The Work of Justice Is to Confront “Bad Religion”

by Joshua Van Cleef

In 2011, I found myself returning to the Catholic Theological Union after years in formation with the Franciscans, of whom I have fond memories of ministry, academic work, community, and discernment. This return followed my decision to leave the Friars and heed the call to the ministry and mystery of lay vocation. For me it was a time of searching and discovery. I was excited and a bit terrified. I knew I was called to ministry and called to build the kingdom, but now, for the first time in a long time, I didn’t know how I was going to do that in any significant way.

I did something new: I landed a part-time job at a retail coffee shop. Having been in ministry for nearly five years, my new work was a jarring contrast. I had gone from being a minister on the Navajo Reservation to serving coffee in Lincoln Park. Jarring as it was, it was kind of exciting at first because I felt like a complete foreigner in the land of shiny watches, condescending voices, and expensive coffee. In the beginning, the novelty of the situation largely whitewashed the reality of the working conditions. Then I discovered that employees were paid minimum wage received no sick days, and that the healthcare option was a mere corporate public relations ploy. I began to talk to the other employees and discovered that these working conditions were far from novelty for them. The majority of them had been in the retail industry between three and ten years, and they didn’t have the privilege of calling this a transition job. A transition job suggests that there is a better opportunity waiting around the corner. But the reality for my co-workers was that retail was their main work, working poor was their economic class, and the horrible working conditions were their life. It was then that the novelty wore away for me too.

I began to ask them questions about the dignity of work and every person’s right to a living wage. Within three weeks of my employment, a large group of employees met to talk about their experience of working for this corporation. These conversations became a weekly meeting as we began to get more organized. Within two months, a living wage campaign was born. Within a few more months, we had our first public action and media coverage, which led to the sprouting of similar initiatives in retail locations all over the country. A few months after that, I had a private, hour-long conference with the CEO. I will return to this topic at a later point, but first let me tell you about some of the difficulties I faced in organizing.

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Resistance at the Root

To my surprise, it was among the working poor, the majority retail workforce, that I found the most resistance. The eighty percent of this billion dollar company who were being paid under a living wage\(^1\) were the hardest to convince that positive change was possible or even warranted. Efforts to discuss injustice were met with fierce corporate loyalty or seasoned learned helplessness. Attempts to educate my co-workers about worker rights were met with widespread corporate codependence. Employees reaching out for help from outside organizations were met with coworkers and HR representatives shaming them to keep it in the family. Some employees even interpreted the news of organizing within the company as a personal attack. With the majority workforce subjected to policies that demanded a five-day work week yet offered salaries below the Illinois poverty line,\(^2\) I assumed that ideas of collective bargaining, dignity of work, and solidarity would be received as a glass of water on a hot day. Instead, the victims of this system fiercely defended the company and the competitive market that drove it. I had underestimated how deeply the roots of passivity extended.

The fierce loyalty, refusal to question, institutionalized fear, and learned helplessness of the masses were not unique to my experience. They are the fundamental stumbling blocks to working for justice. I realized that I needed to make a paradigm shift on how I thought about corporate retail.

Look at Nordstrom versus Melville. Notice the heavy-duty indoctrination process at Nordstrom, beginning with the interview and continuing with Nordie customer service heroic stories, reminders on the walls, chanting affirmation, and cheering. Notice how Nordstrom gets its employees to write heroic stories about other employees and engages peers and immediate supervisors in the indoctrination process. (A common practice of cults is to actively engage recruits in the socializing of others into the cult). Notice how the company seeks to hire young people, mold them into the Nordstrom way from early in their careers, and promote only those who closely reflect the core ideology. Notice how Nordstrom imposes severe tightness to fit—employees that fit the Nordstrom way receive lots of positive reinforcement (pay, awards, recognition)—and those who don't fit get negative reinforcement (being “left behind,” penalties, black marks). Notice how Nordstrom draws clear boundaries between who is “inside” and who “outside” the organization, and how it portrays being “inside” as being part of something special and elite—again, a common practice of cults.\(^3\)

This is an excerpt from Jim Collins’ book *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies*. His research suggests that, over time, the best visionary companies share certain characteristics that make them great—a formula for success. One of six fundamentals of visionary companies is to build a cult-like culture. Such a culture has four major characteristics: 1) Fervently held ideology; 2) Indoctrination; 3) Tightness of fit; and 4) Elitism. The work of Collins offered insight into the struggles we faced in organizing. Is it just happenstance that stumbling blocks for working for justice are the building blocks of visionary companies in corporate America? How do you confront a corporation with economic ends relying on cult-like means?

I am well acquainted with religious fundamentals that could, at times, work against the promotion of a fuller humanity. It was that ring of familiarity that gave rise to a paradigm shift in me: working for justice in corporate retail

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is confronting “bad religion.” An openly professed deity doesn’t necessarily sit atop the retail pyramid, but there is some indication of where ultimate authority rests.

**Atop the Areopagus**

In the face of a workforce suffering from corporate Stockholm syndrome, a living wage campaign was eventually born. In the midst of that campaign, I found myself at the figurative doorstep of my CEO’s office. We had arranged a meeting to discuss a number of justice issues. I confronted him with the fact that the company could offer a living wage to all employees and that dignity of humanity demanded it should. His response gave me great insight into where the authority ultimately rests. He summarily divested himself of responsibility and pointed to the free market, professing that it decided what they should do.

Scary as the thought might be that the ultimate authority, the moral compass, lies in the invisible hand of the free market, it is a given for most of corporate retail. Scrape away the faint religious sentiments that whitewash high-end grocery stores or the values tattooed across the all-too-hip corporate coffee shops, and you will find the bottom line: the free market decides. Corporate leadership merely interprets the decision of the free market within the context of minimal state safeguards (that do not guarantee wages that sufficiently cover the basic cost of living4).

**Working for Justice in Corporate Retail**

So what were some basic principles that I found to be relevant as we organized from the root up and faced bad religion in corporate retail?

**Rooted in Experience**

Working for justice must be rooted in experience. How do corporate doctrine and policy square with the lived experience of the employees at the bottom? In my situation, the actual experience of the retail worker was that we had to commit to full-time availability for part-time work. Four-hour shifts were a company standard. This meant that if I wanted healthcare (offered if you maintain twenty-one hours a week), then I had to work a minimum of five days a week. If employees are compelled to work at least five days a week to get healthcare—at four-hour shifts—then they are left with no other option but to rely on a part-time job that pays poverty wages as their primary source of income. What other job could they get to fill in the gaps?

According to Elizabeth Johnson, if a group of people believes that a viewpoint or experience may threaten their authority and security, it is not uncommon for them to systematically ignore that group’s voice.5 If the voice, wisdom, and experience of the common worker will threaten the financial security or power of the minority leadership, it is no surprise that any such insight is ushered into the blind spot. Bringing the perspective of the marginalized into view, we can see clearly whether or not an institution’s policies uphold human dignity or diminish it. It is therefore the work of justice to rescue this insight from the blind spot so that informed decisions can be made and bad religion can be confronted. It is the work of justice to turn corporations, no matter how iconic or visionary, on their side, exposing the easily corruptible underbelly, in order to have an honest look at the premises behind the policies. It is the work of justice to seek validation for the oppressed.

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4 “Living Wage Calculator: Poverty in America.”
Negative Experiences of Contrast

The ultimate voice of divine authority does not work to legitimize injustice but rises prophetically to unmask and denounce it. According to theologian Edward Schillebeeckx, within the experience of injustice, people can hear the voice of God saying in no uncertain terms, “This is not the Kingdom!” This unmasking of what is “not-god” by way of protest and praxis against injustice and their causes is termed by Schillebeeckx as “negative experiences of contrast.” With widespread hopelessness and ever widening “learned helplessness,” negative experiences of contrast are an invitation to find the voice of justice as a still whisper and a whirlwind of anger saying, “This is not how it is supposed to be!” How do you keep your compass pointing true north when you are overwhelmed by injustice and surrounded by an industry that practices systematic victim blaming? You regain your foothold by naming injustice as such, divesting yourself of the victim-blaming that legitimizes your unfortunate position. Then like a master carver or sculptor, you chisel away at what you know should not be there and what should begins to take form.

Ideal Centered

In the words of G. K. Chesterton, “Reform implies form. It implies that we are trying to shape the world in a particular image; to make it something we already see in our minds.” To organize in corporate retail, we must be ideal-centered. Once we named what was unjust, we were ready to claim what justice is. Then we set that idea as a reference point, our true north. And just as a builder pictures the finished house well before he ever lays the first brick, we too knew that our true cornerstone must be our ideal of worker justice. Grounded in our vision, we were ready to take a step toward building it.

Organizing, to use the words of Martin Luther King Jr., must involve “going to the mountain.” It is not sufficient to assume that the free market, fair market, or status quo will get us there. We have to envision a just world, reset our compass, and acknowledge that we all have been charged to walk in justice and build that ideal.

Accountability

If we are to work for justice in retail, we must hold our corporate leadership accountable for the policies that simultaneously drive their workers into poverty and line their own pockets in unbridled proportion. We must identify that the objective third party that we call the free market is nothing other than our own shadow and the shadow of corporate policy. If we are to work for justice, we must acknowledge that remaining silent in the face of injustice is consent. Commenting on Schillebeeckx, Mary Catherine Hilkert proposes that we are called to a “creative dissatisfaction.” That means our dissatisfaction must make us builders of a better world. We are neither naysayers nor people of despair—we are bold builders of our collective future. We must embrace with resolve the words of Elizabeth Johnson, when she writes: “no more prizes for predicting rain; only prizes for building arks.”

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6 Injustice and human suffering runs contrary to the eschatological vision and promise of God. It is in this context that Schillebeeckx develops “negative experience of contrast” and inextricably links the Spirit to the dynamic center of the process, animating the movement from experience to action. “These contrast-experiences show that the moral imperative is first discovered in its immediate, concrete, inner meaning, before it can be made the object of a science and then reduced to a generally valid principle. The initial creative decision which discovered the historical imperative directly in its inner meaning in the very contrast experience is, for the believer, at the same time the charismatic element of this whole process.” (God the Future of Man, trans. N. D. Smith (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1968), 155-56).

7 G.K. Chesterton, Orthodoxy (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co, 1908), 108.


9 Johnson, 17.
My experience of organizing a living wage campaign was a blessed one. I was able to witness people regain their hope and strength to work for justice. It was a blessing for me to be able to tap into my own tradition’s prophetic teaching and challenge a major institution that oppresses many workers today. It was a time of learning as I began to realize the unfortunate premises that often hijack both economic and religious institutions. I watched as young people who claim no religion but have inadvertently imbibed toxic religious practices take on the prophetic paradigm to challenge the status quo. As I came to understand my own vocation better, I also came to understand the vocation of the church: to confront bad religion wherever we see it.