

In fact, Clooney's double reading has drawn him more deeply into his own Christian faith. Vulnerability to the transformative power of the "other" is an important feature of Clooney's spirituality. De Sales makes Desika familiar, but Desika makes de Sales strange. Clooney, therefore, must read the Christian saint with new questions.

Clooney is also aware that what he is up to will be met with suspicion in some quarters. Becoming implicated in another religious tradition will likely be misunderstood as syncretism, infidelity to established doctrine, or religious relativism. And here Clooney does not tread lightly: he asks us to surrender our exclusive allegiance to Christianity in order to become vulnerable to the truths of Hinduism. In doing so, a new kind of community takes shape. This is an important insight. In some respects, I have more solidarity and spiritual kinship with my Buddhist friends and teachers than I have with some Christians. Clooney can say the same thing about his Hindu friends and teachers.

This leads to a practical problem that Christians, especially Catholics after the pontificate of John Paul II, must face today. John Paul consistently taught that the Holy Spirit is present in every human prayer. This belief was the theological basis for his famous meeting with religious leaders at Assisi, which was given a decidedly chilly welcome by some members of the curia. Clooney believes that Christians can integrate Desika's Hindu devotions into their own spiritual practice. But I have to ask: What does it mean for a Christian to pray using a Hindu mantra? Similar questions can be raised about Christians practicing Zen meditation, for example, or even praying the psalms with their Jewish neighbors. Clooney recognizes that interreligious prayer poses important theological questions for Christians today. He has little to say about how these problems might be addressed.

The great Buddhist scholar Edward Conze is reported to have spent an evening reading Butler's *Lives of the Saints*. There was not one Christian saint, he claimed, that a Buddhist could admire,

let alone emulate. Not all Buddhists share this view. In fact, Buddhists regularly come together with Christians for mutual enrichment. Clooney certainly sees much to admire and even emulate in Hinduism. By no means can his appropriation of Hindu truths be equated with the "eclecticism" derided by *Dominus*

Jesus. His book is about an encounter of great depth and should receive wide attention. ■

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Steven Greenhouse

Mugged by the Boss

Wage Theft in America Why Millions of Working Americans Are Not Getting Paid—and What We Can Do About It

Kim Bobo

The New Press, \$17.95, 336 pp.

As a child growing up in Massapequa—the Long Island suburb where Jerry Seinfeld and Alec Baldwin were raised—I always viewed my community as patriotic and law-abiding. Ron Kovic, the crippled Vietnam veteran who wrote *Born on the Fourth of July*, came from Massapequa. So did Peggy Noonan, the Reagan speechwriter. The most popular restaurant in town was a burger joint called "All-American."

So I was rather startled to learn last November about some shameful, un-American goings-on in the community next door. According to the New York State Labor Department, a houseclean-

ing company in neighboring Amityville often had its 170 employees work sixty hours a week, but they sometimes took home less than \$100.

The company took all sorts of outlandish and outrageous deductions from the workers' paychecks. If a customer was not satisfied with the service provided, deductions were taken from the cleaner's pay. When the company did a promotional campaign offering discounted services, the discounts were often taken out of workers' paychecks. If an employee needed assistance on a difficult project, like cleaning carpets or air ducts, the pay for the additional worker was deducted from the paycheck of the employee who requested assistance. If a customer gave an employee a check that bounced, the company deducted money from the employee's paycheck to make up for the lost revenues. In these ways, the New York State Labor Department found, the company cheated its employees of \$238,581.



"The shareholders and I want to thank you workers and remind you that the meek shall inherit the earth."

In her stirring new book, *Wage Theft in America*, Kim Bobo shines a bright light on this often invisible, alarming phenomenon: the way thousands of employers across the nation systematically cheat their workers out of wages. Bobo is spot on when she writes: “Wage theft is not somewhere else. It is here, in my community and yours.” Bobo, the executive director of Interfaith Worker Justice, a labor-clergy group that battles for embattled low-wage workers, catalogs the myriad ways employers steal wages. They make employees work off the clock, make them work free their first week on the job, erase hours from their time cards, never pay them for their last week on the job, and make illegal deductions for uniforms and for driving employees from one work site to another.

“Although sometimes people have actually experienced wage theft themselves, they thought it was an isolated incident—one bad employer, one bad apple,” Bobo writes. “Unfortunately, the problem is at epidemic proportions.” She explains that wage theft happens not just to low-wage workers, but to many middle-class workers who, for instance, may be wrongly classified as supervisors so they do not qualify for time-and-a-half when they work more than forty hours a week.

As one would expect from the head of Interfaith Worker Justice, Bobo repeatedly reminds us how wage theft flagrantly violates religious teachings. The first four words in her book come from the Ten Commandments: “Thou shalt not steal.” And it shouldn’t be surprising if her book sometimes resembles a jeremiad, because she seems inspired by Jeremiah’s words: “Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice, who makes his neighbors work for nothing, and does not give them their wages.” Bobo also turns to the Qur’an for support: “Give just measure and weight, nor withhold from the people the things that are their due.” She bemoans the disappearance of the Catholic labor schools and Jewish labor lyceums of decades past, which taught tens of thousands of workers how to stand up and fight abuses.



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Bobo makes clear that wage theft is committed not just by small, fly-by-night firms, but also by managers at some of the nation's most prominent corporations, including Wal-Mart. Wage theft hurts not only workers, she explains, but also honest companies put at a disadvantage by competitors that undercut and underbid them by violating wage laws.

While she complains that wage theft has reached "epidemic proportions," I wish Bobo had tried harder to quantify, either in dollars or in the number of cheated workers, exactly how extensive wage theft is. Still, she does point to federal studies showing that only 40 percent of nursing homes complied fully with wage laws and only 22 to 70 percent of restaurants did (depending on the city), and that none of the nation's poultry factories did.

In her view wage theft grows directly out of several corporate strategies, among them expansion at all costs and maximizing short-term profits to please investors. One especially big problem, Bobo writes, is inadequate enforcement and inadequate penalties. Crooked employers know they are unlikely to be caught, and that, if they are, the penalties will be minor. "If a government agency handles a wage-theft case," Bobo writes, "the most likely 'penalty' is that the employer will have to pay the wages the employer should have paid in the first place. That is not much of a penalty."

In the 1940s, the Labor Department's Wage and Hour Division had 1,769 employees in the field, one for every 9,000 workers and every 203 workplaces. But now, Bobo notes, the division has only 750 investigators, one for every 170,000 workers and 9,000 workplaces. Making matters worse, workers who complain of illegalities often encounter unwelcoming government workers and a bureaucratic maze. A worker facing wage theft, safety violations, and sexual discrimination has to deal with three different federal agencies and file three different complaints.

Bobo presents a long menu of recommendations to beef up enforcement. Not surprisingly, she calls for greatly expanding the number of wage investigators,

increasing penalties, and targeting industries known for violations. She calls for streamlining procedures to make it easier to file complaints, and she says the government needs to make it clear that undocumented workers will not jeopardize themselves by filing wage complaints. She advises government agencies to work closely with immigrant worker centers and labor unions so those groups can serve as eyes and ears to help uncover violations.

"My dream for the book is that it builds awareness of the crisis of wage theft and stimulates the needed public will to stop it," Bobo writes. Many low-wage workers will no doubt pray that the new Labor secretary and Wage and Hour director will take her advice to heart. ■

Steven Greenhouse, the author of *The Big Squeeze: Tough Times for American Workers* (Anchor), is a reporter for the New York Times.

Edward T. Wheeler

Antiphonal Fiction

Diary of a Bad Year

J. M. Coetzee
Viking Penguin, \$24.99, 231 pp.

The South African writer and Nobel laureate J. M. Coetzee made his name in the 1980s with *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *The Life and Times of Michael K*, darkly elliptical fables that answered the oppressions of apartheid with a grim and comfortless intensity. Coetzee's fiction typically sets global issues against tight personal dramas of loss, desire, disgrace, and aging, and probes vulnerabilities beyond the merely human. A concern for animal welfare first appeared in a fictional essay, "The Lives of Animals," and was later incorporated into a

novel, *Elizabeth Costello*, as a subversive speech made by the title character. In *Slow Man*, Costello reappeared as a virtual *deus ex machina* to complicate the sexual and personal crises of the male protagonist, a solitary intellectual possessing many traits in common with his originator. Coetzee specializes in this sort of slightly off-center self-examination, using alter-ego fictional characters to present variations on his real self—or, conversely, writing about his real self in the third person, as in his two-part "fictionalized autobiography," *Scenes from Provincial Life*. In that work, the stance of detachment only served to highlight the writer's grave deliberations over his sense of self. Now similar deliberations inform and indeed structure Coetzee's novel, *Diary of a Bad Year*.

