

# Introduction to This Issue

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Only a few decades ago, the neoconservative writer Irving Kristol could dismiss economic inequality as a social problem (Kristol 1980). To his mind, there was little empirical evidence demonstrating that inequality was a significant issue. Today, we have a substantial amount of empirical data that reveals economic inequality as an important element in a number of realms—politics, education, health, social cohesion, and law, not to mention ethical concerns about solidarity, the common good, and human dignity. In short, economic inequality matters.

With that in mind, the Jesuit Institute at Boston College funded a year-long faculty seminar that would examine economic inequality from a variety of academic perspectives. The seminar began in the fall of 2015 and concluded in the spring of 2016. Throughout that period, a group of faculty representing various schools and departments within the university met regularly to read how different academic disciplines looked at economic inequality and discuss the insights that one discipline's perspective might enrich another's way of studying inequality.<sup>1</sup>

The faculty seminar at Boston College led to the decision to host a conference that would present some of the work done by the seminar members. Further, it was decided to invite student papers on the topic as well. In April of 2016 the two-day conference, "Growing Apart: the rise of inequality" was held on the Boston College campus. In addition to concurrent sessions in which the seminar faculty and student presenters gave papers, there were plenary sessions with invited scholars. Many of the papers presented over the course of those two days have been revised and are published in this issue of *Religions*.

The Interdisciplinary nature of the seminar and conference explains the presence of authors and topics that may not ordinarily appear in a journal such as *Religions*. Although the guest editors of this issue are both trained in Christian ethics and a number of the other papers included here are by theologians based in the academy, we felt it important to include several papers that illustrate how scholars in economics, law, sociology, education, political science, philosophy, and social work address the topic of economic inequality. While each of these scholars used methods and resources specific to their fields, the conference was open to the general public and so speakers aimed their papers at a general audience that allowed non-specialists to benefit. In revising the conference papers for publication in this issue, the editors asked all the authors to keep in mind that readers of *Religions* may be well read in other academic fields but expertise is generally located in areas of theology, religious studies, and textual criticism. We believe the essays presented in part one of this issue provide helpful and wise insights from a diverse set of perspectives that can assist those who approach economic inequality from the vantage points of theology and religious studies.

<sup>1</sup> The seminar members were well aware that there are different ways to speak about economic inequality, including but not limited to inequality of wealth, income, and life outcome. Since all these measures were deemed relevant to our shared concerns, the members addressed all of them, attempting to make clear distinctions as necessary for clarity.

By including contributions from writers representing other academic disciplines, this issue of *Religions* helps us understand why economic inequality deserves more attention from religious thinkers, particularly those who bring a normative stance to an issue that touches upon justice, human rights, and the meaning of a good society.

Economic inequality, particularly in the areas of income and wealth, has been steadily expanding in the United States. This reality is a concern for other nations as well. Yet, the topic of inequality was largely ignored by academic economists until recently. And many of those involved with public policy also downplayed the centrality of economic inequality as a societal concern until its reality and influence became impossible to ignore. Perhaps this was due to the fact that for many social theorists wealth distribution was a minor issue compared to economic growth, since the belief was either “a rising tide would lift all boats” or “trickle-down economics” would eventually, but surely, benefit those worst off. Frequent recourse was made to the argument that an expanding pie makes redistribution easier than reallocating shares of an existing pie that was not growing. As confidence in those claims has waned, the issue of economic inequality has gained more serious attention.

In part one of this issue, there are essays by scholars representing the social sciences and law. The initial essay by the sociologist Victor Tan Chen provides an account of how inequality is experienced in one specific setting, long-term unemployed automotive workers. His account provides a vivid description of the impact of economic inequality upon individuals and their communities, as well as providing insight into the difficulties involved in overcoming inequality.

The second essay by Tiziana Dearing offers lessons drawn from the field of social work about income inequality and how that reality, in turn, challenges social work to develop innovative services that might address the challenges presented by income inequality.

In the third essay, political scientists Kay Schlozman, Henry Brady and Sidney Verba discuss recent research on how economic inequality undercuts important practices of democratic politics. Their essay also reveals the negative spiral in which U.S. politics now finds itself, where economic inequality skews political life and where political power is employed to further deepen economic inequalities.

Mary Walsh and Maria Theodorakakis, a professor of education and a graduate student in the field respectively, look at the evidence that economic inequality is harming children’s health and brain development that, in turn, limits academic achievement and intellectual growth. They also relate the story of new educational programs and policies that hold the promise of mitigating some of the harms of economic inequality as it affects the education of children.

Another pairing of professor and graduate student, Joseph Quinn and Kevin Cahill, has produced the fifth essay in part one of the issue. These economists examine two of the most commonly cited and employed methods for alleviating economic disadvantage, namely the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and Minimum Wage laws. Their economic analysis points out the strengths and weaknesses of each strategy for countering economic inequality.

Finally, Frank Garcia, a professor of law, broadens the setting for considering economic inequality by examining the impact that international trade law has on the increase or decrease of such inequality. At a time when international trade has been broadly attacked as a cause of inequality, while others have defended trade as a remedy for inequality, the analysis of trade law is a timely essay.

With part two of the issue the essays move into areas more familiar to readers of this journal. Two philosophical essays begin this section of the issue. Micah Lott provides a brief essay that seeks to clarify just what is meant by claims, often heard during the past election year, that the system is “broken” or “fixed” in such a way that the rich will only get richer while others will suffer. His essay also presses for clarity about what exactly it is that we are discussing when we talk about an economic system.

The other philosophical essay is a longer reflection on the issue of whether inequality is actually harmful to those at the top of the economic pyramid. Dustin Crummett considers various arguments that great wealth, or having too much, hinders human well-being. Might efforts to overcome substantial economic inequality actually benefit those commonly seen as the beneficiaries of inequality?

The next essay, written by Stephen Leccese, provides a history lesson about an earlier era of grave economic inequality. The Gilded Age, a period roughly extending from the end of the American Civil War to the end of the nineteenth century, has been cited as the closest parallel to our present age of economic inequality. What emerged from that period was the birth of a new approach to economics championed by a group of scholars who broke with much of classical economic theory and who saw the goal of the field of economics as serving the public good.

One of the thinkers influenced by the “new economics” emerging out of the Gilded Age was the Catholic social theorist and advocate, Msgr. John Ryan. In the essay by Kenneth Himes, Ryan’s lifelong campaign for a living wage is acknowledged, but the question is posed as to whether resources in modern Catholic social teaching might be put to creating a limit on wealth and not only establishing a minimal income.

Joyce Konigsburg evaluates the contemporary situation of living wage arguments from the perspective of Catholic social thought and economics. She evaluates risks and benefits of living wage proposals for employers and the dignity of workers and deems they are a socially sustainable form of redress to inequality.

Another scholar of Christian ethics, Kate Ward, analyzes the views of Pope Francis and how he discusses inequality. It is suggested that Francis provides an approach to inequality that is closely linked to a virtue ethic response shaped by the Jesuit understanding of the virtue of hospitality. The resonance of that approach with feminist treatments of inequality is also analyzed.

Finally, two more essays by scholars of Christian ethics broaden the discussion of economic inequality by situating it in an international perspective. James O’Sullivan writes about how economic inequality has been treated from the perspective of various global initiatives that have set goals for lessening inequality. His analysis of “global goal setting” strategies is informed by contemporary human rights theory and approaches to human development.

The concluding essay, by the distinguished Indian moral theologian Shaji George Kochuthara, provides an examination of economic inequality within the contexts of a globalization dominated by neo-liberal economics as well as the impact of such thinking on nations such as India. In response, fashioning an alternative economic model that employs the insights of Catholic social teaching leads to a strategy that underscores solidarity as the key element in battling against inequality.

This rich collection of essays offers readers a set of scholarly reflections on what is one of the crucial social evils of our time, the huge and growing gap between “haves” and “have nots.” Because the problem is so complex and beyond the competence of any one discipline to adequately address, the approach to be taken must be inter-disciplinary. A modern university is ideally suited to bring together participants in conversations, which provoke insights that can motivate, clarify, and guide action toward remedying the ills associated with economic inequality. The guest editors of this volume wish to express our gratitude to the Jesuit Institute at Boston College for its support in hosting such conversations. And we thank the editors of *Religions* for inviting us to share some of the ideas that emerged from our seminar and conference.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## References

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