in this arena are seeking ways to formalize informal economic activities – i.e., find ways to capture informal economic transactions in the formal economy that benefit both sides, or to register the value of personal property owned by informal economic agents in ways that will enable their emergence in the formal economy without excessive liability – in order to unleash the potential of these assets as a means of engaging and even empowering those otherwise impoverished according to the standards of the

²⁰ See Alejandro Portes, Manuel Castells, and Lauren A. Benton, eds., *The Informal Economy: Studies in Advanced and Less Developed Countries* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1989).

²¹ See “Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Picture” (International Labour Organization, 2002), available at <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/employment/gems/download/women.pdf> (last accessed 27 January 2009).

²² See Basudeb Guha-Khasnobis, S. M. Ravi Kanbur, and Elinor Ostrom, eds., *Linking the Formal and Informal Economy: Concepts and Policies* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

global economy.²³ This would certainly be helpful for our Fuzhounese immigrants except for the fact that they would still have to deal with the challenges related to their lack of documentation.

How else, then, might the informal economy be understood? On the one hand, the existence of the informal sector “can be viewed as a constructed response on the part of civil society to unwanted state interference.”²⁴ In the Fuzhounese case, there are, in addition to these economic considerations, immigration factors which motivate their avoidance of the state. On the other hand, it is also fair to say that the explosion of informality has occurred in reaction to the mercantilism and state, national, or even international bureaucracies that hinder effective formalization of economic activity at the grassroots. As instinctive responses of the masses to poverty, underdevelopment, and the inefficiencies of the legal-political system, the informal economy exhibits a good deal of energy, spirit, entrepreneurship, ingenuity, productivity, persistence, and just plain hard work. By its nature, then, the businesses of the informal economy are unregistered, its transactions not computed (nor computable) in gross national products, and its incomes untaxed (and often untaxable). Yet while the informal economy certainly includes semi-legal and even unlawful activity (involving undocumented immigrants, for example), it is probably more accurate to understand this global phenomenon in terms of extra-legality.²⁵ Herein

²³ E.g., Ahmed M. Soliman, *A Possible Way Out? Formalizing Housing Informality in Egyptian Cities* (Dallas: University Press of America, 2004).

²⁴ Alejandro Portes, “The Informal Economy and its Paradoxes,” in Neil J. Smelser and Richard Swedberg, eds., *The Handbook of Economic Sociology* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, and New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1994), 426-49; quote from 444.

²⁵ See de Soto, *The Other Path*, 13-14. As de Soto suggests elsewhere, whereas many see the informal economy as being on the underside of the world economic system, “In fact it is legality that is marginal; extralegality has become the norm. The poor have already taken control of vast quantities of real estate and production”; see Hernando de Soto, *The Mystery of Capital: Why Capitalism Triumphs in the West and Fails Everywhere Else* (New York: Perseus, 2000), 30.

also lie the challenges: extra-legal operations in the informal arena result in unprotected employment (workers are without benefits of any sort), impinge on the capacity of informals to grow, develop, and expand their trade (at least in the formal/legal sector), and leave them vulnerable to theft, violence, and extortion, not to mention unjust business practices within an unequal playing field (unequal for the Fuzhounese not only because of their illegal status but also because of their linguistic deficiencies).²⁶ In short, life in the informal economy is not ideal, and it is probably fair to say that informal economic agents do what they do in order to survive on the economic margins of society.

It is such a quest for survival that drives a significant part of the activity of the informal economy. Our discussion of transnational Fuzhounese migration from East Asia to NYC reflects this human search for hope, opportunity, and meaning, and this inevitably leads many to intersect with the religious institutions of Chinatown. Guest's discussion of religion in Chinatown, then, illuminates the role that churches, temples, and religious agents (i.e., fortune tellers) play vis-à-vis the illegality and informality of their parishioners. Focusing more specifically on the Christian churches in Guest's study – which by and large are limited to two once-related evangelical-type congregations – we can see how these have facilitated the strenuous adjustment processes involved in migration that involves half the world's population. Churches provide what Guest calls “safe harbors” with familiar customs, smells, sights, foods, and language.²⁷

²⁶ For an early study of the blurred lines between lawful and unlawful interactions in the informal domain, see George Jenkins, “An Informal Political Economy,” in Jeffrey Butler and A. A. Castagno, eds., *Boston University Papers on Africa: Transition in African Politics* (1967; reprint, New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1968), 166-94.

²⁷ Guest, *God in Chinatown*, ch. 7.

Information exchange occurs, social networks are opened, socio-economic capital are mobilized, and financial, medical, and care resources are made available to vulnerable immigrants.

Financial assistance most often occurs inter-personally between members and adherents as people with needs are brought into the orbit of the church, although in some instances compassion funds established by congregations are “used to assist members who are ill or unemployed or stricken by other misfortune.”²⁸ In some instances, church leaders or members also support immigrants through the legalization process.

But precisely because such churches are constituted by people who live in an undocumented domain of informality, they walk a fine line in their ministry. As evangelicals of the conservative (rather than progressive) sort, Fuzhounese Christians are in general disinclined to engage with the socio-political, economic, or structural issues that are pertinent to life in Chinatown. Thus sermons do not tackle the social challenges of smuggling, sweatshops, indentured servitude, prostitution, or gambling, and if these matters are mentioned in church newsletters, they “typically serve as background for testimonies of miraculous healing and exhortations to pray for comfort and relief.”²⁹ Things may be gradually changing in some of Chinatown’s churches, but even then, there are still challenges: the stratification of the wider community also exists within churches so that legal immigrants are not always sympathetic to the plight of the undocumented. After all, those who have survived the process of illegal immigration and “made it” – i.e., attained legalization –wonder why the next generation should

²⁸ Ibid., 198; on this same page, Guest also notes how one of the Buddhist temples in his study has a revolving loan fund that is available for repayment of smuggling debts in extreme situations.

²⁹ Ibid., 182.

get assistance that was unavailable before.

In short, religion in Chinatown also operates on the borders of legality and formality. And this is the case not only for immigrant destinations but also for their places of origins. Segments of Christianity in Fuzhou, for example, are illegal in the sense that they are unregistered with the government. In addition, there are also theological expressions that are unorthodox when measured according to the traditional teachings of the church. In a sense, then, Fuzhounese immigrants to NYC have simply moved from one domain and type of illegality to another.³⁰ And this is not an experience peculiar to the Fuzhounese diaspora.³¹

The Early Church: Improvisation between Informality and Empire

My suggestion in this essay is that thinking with and through the informal economy might also shed new light on the interface between ecclesia and economics, especially about how the church functions at least in part through setting into motion an alternative set of economic practices. If the values and goals of the formal economy are based on competition, balancing the supply and demand market, the achievement of surplus/profit, and the principle of re-investment

³⁰ As Eleazar Fernandez suggests in his reflection on the Filipino American immigrant experience, the westward migration for Filipinos can be likened in some respects to the ancient Israelite search for liberation in Egypt since it is only after arriving in America the realization occurs that survival is much more difficult than initially realized, to the point that immigrants find themselves entrapped, unexpectedly, in what they thought was in the “promised land.” See Eleazar S. Fernandez, “Exodus-toward-Egypt: Filipino-Americans’ Struggle to Realize the Promise Land in America,” in Eleazar S. Fernandez and Fernando F. Segovia, eds., *A Dream Unfinished: Theological Reflections on America from the Margins* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001), 167-81.

³¹ Thus, for example, in Latin America, pastoral agents of both Catholic and Protestant parishes, both those deeper in the region and those at the border, often provide assistance for emigrants who are without documentation. In other words, the intertwining of religion and non-documented immigration persists not just in North American destinations but at various nodes and along the various migrant paths across the global south. See, e.g., Jacqueline Maria Hagan, “The Church vs. the State: Borders, Migrants, and Human Rights,” in Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, ed., *Religion and Social Justice for Immigrants* (New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 93-101.

of such for the further generation of wealth, the minimal goal of the informal economy appears to be that of achieving subsistence and comfort. Without access to the formal sector, informals necessarily work in (non-formalized) subsidiary organizations and often find solidarity with one another as they seek common cause.

Elsewhere, I have argued, in dialogue with the latest findings of contemporary biblical scholarship, that the practices of the earliest followers of the Messiah can be seen as an ecclesial expression of informal economics.³² Jesus' calling for a retrieval and implementation of the Jubilee ethics – i.e., his teachings regarding poverty and wealth, gift-giving, sharing, and mutuality³³ – were designed to overcome the disjunctions between the rich and the poor and to effectively empower new economic relations rather than support the prevailing economic status quo. His followers embodied, at least for a time, an egalitarian community which met the needs of its members through informal and reciprocal forms of provision. In the following, I want to briefly examine the economic aspects of the early messianic community, especially as unfolded in the book of Acts, in light of our discussion of religion and informality in Chinatown.³⁴

³² See Yong, *In the Days of Caesar: Pentecostalism and Political Theology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), ch. 7.3. As an evangelical and pentecostal theologian, I have repeatedly returned to the experiences of the earliest Christians as recorded in the New Testament for resources to think through contemporary theological issues. This is not to say that there are no other valuable dialogue partners in the history of Christianity or even outside the Christian tradition. For our immediate purposes, however, I limit my scope to the early Christian experience of informality.

³³ See Sharon H. Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee: Images for Ethics and Christology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985); Michael Prior, *Jesus the Liberator: Nazareth Liberation Theology (Luke 4:16-30)*, *The Biblical Seminar* 26 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995).

³⁴ Although I am not unaware of the issues regarding the historicity of Acts – succinctly discussed by Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Luke-Acts in its Mediterranean Milieu*, *Supplements to Novum Testamentum* 107 (Leiden and Boston : Brill, 2003) – my evangelical theological interests do not require adjudication of these matters; in effect, the questions for Asian American evangelicals in particular, and American evangelicals in general, is how the scriptural witness to the apostolic experience can speak to their contemporary lives.

We are told very specifically in Acts that “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need” (2:44-45).³⁵ Later, after the community had increased to over 5,000 men (not including women and children – Acts 4:4), it is noted:

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.... There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need (Acts 4:32, 34-35).

I suggest that from an evangelical theological perspective such a set of ecclesial economic practices was part and parcel of the outworking of the presence and activity of the Spirit of Jesus who the author of Acts tells us was poured out upon the world. This pneumatological economy unleashed the economic practices of mutuality and reciprocity taught by Jesus. Let me make some observations about this economic life of the Spirit seen in the early messianic community.

First, the lines between the formal and informal economies were blurred in the early Christian experience. Yes, there were those who owned, bought, and sold property according to the formal economic conventions of that time. On the other hand, there was also charitable giving, and distribution based on need, not merit (or labor). Further, there was communal “ownership” at least in the sense that none exercised their rights to private ownership. Most importantly, what we see here is not any intentional plan to establish a communal economy; rather the apostolic leaders simply responded to the massive migration from the rural areas: those who had heard about the gospel or about the signs and wonders accomplished among by the

³⁵ Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

apostles were gathering “from the towns around Jerusalem” (Acts 5:16) and these needed to be fed, housed, and cared for.

This leads to our observation that by and large, the earliest Christian community consisted of migrants.³⁶ The early messianic communities were comprised not just of local migrants from the surrounding Judean countryside, but also of Hellenistic Jews and godfearers from the Jewish diaspora around the Mediterranean world. The original 3,000 who responded to Peter’s sermon on the Day of Pentecost were those who had returned to Jerusalem for the Pentecost feast from the ends of the earth (Acts 2:5-11). While mostly Jews or proselytes to Judaism, these migrants were all at least bilingual, thus signifying their having been formed, perhaps deeply, by the various Mediterranean cultures. In part for this reason, miscommunication and misunderstanding eventually threatened to undermine the messianic community: some members of the diaspora who had returned home and stayed were neglected by locals who had taken the lead in food distribution and care (Acts 6:1-2). In short, internal divisions along migration lines ensued, and while the apostles were initially able to address the issues, they turned out to be unsustainable in the long run, at least in part because persecution broke out against the messianic community.

Such persecution highlights the third aspect of early Christian origins: its political character. The healing of a lame man at the Beautiful Gate was the first event that instigated a

³⁶ I develop the ideas in the next few paragraphs elsewhere at greater length: “The Im/Migrant Spirit: De/Constructing a Pentecostal Theology of Migration,” in Peter C. Phan and Elaine Padilla, eds., *Theology and Migration in World Christianity: Contextual Perspectives*, vol. 2: *Theology of Migration in the Abrahamic Religions*, Christianities of the World 2 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming).

confrontation between the apostles and the local political leadership.³⁷ The local council decided to curtail the apostolic activities of preaching and healing: “let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name.” In response to which the council leaders called the apostles in and “ordered them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus” (Acts 4:17-18). Hence messianic proselytism in the name of Jesus was prohibited. But there was also an economic dimension to the initial encounter between the apostles and the lame man. He initially asked for alms, but Peter said: “I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk” (Acts 3:6). In a sense, this established the economic and political trajectory of the early messianic community: they would be constrained neither by the formal economy (they were, after all, already sharing all things) nor by the political legalities (thus their response to the council’s circumscription: “Whether it is right in God’s sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard”; Acts 4:19-20).

Hence it was that the church operated on the borders of economic formality and political legality. With regard to the former, the focus of this essay, it might be said that the church developed its own theological or ecclesiological form of economics, one that bypassed the conventional economic structures of its time by empowering the weak in their midst in the name of Jesus and by mobilizing the generosity of the faithful. In this sense, the economics of the first Christians can be understood as anticipating contemporary economic life in the informal sector.

Might analysis of the practices of the church from the perspective of the informal economy

³⁷ See also my *Who is the Holy Spirit: A Walk with the Apostles* (Brewster, Mass.: Paraclete Press, 2011), esp. chs. 8-15, wherein I provide brief exegetical reflections on Acts 3-6 in light of Jesus’ teachings as recorded in the Gospel of Luke.

unveil how ecclesial solidarity as a way of life provides an alternative set of economic values to those of the formal economy?

To bring things back to the present, perhaps the practices of the earliest Christians can, against the backdrop of the Asian American experience in NYC's Chinatown, spur theological thinking about the kinds of economic arrangements that emphasize mutuality and sharing as well as local accountability and initiative which is applicable for contemporary globalization.³⁸ Rather than being dominated by the economy of exchange and its supply-and-demand transactions, can the church be guided by a pneumatological economy of grace – a set of economic relations and practices inspired by the Spirit of Jesus – that highlights charity (giving without anticipation of return), forgiveness (not only of sins but also of debts), and solidaristic fellowship (cultivated through interpersonal relations, common meals, and daily interactions) instead? If this is possible, might the explicitly theological economy of the earliest messianic believers empower our own rethinking about political economy vis-à-vis the informality and illegality of Chinatown, NYC, and other like environments in the twenty-first century?

Rethinking Money, Migration, and Ministry: Contemporary Globalization and Ecclesial Improvisation

I now want to re-engage the issues at the intersection of religion, globalization, and economics raised by Guest's work in light of the early Christian experience. The following basic

³⁸ Here I have been helped by the concrete discussions of Lee Hong Jung, "Minjung and Pentecostal Movements in Korea," in Allan Anderson and Walter J. Hollenweger, eds., *Pentecostals after a Century: Global Perspectives on a Movement in Transition* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 138-60, esp. 158-59.

theological considerations regarding economics, migration, and ministry may be pertinent not only in Chinatown but also in the transnational zones of the global economy.³⁹ Perhaps the insights to be gained from the Acts narrative for a Christian theology of economics may be more relevant for our contemporary experience than initially anticipated.

To begin, I have highlighted how the earliest messianic believers were both *in* the world and yet not *of* it. Economically, we saw that they worked within conventional economic constraints but experimented with an alternative mode of mutual care and gratuitous provision. Similarly, both historically and today, Christian religious orders and congregations, come-outers, and restorationist house churches have also operated both formally and informally vis-à-vis the established economic systems of their times.⁴⁰ In these cases, the various forms of mutuality, reciprocity, sharing, and solidarity in ecclesial communities can be understood as providing a range of informal economic services within congregational and communal life both as an expression of their religious identity and as part of their Christian ministerial and evangelistic witness. World Christianity as a mass urban movement also involves dynamic national, international, and transnational populations that form new communities and networks in place of the family and clan relations that have been left behind, and it is within these new enclaves

³⁹ From an American point of view, note that almost one out of every ten undocumented immigrants in the USA is from Asia – see Gemma Tulud Cruz, “Expanding the Boundaries, Turning Borders into Spaces,” in Ogbu U. Kalu, Edmund Kee-Fook Chia, and Peter Vethanayagamony, eds., *Mission after Christendom: Emergent Themes in Contemporary Mission* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 71-83, at 72 – so our thinking about illegality and informality at Chinatown has wider implications for considering a theology of migration in global (not just vis-à-vis the East Asian) context.

⁴⁰ These can be teased out, for example, from some of the contemporary literature – e.g., Andrew Walker, *Restoring the Kingdom: The Radical Christianity of the House Church Movement* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1985), and Luke Wesley, *The Church in China: Persecuted, Pentecostal and Powerful* (Baguio City, Philippines: Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies Books, 2004).

(churches, congregations, and communities) that people find both spiritual and material comfort, support, and aid.

Amidst the present forces of globalization, the largely impersonal features of the global market are tempered by ecclesially shaped relations that draw from, enrich, and network with local enterprises, communal associations and cooperatives, and kinship, extended household, and other domestic economic ventures. Whereas the global economy is driven by speculative finance, credit extensions, and the flexibility of money as *the* medium of economic exchange, the church serves God rather than mammon. The church nurtures relationship while providing (especially voluntary) services and enabling a more discerning engagement with the needs of those who are otherwise struggling to survive on the margins of the neoliberal market regime. Fuzhounese immigrants, for example, are excluded from the formal economy precisely because of their undocumented status. As such, a theology of economics that is relevant to their situation must critically engage with the informal economy. In the informal domain, it is not what the church has on the books that matters, but how it empowers agents to survive and make meaning in life that counts.

In one respect, I urge that we go beyond what political economists define as the margins of the informal economy and include the sphere of reproduction and care.⁴¹ The church that privileges the poor also prioritizes widows, orphans, children, the aged, the infirm, people with disabilities, and those otherwise vulnerable, so that the care of these groups of people is

⁴¹ See Eva Feder Kittay and Ellen K. Feder, *The Subject of Care: Feminist Perspectives on Dependency* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), and Eric Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), esp. ch. 3.

registered as most important from the standpoint of the economy of grace. For immigrants who are already vulnerable because of their undocumented status, losing spouses, getting sick, becoming disabled, or growing old multiplies the challenges that are confronted. In this framework, there is an even more urgent need for various forms of what we may call collective entrepreneurship to emerge. On the one hand this sustains vulnerable members who are on the margins if not the underside of history, while on the other hand it inspires creativity not only for survival's sake but also for the wider communal good. Churches and congregations in Chinatown and various heavily populated transnational zones already function in some of these ways. I am simply urging that we attend more intentionally to the biblical and theological issues so that we can be more truthful, practical, and relevant to the situations at hand.

The preceding reflections, however, should neither dull us into a false sense of accomplishment in the dialogue between religion and economics nor blind us to the challenges confronting the realities of life in the informal economy. Hence a number of clarifications are in order. First, note that such a consideration of the church from the perspective of the informal economy does not remove the church either from the world or from the global market.⁴² This is neither a call for the overthrow of the neoliberal economy nor an advocacy of one or another form of socialism or communism, but rather a reminder about how the church, when going about its business of communal edification, will inevitably recommend an alternative set of economic

⁴² Sometimes, Mennonite intellectuals are more predisposed to withdrawing from the capitalist order and forming an alternative economics based on local community and advocating moral and environmental critiques of the current order from the Mennonite margins. I am sympathetic to the theological motivations behind such concerns but do not think that a withdrawal from the market is either feasible or the best way forward. See Jim Halteman, "Mennonites and Market Capitalism," in Calvin Redekop, Victor A. Krahn, and Samuel J. Steiner, eds., *Anabaptist/Mennonite Faith and Economics* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1994), 321-31.

values if not its own distinctive economic way of life. I am concerned that such recommendations be made in the footsteps of Christ by the power of the Spirit and resist being co-opted by the economic powers that be.

Second, especially in light of the work of the church in immigrant enclaves, I simply wish to highlight how conscientious ecclesial participation in the informal economy can serve as a protest against the self-interested greed, consumerist materialism, and rampant hedonism that are pervasive in the neoliberal market economy. Communal solidarity, private initiative directed toward the public good, and local and interpersonal relations, exchanges, and accountability – all of these should be advocated by the church because together, they combine to ameliorate the debilitating effects of the Fall in our economic lives. Yes, life in the ethnic enclave is indeed a struggle for survival; if the church cannot speak and embody the gospel in such economic domains, so much the worse for its witness. However, to the degree that the church can model the mutuality, reciprocity, and hospitality of the earliest followers of Jesus, to that same degree it can be subversive of the invisible hand that stratifies both the formal and informal economic domains.

Finally, my assessment of the church as operating in effect within the informal sector is not intended to naively affirm all that transpires in that domain.⁴³ Obviously, the church should not legitimate the distribution of contraband (i.e., drugs, music, and other goods), condone tax evasion, bribery, kickbacks, and other forms of unlawful activity, or look askance at the delivery

⁴³ This is the job of a more expansively considered theology of economics, such as those proposed by Douglas Meeks, *God the Economist: The Doctrine of God and Political Economy*, new ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), and Kathryn Tanner, *Economy of Grace* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005). See also the concluding reflections below.

of illegal services (i.e., prostitution and slave-trafficking). The church also must not think that a functional informal sector is a means of pacifying the poor or that it alleviates the church's responsibility to speak prophetically to the world (that includes the state) regarding the enactment of economic justice. Last but not least, the church should not ignore the wider structural forces of globalization that drive undocumented migration and unjust and criminal economic activity.⁴⁴

These caveats raise the question of what the church should do to address the many injustices that are perpetuated within the informal economy. The fact is that the informal economy is dominated by the poor, who are exploited by both criminals (through illegal activities) and the more well-to-do (i.e., who put the poor to work in sweatshops), besides having to negotiate the challenges of otherwise unjust political, social, and economic systems. Desiring neither to idealize poverty nor sentimentalize or patronize the poor, I suggest that a pneumatological economy of grace according to Jesus' Jubilee paradigm enacted in the early church will be sensitive to global factors that impinge on unjust economies while focusing on

⁴⁴ One of these issues is precisely that pertaining to the economic inequities between the global south and the Euro-American West. On this note, I recommend both Nimi Wariboko, *God and Money: A Theology of Money in a Globalizing World* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), and Philip Goodchild, *Theology of Money* (London: SCM, 2007), for the not faint-of-heart who are interested in rethinking the theological dimensions of the global economic system. What Wariboko calls the *Earth Dollar* (as opposed to dominant national currencies like the dollar, the euro, or the yen) works to level out the playing field economically between richer and poorer countries, tempering the violent shifts in the foreign exchange rates that exacerbate the economic conditions of the most impoverished and vulnerable regions of the world, and enabling the development of and entry into the global market of the latter without hindering the economic growth possibilities of the more established and affluent nations. Goodchild's major constructive proposal is to develop banks of evaluative credit which can provide religious and moral guidance for the assessment and investment of money in the market economy. My contribution to this discussion is primarily theological, reminding us of the equal importance of ecclesial practices which embody the values of the Spirit since apart from such concrete relations we will in due course lack models for effective mutuality and cease to be able to develop viable criteria for the evaluation of money itself.

local projects and initiatives, especially at the congregational and parish levels. In other words, Jesus' meeting the needs of the poor in various aspects invites the contemporary church to be alert to the multiple levels of poverty that afflict people today. Individual healing is therefore incomplete without the provision of basic material necessities, friendships, and spiritual care, access to social, educational, political, economic, medical, and civil resources, and attention to an environmentally and ecologically sustainable way of life. Solidarity with the poor thus requires formation of subsidiary organizations that include those outside ecclesial communities in order to identify and redress the causes of poverty at each level, and in order that feedback from lower levels can also trigger revision, reform, and reorganization at the higher levels. Socio-structural inequalities related to gender, race, class, and physical, intellectual, and other sensory-disabilities must be engaged both at the grassroots where such can be sensitive to the particular challenges involved, and at the political levels where more general and abstract policies can be formulated in order to forge a more just society.⁴⁵ In the latter domain, the church must be a prophetic voice that calls attention to the biblical vision of shalom but also provides instantiations of such shalomic practices in order to point toward a better way.

This last set of recommendations also reminds us that in addition to operating at or within this informal domain, the church remains active in the formal economy at many levels. The preceding proposals should not be taken to suggest that the church ceases formal operations as an economic agent. In fact, the church in its various local forms and even global shape itself can and should be understood as corporations of various types, and should be subject to the different

⁴⁵ Andrew Hartropp, *What Is Economic Justice? Biblical and Secular Perspectives Contrasted* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2007), ch. 2.

political, social, and legal strictures within that formal domain. To some degree, many of the church's contributions to political reform, social justice, and economic development projects should be properly formalized.

For instance, in dealing with the undocumented Fuzhounese to Chinatown, the issue of illegal immigration is one that requires further attention. Yet there are at least two domains of political activity that must be engaged on this matter: one regarding the structural factors that pertain to international free trade agreements which impact developing economies, and the other regarding the rights and responsibilities of sovereign nations to protect their borders. These are complicated matters which deserve extensive ecclesial and theological consideration.⁴⁶ Our spotlight in this essay on the more concrete local church's response to the presence of undocumented workers negotiating the informal economy does not mean that these other aspects intertwined with such situations are undeserving of sustained deliberation. So while appropriating the lens of the informal economy is helpful for inviting reflection on what is happening in the transnational zone that is Chinatown, NYC, we should also recognize that the

⁴⁶ A helpful ecclesial document in this regard is *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope – A Pastoral Letter Concerning Migration from the Catholic Bishops of Mexico and the United States* (2003), available online at <http://www.usccb.org/mrs/stranger.shtml> (last accessed 5 June 2010). Roman Catholic scholars have been at the forefront of articulating a theology of migration – e.g., Solange Lefebvre and Luiz Carlos Susin, eds., *Migration in a Global World*, Concilium 2008/5 (London: SCM Press, 2008); Daniel G. Groody and Gioacchino Campese, eds., *A Promised Land, a Perilous Journey: Theological Perspectives on Migration* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008); Donald Kerwin and Jill Marie Gerschutz, eds., *And You Welcomed Me: Migration and Catholic Social Teaching* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009); and Gemma Tulud Cruz, *An Intercultural Theology of Migration: Pilgrims in the Wilderness*, Studies in Systematic Theology 5 (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

church functions variously, and rightly, in the formal economic and political sectors as well.⁴⁷

Concluding Theological Musings: The Spirit's Shalom in Pentecostal Key

The preceding has led us to see that the church's economic witness is not exhausted in its formal transactions. In fact, the distinctiveness of the church's economic witness occurs, I have suggested, in the diversity of its informal economic activities. From an evangelical theological perspective, these alternative ecclesiological economies can be seen as retrieving and channeling the pneumatological economy of grace unleashed on the Day of Pentecost. The many kinds of ecclesial economic activity can thus be seen as expressions of a pneumatologically-shaped version of local autonomy and participation which empowers an ecclesially-inspired form of creativity and initiative, and fosters an ecclesially-rich sense of appreciation for the diversity of the global Christian body politic.

Beyond this more general vision of the informal church, however, I suggest a more explicitly Lukan interpretation animated by the thesis that the many tongues of the Spirit are anticipations of the many gifts that are expressed in the economic sphere.⁴⁸ From out of this more pneumatological and charismatic framework arise a set of ecclesiological alternatives, nurtured within the informal sector, wherein all members are honored, especially the weak, so that all are available to come to the aid of those who are suffering, even as each potentially

⁴⁷ And of course, there are many other factors besides the economic one that clamor for recognition in the emerging discussions about theology and migration. A perceptive and programmatic text in this regard is by the Lutheran theologian, Dorottya Nagy, *Migration and Theology: The Case of Chinese Christian Communities in Hungary and Romania in the Globalisation-Context*, Mission Studies 50 (Zoetermeer, The Netherlands: Uitgeverij Boekencentrum, 2009).

⁴⁸ This is the thesis of my monograph *In the Days of Caesar*, the economic aspects of which are explicated in ch. 7.

contributes her or his own peculiar gift for the edification of the whole. Empowered by the Spirit, these informal economic ways of life and activities may also function as prophetic parables that challenge the corruption, injustice, hedonism, and environmental degradation characteristic of neoliberal capitalism that sometimes runs unrestrained within a free market economy. In short, the Spirit not only provides for and edifies the needy through the generous dispensation of the gifts (charisms) of the body of Christ, but also enables a solidarity of life that resists the world's economy of domination.

The result will not be *the* shalom of the coming kingdom but will be intimations of the peace, justice, and righteousness that will be established on that day of the Lord. For the ancient prophets, the Hebrew shalom referred to the wholeness, completeness, security, friendship, well-being, and even salvation of the people both individually and collectively.⁴⁹ Herein will the sick find their healing, perhaps not necessarily in bodily cures but certainly in and through their integration in reconciling, caring, and welcoming communities. Herein also will the gospel find its penultimate fulfillment, perhaps not necessarily in affluence and material wealth, but certainly in and through the Spirit-inspired sufficiency of mutual, sharing, and generous communities of faith. In our global context of pluralism, immigration, transnationalism, and the neoliberal market economy, such a pneumatologically inaugurated *shalom*, initiated in part on the Day of Pentecost and perhaps unfolding variously in the church today even among congregations situated in the ethnic enclave of Chinatown, NYC, may be a harbinger of the peaceful and just community that human beings have long sought. Such a Spirit-inspired people of God, a true

⁴⁹ E.g., Malinda Berry, "Mission of God: Message of *Shalom*," in Dale Schrag and James Juhnke, ed., *Anabaptist Visions for the New Millennium* (Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora Press, and Scottsdale, Penn., and Waterloo, Ont.: Herald Press, 2000), 167-73.

fellowship of the Spirit, will manifest the diversity of the ecclesial body together around the name of Jesus and this in turn has the potential to generate and dispense with authentic health, wealth, and shalom beyond the world's economy of exchange.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Thanks to Eleazar Fernandez for inviting my participation in this festschrift, and to an anonymous reader for the *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion*, for help in improving this article. I also appreciate comments by my GA, Tim Lim, on an earlier draft of this paper.