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## Introduction

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For the last four decades, M. Douglas Meeks’s wide-ranging contributions to theological reflection and education, pastoral formation, and public witness have placed him at the center of many of the most important developments in contemporary North American theology. Those who know Doug’s scholarship are undoubtedly familiar with his groundbreaking work in exploring and articulating the radical political-economic implications of the core affirmation that the triune God—the divine Economist who is Father/Mother, Son, and Holy Spirit—is at work in and for the salvation of the world by “making home” for the whole creation. Countless church leaders, from World Council of Churches representatives to bishops, clergy, and laity, have received his gifts of clear guidance, faithful instruction, and poetic inspiration. Those who have sat in Doug’s classroom and around his seminar table know that he is an exacting but gracious teacher who expects his students to think as deeply as he does about the nature of God and God’s righteousness, the mission of the church, and the unjust sufferings of the poor. Most everyone who knows him has experienced the warm hospitality Doug and his wife, Blair—a wise theologian herself, and a skilled liturgist—freely offer within their home and throughout their lives, both of which are far along the *via salutis* toward Christian perfection in *this* life.

This book of essays is offered with great respect and appreciation in honor of M. Douglas Meeks, who is a colleague, teacher, scholar, administrator, mentor, friend, minister of the Gospel, advocate for the poor, and disciple of Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. It contains essays that

address the theme of God's economy of salvation from biblical, historical, ecclesial, and theological perspectives. We hope this volume serves both to recognize and celebrate this influential and beloved theologian and to focus attention upon the *oikonomia* of God's righteousness, which Doug continually reminds us is the saving power of God for life over death. In his introductory lectures to beginning theology students, Doug often claims that Christian theology can only be done in conversation with others. The contributors to this collection, most of them longtime friends, colleagues, and collaborators, are a tribute to the depth and breadth of Doug's living conversation partners. All have written out of sincere respect and grateful affection for M. Douglas Meeks.

The focal theological themes present within Meeks's corpus are many: hope in God's coming reign of righteousness within the whole of creation; the suffering love of God manifest on the cross; the *perichoresis* (round dance) of God's triune life together; the sanctifying grace of the Holy Spirit empowering us to participate in Jesus' resurrection life already here and now under the conditions of history; God's particular concern for those threatened by death—the poor, oppressed, homeless, abandoned, vulnerable; and a vision of political economy for both the church (given in the Eucharist) and the nations (achieved through political struggle and reform) that corresponds more closely to the inclusive, self-giving, coequal, communal, and just nature of God's economy. Although a full introduction to Meeks's work is not possible here, a brief review of the defining marks of his unique approach to the theological task will, I hope, help frame these rich and varied themes.

### A Political Theologian

Following his two primary mentors, Jürgen Moltmann and Frederick Herzog, Meeks has taken up the tasks of political theology by investigating not only the *political* implications of various theological claims but also the *theological* assumptions embedded within any particular political ideology or system. As he often impresses upon his students, it is not enough simply to speak of "God" in church or in public, for we must always ask, "Of which God are you speaking?" The God of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit is decidedly *not* the deity of Egypt, Rome, Babylon, or the god called upon by politicians to "bless the United States of America."

At the same time, the absence of explicit God-talk within certain public, secular spheres does not mean God-concepts are not in fact operative in both subtle and powerful ways. One of Meeks's most enduring contributions, in fact, has been to unmask the deformed and oppressive theological conceptions implicit within the modern global market economy. In many of his writings, including especially his masterful and still urgently relevant *God the Economist: The Doctrine of God and Political Economy*, Meeks has shown how traditional Western attributes of God as infinite, immutable, immortal, impassible, omniscient, and omnipotent are fundamentally constitutive of the ideal *homo economicus* underlying the logic of modern political economy. Capitalism's self-interested rational actor who maximizes his utility through market exchange is ultimately a description of the West's Monad of Being who transcends suffering and need in absolute isolation from all others.<sup>1</sup> Meeks has taught us that those seeking more just, equitable, and sustainable systems of property/ownership, work, and consumption—systems that do not terrorize the poor and ravage the biosphere—must engage in criticism of the market economy's implicit theological assumptions while also proposing alternative theological visions that can support the emergence of a very different kind of political economy.

### A Church Theologian

The church, according to Meeks, is eligible to contribute toward a critical and constructive public theology for the sake of a more just political economy to the extent that we who are the church's stewards draw deeply and intentionally upon our own biblical, theological, and ecclesial knowledge and memory. Here Meeks shows his allegiance to Karl Barth, with whom both Moltmann and Herzog began their theological careers. To do political theology effectively, then, requires attending to *dogmatics*, which Meeks describes as "the church's way of making a judgment about the truth in the face of the truth claims in the church and the world that contradict Jesus Christ."<sup>2</sup> From Meeks's perspective, the North American church has been silent on matters of economy precisely because it has been so completely absorbed by the theo-logic of the global market. One of the key tasks of the theologian in our context, therefore, is first and foremost to convert our churches to the theo-logic of God the Father/Mother, Son, and Holy Spirit.

1. Meeks, *God the Economist*, esp. ch. 3.
2. Meeks, "Economy and the Future of Liberation Theology," 44.

Only then might we Christians be able to contribute to the shaping of an alternative economy in the world.<sup>3</sup>

In searching deeply within the biblical narratives to uncover the logic of God's Trinitarian history with the world, Meeks identifies a wealth of wisdom internal to the church but available to be shared in public conversation with others about political economy. In recounting the story of Exodus, Meeks shows how crushing debt and the centralization of power and wealth inevitably leads to slavery, while reminding us that God's salvation begins among oppressed peoples as the power for liberation from bondage. He sees the Torah as God's gift to Israel in order to instruct the nations how to order economic life to avoid slavery and serve the flourishing of life through such laws as prohibiting usury, sharing common goods through gleanings and tithing, showing hospitality to foreigners, observing Sabbath rest for workers and the land, and observing the Jubilee redistribution of concentrated wealth. In Jesus' table practices, Meeks says, God's economy is revealed as one in which everyone is invited, especially the poor and those considered strangers, debts are forgiven, dignity is bestowed, gifts are distributed through the logic of grace, power is justly shared, and the resultant abundance is enjoyed by all.<sup>4</sup> A church marked by the active remembrance of this *oikonomia tou theou* would have much to offer the world, indeed.

Because he is a church theologian, Meeks knows that theology is not complete with God-talk alone but entails guiding others to participate in God-walk as well. Here Meeks follows his spiritual elder, John Wesley, in understanding that the teaching role of the theologian includes creating opportunities for practical formation in the ways that lead to life. "Theology as life in the Holy Spirit" by following Jesus Christ, he has written, "is an ordering of one's way of being in the world out of the energies of God's grace."<sup>5</sup> Meeks's lifelong commitment to reform the shape of theological education—guided by Wesley's questions for the early Methodists: What to teach? How to teach? What to do?—has involved participation with students in Covenant Discipleship groups, feeding ministries with the poor, community gardens, prison ministries, public protests against the death penalty, and more. Engaging faithfully in theological education today requires "a constant practical and theoretical struggle before God for a life that conforms to the character of God's life"—a struggle that, Meeks has

3. Meeks, "God's *Oikonomia* and the New World Economy."

4. Meeks, *God the Economist*, ch. 4.

5. Meeks, "Reflections and Open Tasks," 133.

argued, will include attempts to resource the church in its mission to the world, to form direct relationships with the poor and oppressed, and to reshape seminary life itself in greater conformity to the triune God's economy of salvation.<sup>6</sup>

### A Metaphorical Theologian

Perhaps the orienting genius of Meeks's work resides in his poetic language and metaphorical images gifted to the church and world. Precisely as one committed to the formation of persons in ecclesial communities for the sake of a more just and hospitable world, Meeks has disciplined his writing and public speaking so that his penetrating and complex analyses of political economy, Trinitarian theology, contemporary culture, and ecclesial life are accessible to educated clergy and laity, as well as academics in other disciplines devoted to the common good. Unlike other metaphorical theologians of his generation, Meeks has drawn deeply upon the living symbols of the Bible and church that infuse his work with a richness and power that will likely endure long after other, more experimental and well-known attempts have faded from relevancy.

For Meeks, God is the Economist, the homemaker who redeems the world by creating the conditions of home for all God's creatures. *Oikonomia* in its ancient usage (*oikos* = household + *nomos* = laws or rules) simply means the management of the household. The most basic question of economy, then, is this: Will everyone in the household get everything they need to live? Home is 1) where everybody knows your name/story, 2) where you can count on being confronted, forgiven, loved, and hoped for, 3) where you can always count on there being a place for you at the table, and 4) where you can trust that what is on the table will be shared with you.

If home is having access to these means of life, according to Meeks, then to be homeless in any of these ways is to be subject to death. He has identified at least six dimensions of the menacing threat of poverty, from which God the Economist provides salvation. For those who cry out "I am hungry" (economic poverty), the scriptures respond that "God is bread." For those who cry, "I have no power to determine my future" (political poverty), Christians affirm that "God is power." For those who cry, "I have no story, no name" (cultural poverty), the church proclaims that "God knows you by name." For those who cry out, "I am ignorant, I don't know"

6. Meeks, "Globalization and the *Oikoumene*," 10.

(educational poverty), the scriptures say that “God is wisdom.” For those who cry, “I am sick, I have no health” (bodily/natural poverty), Christians claim that “God is healing.” And for those who cry out in despair, “I have no hope” (spiritual poverty), the answer is that “God is hope.”

The church, for Meeks, is God’s attempt to build a household that will join God in making the world into home. Essential to the flourishing of any home are the material/symbolic elements of table, bread, water, oil, towel, and basin. The church’s sacraments, then, are the means by which God creates the conditions of home for the homeless. Having received the gift of home, Christians are thus sent into the world to help make home for all others.<sup>7</sup>

These rich and generative metaphors, along with many others, capture both the substance and methodological approach of Meeks the political church theologian. These will last as one of his most enduring legacies.

## Essays

The diverse essays in this volume reflect Meeks’s broad influence upon contemporary theological reflection and education, as well as his impact upon the life of the church and the world. Walter Brueggemann offers a reading of the Elijah, Micaiah, and Elisha narratives hidden within 1 and 2 Kings, demonstrating how each provides a prophetic challenge “from below” to the more official accounts of established power and royal claims to authority. Patout Burns’s essay provides a comprehensive examination of Augustine’s views on wealth, property, earthly goods, social status, poverty, and almsgiving found throughout his sermons. John Cobb reflects on decisions made by the 2012 General Conference of the United Methodist Church concerning homosexuality and proposes a progressive vision for the future of the United Methodist Church rooted in Wesley and oriented around principles of inclusiveness, justice, peace, and sustainability. Kendall Soulen argues that pluralist calls to depict God as the nameless, ineffable One manifest through all religions reflect the logic of the marketplace, proposing instead that the LORD made known to Israel through the exodus and revealed as Jesus Christ is a God who resists commodification and imperial control. Néstor Míguez uncovers the systemic violence woven into the global market economy and its effects upon the peoples of Latin America,

7. The content of this section is drawn from notes taken in Meeks’s lectures from multiple courses at Vanderbilt Divinity School over the span of many years.

contrasting neoliberalism's culture of violence with the biblical vision of a culture of peace. Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki argues that Meeks is implicitly a process theologian, pointing to his rejection of Greek philosophical categories of divine omnipotence and omniscience and his affirmation of a God whose power is present in the world to create inclusive communities for the well-being of all. Michael Welker proposes a way forward for christological reflection in the West by demonstrating how a return to teaching the threefold office of Christ—kingly, prophetic, priestly—allows us to focus on the public Christ in different domains of life. Sondra Wheeler reviews Wesley's writings on the use of possessions, identifying the strategies Wesley employed in addressing the structural and material lives of the early Methodists, while suggesting points of contemporary relevance of a Wesleyan perspective on wealth, possessions, and economics. Charles Wood argues that one of the contributions the Wesleyan tradition offers to ecumenical ecclesiological conversations today is viewing the church in the context of the work and presence of the Holy Spirit. Young sets forth a spirituality of hope grounded in the biblical witness and conversant with Meeks's writings, and Moltmann offers up elements of a culture of life and a confidence in the future amidst the many crises threatening existence today.

## Conclusion

M. Douglas Meeks began his theological career in a turbulent age marked by political revolution, cultural upheaval, and the cries of the world's poor for liberation and justice. In his first book, revised from his dissertation, *Origins of the Theology of Hope*, Meeks wrote that Christian existence is defined neither by optimism nor pessimism but resides within “the dialectic between hope and our suffering from real contradictions of our humanity.”<sup>8</sup> The age today is marked by multiple overlapping crises that threaten the world's poor and the planet's impoverished natural systems with death. The questions that Meeks has attended to for decades are still at the urgent center of theological reflection and education. In an age of climate change and resource depletion, what ought we to hope for in light of the *novum* given to us in the life, death, resurrection, and coming reign of Jesus Christ? Amidst the growing disparity between the wealthy elite and the dehumanized poor caused by a global corporatocracy and justified by a deformed market ideology, how might our political and economic systems

8. Meeks, *Origins of the Theology of Hope*, 7.

be re-shaped such that all enjoy the goods of dignified work, just access to “daily bread,” an equal voice in the shaping of society, spiritual and bodily health, and creative participation in communities both local and global? For those of us who work and teach in seminaries and divinity schools—which are experiencing a critical shaking of the foundations as well—what are we to teach, how are we to teach, and what are we to do in the face of a North American church that seems wholly unprepared to address the massive social, political, economic, and ecological crises threatening to overwhelm us? In all of these questions, and many more, Meeks continues to be a wise and faithful guide, directing our hope toward the God who made a people out of no people, who raised the Son from the grave through the Spirit of Life, and who will make this increasingly uninhabitable world into our true and lasting Home.

May this volume honor Doug’s significant and ongoing contributions to theology, the church, and the world God so loves, while bearing witness to God’s *oikonomia* of salvation.

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