Jonathan Tran AAR Edited

**Jeff Liou:** Hey, Emily.

**Emily Hill:** Hi, Jeff. How are you?

**Jeff Liou:** I'm doing all right. How are you?

**Emily Hill:** I'm good. I was taking care of my chickens this morning.

**Jeff Liou:** Oh, how are the chickens?

**Emily Hill:** The chickens are good. We have seven chickens that I share with some of my neighbors that we help take care of. And they've recently started all laying eggs.

So now we're getting six or seven eggs a day.

**Jeff Liou:** You know, I know that people do that with their community for a certain kind of arrangement, a certain way of arranging their social relationships. Tell me why you decided to do that.

**Emily Hill:** I think we were sort of interested in the idea of having sort of urban chickens.

We thought that would be kind of fun. We have a garden, but we did actually think that it would help us grow as a community because we would have to share the things we would have to talk together about how we were going to take care ofthem. And make decisions together and work on projects together for them as well as share the eggs.

So we thought that it would also just be a way of growing community amongst the neighbors.

**Jeff Liou:** You know, I, I think I'm familiar with a term for basically what you just described. I think the term is political economy, and I also happen to know Dr. Hill that this is one of the things that you study. So could you explain to our listeners what is meant by political economy?

**Emily Hill:** Yeah. I think political economy, I mean, we could think about the two words being politics and economics sort of loosely. And I think now a lot of times we just think about economics because in some sense that's almost just taken over the way, even that we think about politics, but that's a side story.

So, uh, we've got economics being the way that we think about production,, consumption and trade the way we manage all of that as, as individuals or a community or as a nation. And then politics being how we live together, how we manage all of that together. And so we're thinking about how all of those things relate. So our social relations, our customs, and how we manage all of that together with our economy and thinking about all of that holistically

**Jeff Liou:** To our listeners, you're listening to a bonus episode. Our first of a series of bonus episodes to our first season of the Theology & podcast. And when we were at the American Academy of Religion, we sat down and spoke with Dr. Jonathan Tran, who is a theologian at Baylor University in Waco. He is the George W. Baines Chair of Religion, and he's written a book that has a lot to do with political economy. And the book title is *Asian-Americans and The Spirit of Racial Capitalism*. He describes this book as an attempt to present racism as a theological problem and a political economic distortion of the divine economy. So in this bonus episode, we'll hear a little bit about the difference between political economy and the divine economy that he's talking about, which he describes as Trinitarian. We are excited to bring to you this bonus episode with Dr. Jonathan Tran.

**Jonathan Tran:** So I grew up outside of the church. I was not Christian my whole life and started going to a Chinese Baptist church, like the second half of my senior year. And so when I got to college, I knew it was either going to be sink or swim with the Christianity. So, and they said, if you want to swim, join InterVarsity.

And so I joined InterVarsity and they're super strange people to me. But they are really kind and gracious human beings and very hospitable. So I hung out with them a lot. My, my life in university was basically reading philosophy, playing basketball and hanging out with InterVarsity. I'm like one of those people that would basically say I majored in InterVarsity .

 I majored and maybe double majored in InterVarsity. It was deeply formative. Tom Allen, of course is a national leader now discipled me for 10 years, his wife Denise. And I lived with her kids, Matthew, Daniel. We lived in community. I was really fortunate that my first real taste of Christianity was that, which is super high levels of discipleship. And the idea that giving your life for Jesus means gaining Jesus. And so that's really how I still understand Christianity.

**Jeff Liou:** Well, if that was your first taste, it sounds like you've had other tastes as well.

**Jonathan Tran:** Yeah. So, and some of it's good, right? One of the powerful things about InterVarsity is it has a very deep account of discipleship, but part of that is leveraged on a very narrow account of discipleship.

I was a student for four years, on staff with InterVarsity for five years, all at UC Riverside, all under Tom Allen. And then after nine years of super intentional accountability and financial stewardship, and working on racial reconciliation, and issues of bodily purity, and all these things, I was utterly exhausted and I had no idea what to do with my life.

So I did what people in those conditions always do: I went to seminary. I went to Duke Divinity School and probably for the first half I really did not know whether anyone else believed in God. So the first posture was judgmentalism and then I realized God is a lot bigger than I thought.

And since then, now it's been 20 years. A lot of it as an academic where you learn about how big God is. I still believe that the model of Christian discipleship that I learned in InterVarsity is the most powerful account of discipleship I've seen.

**Jeff Liou:** Wow. That trajectory, especially the judgmentalism part you know, I think maybe all of us know folks that never make it out of that. Can you describe what that process of learning-- that God is bigger than you originally thought? What that was like internally for you?

**Jonathan Tran:** Yeah. Fortunately, one of the gifts that InterVarsity gave me is a set of concepts to check hypocrisy, narrow-mindedness. We studied the gospel of Mark and Jesus encounters a lot of people are very narrow minded about what God is, and what God asks us, and what God enables. And so those set of concepts, I think served me. The first years out were pretty narrow judgmental and then opening it out. In some ways it was pushing against the InterVarsity background. In some ways it was living more deeply into it.

And so if Jesus' interaction with the world is to say, "you thought God was like X, or you thought the world was about Y, Jesus blew all that up. And so I think it helps orient me in the world, where the fundamental posture is critical, and academia really doesn't help this. It's properly critical, but oftentimes the posture of critique over determines our relationship with texts and traditions and histories.

One of the things, uh, Stanley Hauerwas, my advisor and one of my dearest friends said about me early on was you come from InterVarsity and that's suspicious, but one of the things you never do, Jonathan is you don't pooh pooh on your own tradition. And he once said to me, I'm really weary about evangelicals, but I think the future is somewhere in the kind of sustainable energy that they have.

And I think this is true. I work at Baylor University where it's chock full of evangelicals. And there's some things that are challenging about that context, very much so, but it's like InterVarsity, there are people who love Jesus, and they have pretty good brains and the combination of the two opens them to the world and to God in ways that are very powerful.

That's the stuff that gets me up in the morning.

**Emily Hill:** So now you are an academic and you kind of mentioned that that trajectory was a little bit bumpy, but that you eventually opened up to the bigness of God within that journey and you've seen that in others as well. I wonder if you could describe what it is that you do to people who aren't theologians or who aren't academics. And also why you love it and what that journey has been like. Um and maybe also just with that why you think being an academic theologian as important to your faith and to other people's faiths.

**Jonathan Tran:** Yeah, that's a great question. I mean, a question of the whole trajectory of my life in so far as it's taken me here. I mean, being a theologian is stepping into a tradition that not only precedes you, but names you claims you, gives you a sense of a future because of the momentum of its past and its present conversations.

The wonderful thing about theology is it's an incredibly wide tradition, not simply wide in the traditions of Roman Catholic and Protestant and Eastern thought, but theologians actually believe you should know everything, or as much as you should know. So I'm in a research project right now on bio linguistics and it involves me learning Noam Chomsky to evolutionary biology. And we think all of this matters about God, because we think something about the natural world tells us something about God, and what it tells us and how it tells us those things are critically difficult and really exciting questions. And so I get to do this full time. To think about the world as if it is God's world and it charges my life with much more purpose than it would have on its own.

The other thing is I get to do this with students. Whether they be undergrads or PhD students, the life of inquiry, and this lived tradition, right? It's a lived tradition in that it's always new books and always new, old books and treasures old and new, but it's always new people. Students who bring in their own sets of questions, then exert enormous pressure on the things I think I believe in and vice versa and this kind of discursive history is just a wonderfully fruitful place.

It also comes with significant challenges. To have one's world constantly opened up means it's hard to be settled and church should be at simultaneous place of both being stretched and expanded, but feeling settled and at home. And when your posture is mostly critical, it's hard to sit in worship and not think about questions. To be in the sermon and wonder whether you "agree with that." whereas I don't think scripture is a matter of agreement. Scripture, and the preaching of scripture, it's a matter of proclamation and identification and, um, you know, edification. Uh, that's a different posture than what I do as a professional, academic nerd.

**Jeff Liou:** I'm thinking about that tension between settled and stretched. We all know folks that live in the settled and that stretching is not just challenging, stretching is threatening. I hear you saying that the stretching part can leave you feeling unsettled. But what would you say to folks who dwell in the settled and especially when talking about academic work, the ways in which academic work can seem like a threat when really for you you're describing a stretching, right?

What's that disconnect?

**Jonathan Tran:** Yeah. I mean, this is the tension I talked about earlier with Jesus and the keepers of the Jewish faith, and the difficulties of living most fully into Jewish thought and religion and theology of the Old Testament, while also seeing the trajectories out of that, that take you places you didn't know to anticipate. And so people who are settled, it seems to me, the challenge of their life is on the one hand: their settlements are often settlements in systems and structures of incredible inequality and injustice and in so far as they protect those structures because they're settled, because it advantages them and privileges them, then they perpetuate injustice and the lack of what Jesus described as loving your neighbor. Um, in fact, in scripture the very meaning of that term becomes the point of incredible contestation, and I would argue to his crucifixion. That he meant by neighbor something that maybe I'm not inclined to think about. \

but more constructively I feel like those people are just missing out on the world. They're missing out on the Spirit. The Spirit is liberating, Spirit's doing things. It's building communities, it's constructing possibilities, it's dismantling structures and systems. So if you're settled, then on the one hand, you're perpetrating a bunch of stuff or you may be perpetrating a bunch of stuff, but the other problem is you're missing out on God.

And I lived enough without God. I don't want to miss out on too much. I'm sure I still miss out on way more. Um, but you know, it's, it's pretty great stuff if you're open to it.

**Jeff Liou:** So that takes us right into your most recent book and the mention of dismantling systems and structures. When you talk about it in your book *Asian-Americans and the Spirit of Racial Capitalism*, that's partly what you're talking about. Right? So especially if there's a frame of following the Spirit and not missing out on what the Spirit is doing, can you talk a little bit about what you're writing about in this book and the way in which people can participate with the spirit and the work of dismantling systems and structures that make life difficult for others.

**Jonathan Tran:** Yeah. So I began by challenging what I would describe as the popular notion of what racism is. I think people tend to think racism begins as a personal set of prejudices, maybe arising out of ignorance or bad experiences. And then from these racist ignorance, or presumptions or stereotypes, then you act racially. Racist attitudes or behaviors towards individuals, but it's primarily an individual fair.

And then sometimes if you get enough of these racist individuals that then it rises to the level of systems and structures that becomes quote institutionalized. I think that narrative largely has it backwards. I think racism is a structure and system that facilitates extraordinary forms of violence and domination for the extraction of value and capital from the earth, and from all that is on the earth, that is other human beings. And the racism then justifies it. It says, you know, you go to a neighborhood in Waco and you say, well, why did these folks not have access to education? And then you look around you say, oh, it's cause they're brown. Instead of asking the question, "why do we have a society that produces that in perpetuity?"

We gaslight people and we say, it's something natural to them. It's because they're brown. Just like we might say, we go to a wealthy part of the neighborhood city, and there's a lot of white people we say, "of course, that's what white people should have." Instead of asking about why wealth accrues in certain kinds of ways.

I try to reframe things and what I describe as political economy and both parts of that, that term are important. It's not just economics, but it's the way race and class are always intertwined with other things, with each other, but also things like gender. They facilitate structures. And this produces racist people because you have to have a moral psychology that justifies the conventions that make our lives, especially us wealthy people, us wealthy say non-Black and brown people, or if you're yellow like me, yellow and distinct from say, Cambodian folks or other types of Asian Americans.

This makes for much more difficult picture. Uh, and so it's not going to be about changing hearts and minds. It's going to be about changing structures and systems. We're happy to change our hearts and minds cause they usually, there's pretty minimal consequences to change structures and systems is to rethink the way our society is organized and arranged.

So to follow the Spirit is to believe that the fight against racism as I've just described it-- if it's as totalizing, as I've just described it-- is to believe that we live in a total reality that is bigger than that. Because if you think that systemic inequality and racism, systemic domination, exploitation are the biggest story, then the best you could do is resist. And I don't think lives of resistance are sustainable for the entirety of our life. Because if it's as totalizing as I just described, no one person can survive it. So that's why I try to situate this story about racism and its domination and its extraordinary forms of violence within a much larger story of the Trinitarian life of God.

And so I contrast what I call racial capitalism with what we've called in the traditions of Christian thought for many, many generations, the divine economy. Which is one of grace and a repair and reconciliation. And so I think that the primary key of Christian life is not resistantce. That our primary key of Christian political participation is not resistance. Our primary key is proclamation. We're witnesses of what God has, is, and already has done. And I'd like to say that we're simply leaning into what the Spirit has accomplished at cross and resurrection.

**Jeff Liou:** I'm going to need you to take us deeper because the language that I hear the most often is the resistance language that is not just the mode of operation, it's also the virtue that we use to valorize our way of being in the world. Is it accurate to say you're contrasting proclamation with resistance or is there another relation that you would put there?

And secondly, How does the average person listening to this podcast live a life of proclamation in the face of a machinery that continues to reproduce this racism and racists?

**Jonathan Tran:** Yeah. I'd like to say that resistance has to be a moment within proclamation and the, the sense, the existential experience of resistance. I mean, you walk out into the world, of course it feels like resistance. I mean, unless you have your head in the sand and a lot of people have their head in the sand I mean, I would describe that as a resistance to truth and goodness. But for those who are attuned to the liberative power of the spirit, of course, there's moments where it feels like it's just resistance.

And there are generations where you feel like, you know, one step forward, two steps back, and there are continuous moments of that. But I also want to say that one of the gifts of Christianity is to say that that's not our whole story. That how you keep sight of the larger story of liberation and the context of what it feels like at best is moments of resistance, uh, is in some sense, the story of Christian discipleship. We are people that live on the razor's edge between hope and despair. And unless you're going to live in forms of consolation like withdrawal, which are simply perpetuating systems and structures then you pull your head out of the sand and it's a pretty scary reality. What Christianity does is it allows us to see more fully what's happening, just how evil this is. But the story of evil is not the whole story for Christians. The story of God's redemption this story that God is roomy enough, right, as Eastern theologians thought, to take into God's life, even all the damage that we've done through these systems.

The book methodologically tells two large stories. One, you know about Jeff because you were in a reading group very early on in this book about Chinese Christians who settled in the South after reconstruction and on the one hand have pretty amazing neighbor love relationships with their Black neighbors. On the other hand, enter into systems with exploitation. Not because they're racist per se, but they become racist because it's structures and systems. They become Christian, because they're in Southern Baptist Christian lands. And I argue that that the Christianity does nothing for them, except for justify what they're already doing. Again, not a nefarious picture, equally problematic.

The other story is of a bunch of InterVarsity alum who graduated from Berkeley and Stanford and UCLA and MIT and all these places that you think model minorities go to. They go to college and through InterVarsity, largely urban projects, learn that Jesus is on the side of the oppressed. And if they want to hang out with Jesus, then they're going to need to go into places that their upbringings would have told them God isn't ,and joy, isn't happiness isn't. And so they get this in their bones and at the behest and invitation of Black churches, some of these Christians end up in the Bayview- Hunters Point part of San Francisco, which is historically the most marginalized part of that city, the site of extraordinary, breathtaking, blatant environmental racism, and they learn to be with their neighbors. And they find more joy and hope in these communities than they could have ever on their model minority track.

And so they create a software company because they're a bunch of electrical engineering nerds. And they redistribute money through the software company. Because some of them are teachers, they start a school in the neighborhood and, um, using those funds. All of this in forms of repentance. I don't think any of these people would say they're doing this because they're good. I think they would all say that they're doing this out of forms of repentance from their advantages that accrue to them because they're particularly racialized in the ways that they're racialized.

The most important thing I think they do-- this goes to the question of resistance and proclamation-- is that it all begins not because they're, you know, virtue signaling, benevolent, missional people. They do it because they are called to be in community with them and their neighbors, and it just becomes the most natural thing to them. So it starts in these amazing places of worship, and ,singing and Bible study that just naturally exceeds its own boundaries. I described this as an ecology of grace. That they don't see strong distinctions based on race, strong distinctions based on education. Those are the things our world teaches us, but they want to be with human beings, and with creation, and God's life. It's an incredible picture of neighborly love.

**Emily Hill:** I love that story. And you're describing a lot of really great activity. Which alludes to the fact that proclamation is not just talking, but I'm wondering if you could, when you say proclamation, what do you mean by that? Uh, that it's not just preaching for example. Um, so when you are talking about proclamation theologically, what is that? Especially as opposed to resistance.

**Jonathan Tran:** That's a really helpful clarifying question. I get the proclamations the primary key from Karl Barth, one of the great influences in my life. And Barth thought that primarily what we do as human beings is we receive the word of God. And so proclamation is primarily first about listening, actually, and receiving and receiving the gift of our existence and the gift of our neighbors and our world.

But that the reception of that gift is the response to is, is properly proclamatory, right? It's to say something to give bear witness to say, look how great this is, look how joyful my life is with my neighbors. Look how terrible the world's violence is given that reality. And so proclamation is a mode of witness, um, that begins with literal forms of proclamation: God proclaiming to us, the preacher proclaiming the word as she exegetes the scripture. And so it certainly begins with those modes of proclamation, but you're right, proclamation is lived lives. I mean, my primary area of research is not even in race or social sciences, my primary area of research is in the philosophy of language and language works by way of conventional structures. So we say things, the conventions of our lives, are deeply bound into the way we live our lives. In some sense, you know, as, as Irish Murdoch said of Wittgenstein: we can only act in a world that we can see, and we can only see a world that we've been taught to talk about. And what the proclamation of the gospel does is allows us to see the world and therefore it's injustices, but also God's reparations in that world.

And then therefore to act and live into it. That's the problem with racism, what I mean by structural, systematic. It's not simply going to be me changing my mind. It's that the structures and systems teach us to see the world, or to not see the world. And therefore a set of possible behaviors, they never even occurred to us. That's the problem with the Delta Chinese. It's not that they're bad people, it just never occurred to them that their life could be anything more. And so this is a great question because proclamation, it has everything to do with the conventional nature of our lives.

The problem is the racist society teaches you and inculcates you endlessly to be racist. If not in an active nefarious way, just by passively, leading into and being carried by the momentum of our history. That's the difficult thing about America and pretty much any place on earth is that we live in structures and systems that we have to either choose to repair or we perpetuate. And that's part of the rub of Christian life. Is it illumines the world for us, how beautiful it is and therefore how violent it's distortions. And then it poses a question: what now will you do? Will you continue the momentum and perpetrate the violence or will you live into the life that God is perpetually and endlessly giving the world?

**Emily Hill:** Well, there we go.

**Jeff Liou:** Yes, that's a great question. Um, who do you anticipate seeing, Jonathan, taking on these forms of life more and more or less and less?

**Jonathan Tran:** Yeah, it's a great question. I've certainly thought about this this, this life, as you know, Jeff basically took 25 years off my life. The challenges of this book are not going to be for people who have settled, like you said. For folks who are happy to perpetuate systems of violence, whether they know it or not, they're not going to care at all about my book and they'll be easily dismissible. The challenge in this book are people in the fight, and the concepts that they have and the way that they imagine these questions. That's the intervention for the part of the church in America and the world that is committed to liberation. There's a lot for us to think through. And this book is the attempt to open up a set of questions.

I don't think this is primarily about racial identities. I think it's generally a mistake to, for example, tell white people that they are white. I think white people need to be told less that they're white. I think we need to destabilize racial categories, especially in the ways that they facilitate domination. You know, my attempt to replace that kind of thinking, or to challenge that kind of thing, or to nuance that kind of thinking by thinking about systems and structures, and political economy, and racial capitalism, those will be the challenges. For the average person who is committed to justice, say the average Baylor undergrad who loves Jesus and has some brains, like I said earlier, and loves the world my hope is that the issues of justice boil down to basic decisions, she will make about her life, where she will live, what kind of house, how she thinks about her bank account, and the ways that she is going to stand up to how city hall manages neighborhoods, how she thinks about the education of her children, other people's children.

So, yeah, I mean, I think this is a revolution in thought, but I think it's a revolution in thought we've been in for thousands of years. I mean, one of the heart of my book is coupled by the companionship of the Black radical tradition, that's often associated with forms of Marxism. I takeup Marxism in a very, very narrow way, but one of my challenges to Marxists is what I think Christianity presents. Marxists want us to sit around and wait for a revolution to start Christians lean into a revolution 2000 years in the making. That's what I mean by the difference between resistance and proclamation,

**Jeff Liou:** May it be so, may it be so.

You've been listening to Theology &, a podcast of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. Thanks so much for listening.

**Emily Hill:** You can check us out on social media.

**Jeff Liou:** And visit us on the web at theologyandpodcast.com.