

No Rising Tide: A Study Guide

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This study guide is designed to help readers engage with the central questions, concerns, and proposals of *No Rising Tide: Theology Economics and the Future* by Joerg Rieger. The study guide aims to be accessible to a wide variety of users, including individuals reading the book on their own or groups looking for a resource to guide their discussions, for laypersons, students, church groups, or community reading groups. The best way to use the study guide will depend on your particular setting: Individuals and students reading the book may desire to follow along question by question as they read through the book, while reading groups or Sunday school classes may prefer to choose just a few questions from each chapter which they find most pertinent and accessible to discuss. However you choose to use it, the intent of the study guide is not to produce unquestioning faith in either an economic model or theological propositions, but rather the study guide hopes to promote insightful discussion and thoughtful argumentation (even disagreement) about the challenges that face us in an economy (and religion for that matter) that is benefiting fewer and fewer.

Chapter 1 – No Rising Tide: Religion, Economics and Empire

1. Rieger argues that economists and economic policy makers today profess a firm faith that “A rising tide lifts all boats”.
 - a. In terms of the economy, what does the analogy “A rising tide lifts all boats” mean?
 - b. How does a belief that “a rising tide lifts all boats” relate to the promotion of “trickle-down” economic policies (ie. policies that increase the amount of money in the hands of the wealthy believing that the wealthy will invest their money in ways profitable for all persons)?
2. Rieger demonstrates that even when the economy was growing in the past two decades, the rising tide lifted few boats.
 - a. What are some contemporary examples that Rieger uses to show that in the economy a rising tide does *not* lift all boats?
 - b. What are some examples from your life, friends, or contemporary events that challenge the belief that “a rising tide lifts all boats”?
3. The chapter suggests that there are similarities between the unquestioning faith encouraged in many religious communities and the demand for blind devotion to a fixed set of economic principles.
 - a. What is “market fundamentalism” (14)? How does “market fundamentalism” respond to economic downturn?
 - b. How has free-market thinking shaped social life beyond the scope of economics, including how we think about God and how churches organize?
 - c. What does it mean that standard approach to economics and to theology today both “believe in a transcendent fix” (18)? How does the “Prosperity Gospel” epitomize this approach to economics and theology?
4. Rieger speaks about economic power differentials in terms of empire that shapes our lives and act as if there is no alternative to the status quo.
 - a. How is individualism (whether as praise for those who pull themselves up by their own bootstraps or as chidings not to be so self-centered) a myth that distracts from the real relationships of power that shape our lives?
 - b. How are economics and religion similar in looking to positions of power and wealth as the image of perfection or divinity? How does the life and crucifixion of Jesus challenge this model of thinking about divinity and power?
5. While the consideration of the state of the economy and extreme power differentials may be disheartening, Rieger firmly advocates that there are alternatives.
 - a. While the media and even church sermons are saturated with the moral condemnation of greedy CEO’s, why are moral categories like greed, jealousy, and envy not very helpful in identifying alternatives to the economic status quo?
 - b. Why does Rieger propose that we find true alternatives only when we begin to examine “where it hurts” in place of economic pressure, rather than focusing on trying to integrate the economically disadvantaged into status quo structures of society?

Chapter 2 – The Logic of Downturn: Class Matters in Religion and Economics

1. The fact that downturn has become the rule rather than the exception for the majority of persons opens up new avenues for questioning the economic and theological status quo.
 - a. Why does Rieger suggest that times of economic downturn offer a fresh perspective on the economic and religious situation?
 - b. Why does looking to the bottom (the place of pressure and conflict) help us identify genuine alternatives better than looking to the top where people seem to be succeeding?
2. Class, while not a popular way of talking about social divisions, is still very much at work in economics and religion.
 - a. What are some of the ways we still recognize and talk about class distinctions today, either identified by Rieger or in your own experience?
 - b. How does it help to think about class in terms of power differences (who has power over their work and who ultimately benefits from the work)?
 - c. How do you respond to the fact that, in terms of power, 62% of Americans are working class (including both blue-collar and white-collar cubical workers) and only 2% are in the ruling/ownership class? What position does this put the middle class in?
 - d. How can thinking in terms of class help us overcome the “myth of individualism” and the tendency to blame the victims? How does thinking in terms of class help us see how the economy is *not* designed to empower and to benefit everyone (or even most people)?
3. Both economic inequalities and power differentials are growing, not shrinking, regardless of whether the economy is undergoing boom or bust.
 - a. This chapter presents a lot of numbers and statistics that represent the growing inequality both in the United States and globally. What statistics stand out most to you?
 - b. How does the growing economic inequality also represent a growing difference in power relations? Or, how are the gains of those at the top related to the losses of those at the bottom (and increasingly the losses of those in the middle)?
 - c. How should we rethink the American Dream in light of the fact that class mobility is becoming less and less a reality?
4. Class conflict is real and going on right now, whether we want it or not.
 - a. How does liberation theology respond to class conflict? How does it see this modeled in Jesus and in the writings of the apostle Paul?
 - b. Why is common interest found at the bottom rather than at the top? Why does taking pressure off those at the bottom ultimately protect everyone?
 - c. What is the place of churches in relation to the growing economic inequality and power disparity? What are some the things churches are doing to resist the power disparity and take the pressure of those at the bottom?

Chapter 3 – God and the Free-Market Economy

1. The economy is not the only place bubbles are being produced; mainline Christian theology is creating a divine bubble, putting hope in a transcendent reality that can't deliver.
 - a. How have you seen the economic crisis create a crisis of hope?
 - b. How does the Gospel of Prosperity create a divine bubble?
 - c. How does the mainline Christian belief that God is like the powerful, successful and wealthy resemble the divine bubble of the Gospel of Prosperity?
2. The economic bubble is grounded in an unhealthy utopianism that puts its faith in transcendent belief against all evidence.
 - a. How does belief in “the invisible hand of the market” (65) ground the free market in a transcendent belief system that shapes more than just the economy?
 - b. How does the transcendence embraced by the free market differ from the transcendence embodied in the ministry of Jesus?
 - c. What examples, either from the chapter or your own observation, demonstrate an unhealthy belief in the transcendence of the free market in the face of contradictory evidence?
 - d. Why does Rieger suggest that neither the responses to the economic crisis presented by liberals nor the responses to the economic crisis presented by conservatives offer real alternatives to a faith in the transcendent free market?
3. Christians like to talk about how faith should influence how they use their money, but first they should critically evaluate how money influences their faith.
 - a. What are concrete examples of how financial success or business models shape how we think about Jesus or God?
 - b. How does the life and death of Jesus contradict these images of Jesus and God as a financial success or business leader?
4. Both religion and economics must turn from the ahistoric “idealism” that shapes their understanding of God and the market and deal with the real struggles of the historic situation in order to find genuine alternatives.
 - a. How does ahistoric “idealism” in both religion and economics resemble idolatry and pose the same dangers as idolatry?
 - b. How can looking at the history of the creation of the free-market economy help us overcome the assumed transcendence of the free market?
 - c. From a historical perspective, who has the free market actually benefited and to whom has it given power? What are specific examples?
 - d. How does a historical perspective shed light on how the free market relates to issues of race and gender?

Chapter 4 – Consuming Desire vs. Resisting Desire

1. In order to understand what drives us onward in times of downturn, we will have to take a look at our desires and how they are formed.
 - a. What is “desire” and what does it have to do with our understanding of God (in Luther’s terms “that to which your heart clings and entrusts itself”)?
 - b. How does the advertising industry shape human desire and tastes? Can you think of personal ways that advertising or marketing has shaped your taste or your desires?
 - c. How does the presence of unconscious desires influence our attempts to create economic alternatives?
2. In order to understand how our desires are formed, we will have to examine the role of production in the economy and society in general.
 - a. Why is the often-made critique of consumerism and materialism not particularly helpful in understanding how desire is shaped in the economy?
 - b. How is consumerism and the shaping of our desires connected to the process of production?
 - c. How does economic and consumption inequality affect desire, producing the phenomena often called “keeping up with the Jones”?
 - d. How does the production of desires in the economy influence our religious desires or how Christian communities operate?
3. To find economic alternatives, we need to look to at realities of economic production.
 - a. How does looking at the reality of production help us get at understanding the systemic pressures of the economy more fully than looking at the economic distribution (inequality of pay)?
 - b. How does distinguishing between “wants” and “needs” help expose the problems of producing endless desires to consume?
 - c. How has the tradition of labor or workers been overlooked in what we identify as part of the history of Christianity and in what economic issues churches discuss?
 - d. How does the perspective of labor inform both our view of economic production and the work of God in history?
4. Desire itself is not inherently evil or consumeristic; but in order to transform the types of desires produced in the market, we need to tap into alternative desires already at work that will change the form of production.
 - a. What is the difference between “consuming desire” and “resisting desire”?
 - b. Where do we find alternative or resisting desires already at work within society and the economic system?
 - c. How does the example of Jesus lead the way toward “wild spaces” (115) in which resisting desires are formed and organized?
 - d. In this context, how do we identify sin? How do we resist sin?
 - e. Can the insights of socialism (economic democracy) offer any alternative forms of production?

Chapter 5 – Rethinking God and the World

1. Values matter in economics and religion, but we must always look deeper for the full story.
 - a. What are the values embraced by free-market economics?
 - b. What are the values asserted in the theological statements affirmed by the Lutheran World Federation, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, the United States Conference of Roman Catholic Bishops, and the United Methodist Church?
 - c. How do the theological values affirmed in these Christian traditions relate to the values embedded in the free-market system?
2. If we don't look on the underside of power, where God is at work, we might miss the reality of God altogether.
 - a. How does seeing God at the top – seeing God as most like those who are economically successful and powerful – threaten to become just projection of God in our own image (idolatry)?
 - b. Why does seeing God at the top contribute to an economic system that disproportionately benefits those at the top? How does the benefit to those at the top directly relate to the increasing pressure on those at the bottom (and more and more the middle-class as well)?
 - c. How does the Christian tradition point us toward discovering the presence of God on the underside of history? What are specific examples?
3. Rethinking religion from the bottom-up helps us see economic alternatives from the bottom-up.
 - a. Why does Rieger argue that transforming economic systems from the bottom-up is not just something that is 'good' for Christians to do, but central to the Christian life?
 - b. How could seeing God from the bottom-up help us rethink how to structure the economy in a way that would benefit everyone?
 - c. How does starting at the bottom provide an alternative energy source and alternative insights that manifest alternative options to a free-market system?
4. Seeing God at the bottom forms a specific understanding of justice that benefits all.
 - a. What sort of justice does the free-market system promote? Who does this sort of justice as fairness benefit?
 - b. How does the Christian tradition of seeing God from below help us rethink justice from the perspective of those under pressure? How does this conception of justice as solidarity ultimately benefit everyone?
 - c. How does rethinking justice from below affect how we do theology and economics? Specifically, how does it help us rethink the way we structure private property?
5. Seeing God at the bottom supplies an alternative source of hope.
 - a. In what sort of surplus does the free market put its hope?
 - b. What alternative surplus drives an alternative hope from the bottom up?

Conclusion – The Turning of the Tide: Theology, Religion, and Economics

1. Whether the economy is in boom or bust, wealth keeps trickling up and fewer and fewer people are benefiting from the economy
 - a. In what ways are you already in touch with those affected by the pressures of the economy?
 - b. How has the experience of those under pressure influenced your understanding of the economy or religion?
2. The persistence of downturn forces us to rethink the common good.
 - a. How does the logic of the free market defer the common good into a utopic future?
 - b. How does seeing God from below help us redefine the common good from the bottom up?
 - c. What does the common good look like in terms of power relations when we define it from the bottom up?
3. Unquestionable faith claims are dangerous for both economics and religion.
 - a. How can the image of God as “wholly other” help us rethink both the immanence and transcendence of God?
 - b. How does the image of God as Other help us rethink the goals of economics?
 - c. How does getting in touch with those on the underside of power, those who are under pressure in the economic system, or excluded from either economics or religion, help us better understand God as Other.
4. Seeing God as Other helps us recognize that we are always connected to others even when we cannot see it.
 - a. How does Jesus commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself” help us overcome the over simplistic opposition of self-interest and self-sacrifice (or selfishness and altruism)?
 - b. How are we deeply connected to others (in solidarity with those under pressure), even when we do not recognize it?
 - c. How does transforming the economy to protect those under pressure protect everyone?