

# The Economy of Desire

*Christianity and Capitalism  
in a Postmodern World*

Daniel M. Bell Jr.



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## Series Preface

Current discussions in the church—from emergent “postmodern” congregations to mainline “missional” congregations—are increasingly grappling with philosophical and theoretical questions related to postmodernity. In fact, it could be argued that developments in postmodern theory (especially questions of “post-foundationalist” epistemologies) have contributed to the breakdown of former barriers between evangelical, mainline, and Catholic faith communities. Postliberalism—a related “effect” of postmodernism—has engendered a new, confessional ecumenism wherein we find non-denominational evangelical congregations, mainline Protestant churches, and Catholic parishes all wrestling with the challenges of postmodernism and drawing on the culture of postmodernity as an opportunity for rethinking the shape of our churches.

This context presents an exciting opportunity for contemporary philosophy and critical theory to “hit the ground,” so to speak, by allowing high-level work in postmodern theory to serve the church’s practice—including all the kinds of congregations and communions noted above. The goal of this series is to bring together high-profile theorists in continental philosophy and contemporary theology to write for a broad, nonspecialist audience interested in the impact of postmodern theory on the faith and practice of the church. Each book in the series will, from different angles and with different questions, undertake to answer questions such as What does

postmodern theory have to say about the shape of the church? How should concrete, in-the-pew and on-the-ground religious practices be impacted by postmodernism? What should the church look like in postmodernity? What has Paris to do with Jerusalem?

The series is ecumenical not only with respect to its ecclesial destinations but also with respect to the facets of continental philosophy and theory that are represented. A wide variety of theoretical commitments will be included, ranging from deconstruction to Radical Orthodoxy, including voices from Badiou to Žižek and the usual suspects in between (Nietzsche, Heidegger, Levinas, Derrida, Foucault, Irigaray, Rorty, and others). Insofar as postmodernism occasions a retrieval of ancient sources, these contemporary sources will be brought into dialogue with Augustine, Irenaeus, Aquinas, and other resources. Drawing on the wisdom of established scholars in the field, the series will provide accessible introductions to postmodern thought with the specific aim of exploring its impact on ecclesial practice. The books are offered, one might say, as French lessons for the church.

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## Series Editor's Foreword

JAMES K. A. SMITH

One of the reasons “postmodernism” is misused and misunderstood is that the term is often associated with what we might call a “disruption thesis”: the notion that “postmodernism” names something entirely new and radically different—that postmodernism names a “now” that is somehow discontinuous with all that has gone before. When people hear “postmodernism” bandied about in this way, they look around, see an awful lot that is all too familiar, and dismiss such claims as overwrought, the sorts of things you can convince yourself of if you’ve spent a little too long in Left Bank cafés (or graduate school).

But the best thinking that employs the heuristic term “postmodernism” doesn’t subscribe to such notions of discontinuity. To the contrary: the subtitle of Fredric Jameson’s classic work, *Postmodernism*, describes it as “The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.” On this account, postmodernism is not *less* modern but *more* modern—a kind of *hyper*-modernism, the intensification of forces unleashed by a variety of “revolutions”: Copernican, Industrial; French, American; Digital, Sexual.

This is especially true in fiction: those sometimes described as “postmodern” novelists—Thomas Pynchon, David Foster Wallace, Don DeLillo—paint pictures of worlds dominated by consumption

and the unique malaise that characterizes “late capitalism.” Indeed, in Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*, time itself is organized by corporate sponsors. The calendar no longer belongs to the gods and emperors (Janus, Mars, Julius, Augustus) but rather is owned by corporations—the new divine powers. (Most of the action in *Infinite Jest* takes place in the “Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment.”) This world is “postmodern” not because it signals some romantic escape from the modern or some jarring break with modernity but because it is one completely saturated and dominated by the forces of modernity. Postmodernity isn’t a world where modernity has failed; it is the world where modernity is all in all. Or as Daniel Bell puts it below, it’s the world where “we’re all capitalists now.”

Most Christian thinking about discipleship and spiritual formation has failed to appreciate this reality. Indeed, much of contemporary North American Christianity not only blithely rolls along with these realities; in many ways, it also encourages and contributes to it with a vast cottage industry of Christianized consumption. By locating the challenges for Christian discipleship in arcane cults or sexual temptation or the “secularizing” forces of the Supreme Court, evangelicalism tends to miss the fact that the great tempter of our age is Walmart. The tempter does not roam about as a horrifying monster, but as an angel of light who spends most of his time at the mall.

These are lessons I first learned, in a significant way, from Dan Bell’s first book, *Liberation Theology after the End of History*. You might not guess a book of that title would strike such a “practical” nerve, but at the core of Bell’s analysis and argument is a concept that should revolutionize how you think about discipleship and spiritual formation: *desire*. And it is that core intuition that he translates and extends here in this new book, utilizing the theoretical resources in thinkers such as Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault that enable us to see anew just what’s at stake—and what’s going on—in the banality of consumption that surrounds us. Bell helps us to appreciate that there is an *economics* of desire—that our desire is primed and pointed by “technologies” that habituate us toward certain ends. The question isn’t *whether* we’ll be subject to an “economy,” but *which*.

Many Christians have failed to see what’s at stake in contemporary “postmodern” life—dominated as it is by a globalized market and the rhythms of consumption—because we still tend to think

that Christian faith is an “intellectual” matter: a matter of what propositions we believe, what doctrines we subscribe to, what Book we adhere to. And conversely, we tend to think of economics as a “neutral” matter of distribution and exchange. Because of these biases, we can too easily miss the fact that Christian faith is at root a matter of what we *love*—what (and Whom) we *desire*. If we forget that, or overlook that, we’ll also overlook all the ways that the rituals of “late capitalism” shape and form and aim our desire to worship rival gods. Hence Bell’s argument is not just critical; it is also constructive. He invites us to see the practices of Christian discipleship and the rituals of Christian worship as the lineaments of an alternative economy—a “kingdom come” economics that orders the world otherwise, bearing witness to the strange, upside-down economy of a crucified-now-risen King.

This book excites me not just because it will impact on-the-ground approaches to Christian discipleship but also because it should encourage a paradigm shift in how we stage conversations between Christian faith and economics. As Christian liberal arts education continues to grow and mature, we are seeing more and more mature Christian reflection across the disciplines, including economics. A burgeoning conversation at the intersection of Christian faith and economics—fostered by the Association of Christian Economists—would profit from critical engagement with Bell’s thesis and analysis, even though his model and approach will also challenge some of the working assumptions of the “faith and economics” paradigm. Bell has immersed himself in economic theory and made himself accountable to research beyond his discipline, so he can’t be dismissed as a mere amateur preaching from his theological soapbox. As he emphasizes below, he is not advocating some romantic, simplistic “withdrawal” from the market; nor is he suggesting that we somehow just “replace” economics with theology. Christian economists who want to disagree with Bell will need to work *through* his argument and analysis, and their foundational reflection on economics from a Christian perspective will be better for it.

I have long considered Dan Bell one of my teachers. My own thinking has been deeply marked by the impact of his work. And so it is a joy and a pleasure to now have his wise voice as part of the choir that is the Church and Postmodern Culture series. He invites us to nothing less than a *holy* economy.





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## Preface

The composition of this book has been for the author a long struggle of escape, and so must reading of it be for most readers if the author's assault upon them is to be successful,—a struggle of escape from habitual modes of thought and expression. The ideas which are here expressed so laboriously are extremely simple and should be obvious. The difficulty lies, not in the new ideas, but in escaping from the old ones, which ramify, for those brought up as most of us have been, into every corner of our minds.<sup>1</sup>

Thus the noted economist John Maynard Keynes begins his most famous work. In many ways it expresses my sentiments regarding this project. This was a difficult book to write, not because what it says is hard to grasp, but because the “old ideas” it challenges are so deeply ingrained in my life, character, and desire.

I take heart, however, from the words of the Brazilian theologian Jung Mo Sung, who observes that it is not the theologian who creates practices of solidarity and liberation, but the Spirit.

1. John Maynard Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (1936; repr., Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1997), xii.

To the theologian, he says, falls the work of critiquing that which obscures our perception of the Spirit's blowing and of sowing new categories that help better understand the Spirit's activity in our midst.<sup>2</sup> I should be delighted if this modest work contributes to the church's vision in that way.

To the extent that it does, it is due to the wisdom and examples of others who both think about and live this life far better than I. Included here is the work of Hugo Assmann, Franz Hinkelammert, Julio de Santa Ana, and Jung Mo Sung. I have learned much as well from conversations with Joel Shuman, D. Stephen Long, Kelly Johnson, Chris Franks, and Brent Laytham. I am also grateful to Chris Keller and the good folks at *The Other Journal* who invited me many years ago to wrestle with the kernel of ideas brought to fruition here.

Some of the ideas and material developed here first appeared in Daniel M. Bell Jr., *Liberation Theology after the End of History: The Refusal to Cease Suffering* (New York: Routledge, 2001), and "What Is Wrong with Capitalism? The Problem with the Problem with Capitalism," *The Other Journal* 5 (May 2005): 1–7. They are used by permission of the publishers.

Jamie Smith, the series editor, and Bob Hosack, at Baker, deserve more than a word of thanks for their long-suffering patience. The book is dedicated to Phil Baker, whose spirit exemplifies the generosity of God's economy.

2. Jung Mo Sung, *Economía, Tema Ausente en la Teología de la Liberación* (San José: DEI, 1994), 209.

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# Introduction

## What Has Paris to Do with Jerusalem?

### Welcome to Postmodernity

*Where am I?* I thought as I wandered lost through the spacious glass hallways, utterly confused and feeling more than a little like a rat in a beautiful maze constructed by some mad scientist for her amusement. The building was a fine example of postmodern architectural style—intentionally disorienting and illogically laid out, confusing the inside and the outside, space and order, and even time—as the carefully induced vertigo dissolved my meticulous calculations to arrive early at a meeting.

Other incidents struck me with increasing frequency: On the first day of class I walk into a room only to stop short, wondering what *year* it is because the folks gathered before me are attired in an eclectic array of clothing and hairstyles that span at least the 1950s through the 1990s. An email informs me a friend is involved in prosecuting a case of slavery in the very shadow of one of the most technologically advanced industrial areas in the country. A local school garners national headlines as professors argue over what constitutes great literature and whether and how many of Shakespeare's works should be required reading. As I walk through a town in Honduras, just minutes from a village where I saw gut-wrenching poverty, I pass by laptop computers alongside Mayan handcrafts on the sidewalk.

I sit down to relax, and the music on the radio sounds like a conglomeration of steel drums, a synthesizer, and whales. A student meets with me to complain that I do not appreciate that his style of thinking and writing is “nonlinear.” At the gym, contemplating my own petty troubles, I bump into a person whose job of several decades has just been sent overseas. At a political march, the group next to me is pretty clearly *against everything*, as they wander off down various random side streets singing and carrying on, oblivious to the direction and purpose of the march. I turn on the television and surf through one hundred-plus channels in search of news, and when I stop I cannot tell if I have inadvertently landed in the middle of a music video or my television has merely gone on the fritz as the screen jumps from the scene of horrible devastation wrought by a hurricane in a foreign country, to a sports car adorned with a model, to Christmas preparations at the Mall of America, to Hungarian folk music, to the sex life of penguins all in the space of a few minutes (because the talking head with the frozen expression remains the same during all these sound bites, I conclude it is the news and turn up the volume). A newsletter informs me my denomination is fighting over whether there are moral absolutes, and my local church is locked in a bitter debate over the appropriateness of contemporary music, casual attire, and a flexible structure to worship that deletes creeds and adds coffee and bagels.

There is a carnivalesque feel to postmodernity, a kind of anarchic exuberance, where all that was solid seems to melt into air, where the old order is submerged in disorder, where the traditions and foundations of the past seem to crumble into so many fragments that do not disappear so much as float on the chaotic surface of the tides and currents of a hyper-individualistic, hyper-libertine, hyper-suspicious age. And, the futurists tell us, the current volatility, uncertainty, and ambiguity are going to only intensify.<sup>3</sup>

## What Should We Fear?

For several hundred years, much of Christianity has been heavily invested in the project that was modernity. Desperate to find shelter

3. See Bob Johansen, *Leaders Make the Future* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2009), xiv.

from the remnants of a fading medieval order, Christianity embraced modernity's patterns of thought, its political arrangements, its economic organization. Furthermore, the church perceived itself to be one of the necessary pillars of the modern world, a crucial contributor to the success and flourishing of modern society. Whether it was a matter of contributing energy and ideas to solving the social problems of the day, Christianizing the social order, or serving as a custodian of spiritual values and safeguarding the soul of the nation by keeping prayer in schools, values in the family, God in the Constitution, Christ in Christmas, and the national borders well-armed against the bearers of atheistic and idolatrous ideologies, Christianity was deeply inscribed in the patterns and processes of the modern Western world.

Against the pagan philosophies of his day, the early Christian theologian Tertullian once famously exclaimed, "What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem?"<sup>4</sup> In the face of postmodernity, we may be tempted to repeat his rejection. Having identified so closely with modern forms, and having sanctified this relationship by bestowing on it *divine* sanction, the overturning of modern structures can hardly seem anything other than a frontal assault on the rock of faith by the shifting sands of chaos and anarchic relativism. Like Pilgrim in Bunyan's classic, we are tempted to merely pass through this (post)modern-day Vanity Fair, keeping our distance with a stridently defensive posture of steadfast endurance.

But is this fear and suspicion, this defensive posture, justified? After all, on the one hand, there is evidence to suggest that modernity was *not* as hospitable to a robust orthodox faith as was often presumed. We are beginning to see more clearly now that even as the church tried to "be relevant" and fit into the niche allotted it by modernity, even as the church sought to embrace the cultural, political, and economic forms and institutions of modernity, a high price was exacted for such accommodation. Certainly the end of modernity is *not* noteworthy for the triumph of Christianity; today it seems that the good news has been trivialized and marginalized to the point that the astounding truth of God with us cannot hold the attention of the typical young adult or teenager.<sup>5</sup>

4. Tertullian, *De praescriptione haereticorum* 7, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 3:246.

5. See the results of the National Survey of Youth and Religion as reported by Christian Smith and Kenda Creasy Dean. Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York:

On the other hand, postmodernity has declared itself much more open to religion. Whereas modernity accommodated religion so long as religion could show itself reasonable, not mysterious, or so long as it could deliver the votes, postmodernity places no such strictures on Christianity. In the carnival that is postmodernity, the sublime, the sacred, the charismatic, and the ecstatic may all join the ball.

Already we see the fruits of this postmodern congeniality to the theological in emergent church forms and practices. Worship, church architecture, and, increasingly, Christian political and economic positions are being permeated by postmodern currents and trends, from eclectic music styles, the recovery of premodern spiritual disciplines in contemporary forms, and flexible worship spaces that blur the inside and outside architecturally and electronically (via the Web, Twitter, etc.) to the embrace of pop culture and new political alliances and economic configurations that defy modernity's denominational, ideological, and national boundaries.

The suspicion of postmodernism, however, is not baseless. To the extent that the *postmodern* is actually *hypermodern*, it is in many ways an intensification of modern themes. Thus the carnival that is postmodernity remains a parody of Christianity that *uses* rather than *embraces* religion. It may be but a kind of postmodern Trojan horse, a postmodern form of co-optation and conquest of religion.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, while its openness to the theological differs from modernity's atheism, it remains problematic to the extent that it more closely resembles a renewed polytheism or perhaps even Nietzschean super-humanism than true openness to the supernatural.

## The Church and Postmodernity

What then are we to make of postmodernism? Should Christians embrace it or resist it? The Church and Postmodern Culture series

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Oxford University Press, 2005); Christian Smith with Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

6. The noted postmodern philosopher Slavoj Žižek, who has been at the forefront of engaging Christianity, is bluntly honest in this regard, asserting that the only way to fight the "obscurantism" that is the Christian religion is to embrace it, thereby taking it away from "the fundamentalist freaks"—by which he means anyone who actually believes it. See *The Fragile Absolute* (New York: Verso, 2000), 1–2.

is clearly premised on the notion that postmodernity has something to teach the church. As Jamie Smith says, referring to the nationality of the philosophers engaged by the series, it is offered as a kind of “French lessons for the church.”<sup>7</sup> This, however, could be misunderstood. For taking postmodern philosophers to church is not a matter simply of uncritically embracing them. Rather, it is about fostering a more discerning view of postmodernity. In place of a simple rejection of an unmitigated threat, this series presents postmodernity as an opportunity for the church to enhance its ministry and mission in, to, and for the world. Another way of putting this is to say, as Smith does, that we seek to avoid simple dichotomies that either demonize or baptize postmodernism.<sup>8</sup>

This is an especially important point to be clear about at the outset of this particular book because it engages the thought of two of the leading Marxist thinkers and vehement atheists of the late twentieth century. While it uses their work, it is far from simply embracing them. Instead, it attempts, in the words of St. Augustine, to “plunder the Egyptians” as the Israelites did on their way to the Promised Land. Christians have always drawn on and learned from the work of pagan philosophers, frequently putting their insights to uses and ends that they would not or could not have imagined.

In this case, I engage the thought of Foucault and Deleuze on human desire and the postmodern, capitalist economy as a contribution to rethinking and renewing Christianity’s relation to political economy. More specifically, I engage Foucault and Deleuze on desire and economy for the sake of recalling the ways the church’s life is part of a divine economy of desire—one that redeems desire from the postmodern capitalist economy that would distort desire in ways that hinder humanity’s communion with God, one another, and the rest of creation.<sup>9</sup>

## Capitalism and Christianity

Put simply, this work is a contribution to the conversation about the relationship of Christianity to capitalism with a postmodern

7. James K. A. Smith, *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 10.

8. *Ibid.*, 15.

9. Space limitations preclude directly addressing communion with the rest of creation. Nevertheless, this is an important dimension of the divine economy.



twist. Frequently, this conversation has unfolded in terms of the relative merits and demerits of capitalism and socialism and which economic order best corresponds to Christian beliefs and convictions. At one level, this book continues this conversation, although it changes the focus from capitalism versus socialism to capitalism versus the divine economy made present by Christ and witnessed to by the church.

While comparing ideas and beliefs is important, however, it is insufficient. This is where the postmodern twist to the conversation comes in, and where Deleuze and Foucault prove particularly helpful. For a long time, the conversation about the relation between capitalism and Christianity has presumed that getting our economic lives in order was primarily a matter of comparing and contrasting ideas and beliefs in order to decide which beliefs and ideas were best, and then simply willing ourselves to act on such beliefs and convictions. There are several problems with this approach.

First, capitalism is quite adept at absorbing critique, even packaging and marketing it as one more opportunity for acquiring profit. Thus, even where conflicting convictions and beliefs may be articulated, they do not necessarily generate change or resistance. Think of the way various “independent” musicians, who have prided themselves on their oppositional stance to the current social and/or economic order, have been thoroughly incorporated into the capitalist market as just another consumer good. Perhaps the most striking recent example of this ability to incorporate and then profit from critique was the marketing a few years ago of Ernesto “Che” Guevara—an icon of the modern Marxist and anticapitalist left—now reduced to a capitalist brand and promotional gimmick.<sup>10</sup>

Second, the moral life in any age, let alone a capitalist one, is plagued by the disconnect between belief and practice. This is to say, holding right beliefs or ideas is no guarantee of right actions. Thus Scripture speaks of practical atheists who profess God with their lips and yet deny God with their actions (Titus 1:16), and Paul famously recounts the conflict whereby one does what one does not want to do (Rom. 7:14–25). In addition to the problem of hypocrisy, there is also the reality that conflicting beliefs and

10. Naomi Klein gives example after example of this co-optation of opposition in her *No Logo* (New York: Picador, 2002).

practices can coexist in a life in a kind of unexamined juxtaposition, which some label a characteristic of “folk religion.”<sup>11</sup> This is to say, one can sincerely assent to various beliefs and convictions without ever reflecting upon how those convictions may be at odds with various practices and lived realities that characterize one’s life. Thus, for example, I could profess that Jesus is Lord or Christ is King without it ever crossing my mind, much less affecting my behavior, that such a profession might preclude my pledging allegiance to other lords or kings.

A third form of disconnection between belief and practice could be called the problem of the consumption of religion.<sup>12</sup> As Vincent Miller points out, the habits we learn as consumers in the market economy tend to carry over to other dimensions of life. Thus we are conditioned to approach religion as a commodity, as just another consumer good alongside toothpaste and vacation homes. Think, for instance, of the commonplace practice of “church shopping.” This is to say, capitalism encourages a shallow, decontextualized engagement with religious beliefs. Like the vast array of exotic cultural products from around the world that appear side by side on the shelves of the import franchise at the mall, in a consumer culture, beliefs tend to become free-floating cultural objects.<sup>13</sup> These objects do not require anything of me; they entail no particular commitment or engagement. They do not bind me to any particular people or community. Rather, they function only to serve the end(s) or purpose(s) I choose, which, in the case of religious choices, might include shoring up my self-image as “spiritual,” or providing meaning amid the stresses of my middle-class life or the right values for my children, and so on. (Consider the popular standard for evaluating worship: “Does it meet my needs?”) Reduced to a religious commodity, Christian beliefs can be held in the midst of a political economy that runs counter to those beliefs without any tension at all.

11. Roger E. Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2002), 18.

12. This section owes much to Vincent J. Miller, *Consuming Religion* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 84–94.

13. *Ibid.*, 84. This may go some way toward accounting for the eclectic character of much contemporary Christianity. See the discussion of the deregulation school of religion in *ibid.*, 92. See also Roger Fink and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America 1776–1990* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

It is at this point that the postmodern twist to the standard argument and benefit of engaging Deleuze and Foucault come to the fore. Although this book considers beliefs and ideas in order to counter in part the unexamined profession of beliefs that characterizes “folk religion” and in part the arguments of some Christian thinkers whose defense of capitalism depends on problematic theological claims, it moves beyond contested convictions and beliefs. Learning a lesson from Deleuze and Foucault, it moves beyond beliefs to consider the fundamental human power that is desire and how that desire is shaped not only by beliefs and convictions but also by practices and institutions. Indeed, in those places where I treat beliefs and convictions, the point is not simply to make sure we get our beliefs right. Rather, the point is to encourage examining the practices, habits, and institutions that constitute our economic lives and shape our desire.

## Which Capitalism?

At the outset it is worthwhile to say a word regarding what I mean by capitalism. Capitalism often goes by the name “free-market economy,” which is helpful insofar as it highlights the centrality of the market. Although markets of various shapes and sizes have existed for ages, with the advent of capitalism, the market becomes central to the life of the household and society.<sup>14</sup> Whereas markets existed as long ago as the Stone Age, they were by and large incidental to economic life—trading primarily in luxury items and various extravagances.<sup>15</sup> This pattern continued in the West until the later Middle Ages, when a money/profit/market economy emerged and slowly assumed a more important role in everyday life, bringing us to the cusp of capitalism announced by the likes of James Steuart and Adam Smith in the eighteenth century. As James Fulcher observes, “Markets, like merchants, are nothing new, but they are central to a capitalist society in a quite new and more abstract way. . . . Instead of being a place where you can buy some extra item that

14. See Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (Boston: Beacon, 1944), from which this paragraph is drawn. See also C. B. MacPherson, *The Rise and Fall of Economic Justice and Other Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 1–20.

15. See Lester K. Little, *Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978).

you do not produce yourself, markets become the only means by which you can obtain anything.”<sup>16</sup> Not only is the market central, but it is (or aspires to be) “free” as well, that is, free from external constraints and obstacles to its full and uninhibited functioning. Thus capitalism marks the advent of a world where, as Deleuze will argue, not only is the market central to everything, but everything is also subject to the rule of the market.

Identifying capitalism with the dominion of the market is an important but insufficient step in defining capitalism. After all, capitalism is not a monolithic entity, both in the sense that it has not remained unchanged since it first appeared (the dating of which is itself a matter of much debate) and in the sense that there are competing theories of what capitalism is and how it functions. Economists and others are fond of devising schemata for describing the various kinds and stages of capitalism. One can find capitalism linked to a nearly endless array of adjectives: primitive, advanced, late, anarchic, managed, remarketed, organized, disorganized, savage, casino, global, Fordist, post-Fordist, Keynesian, and neo-liberal, just to name a few.

Given the diversity of interpretations of capitalism, it is perhaps unavoidable that some will suggest that I have set up a straw figure, that my interpretation is dated and simplistic. However, notwithstanding the array of interpretations and existence of alternative schools of economics,<sup>17</sup> it is possible to identify a significant consensus on the foundational assumptions of contemporary capitalist or free-market economics. These are apparent in introductory economics textbooks as well as in the economists and theologians on which I draw. Moreover, notwithstanding the diverse schools of economic thought, there is widespread—indeed I am tempted to say “universal”—recognition that what goes by the name of neoliberalism is and has been the dominant theoretical and practical (as in policy-setting) vision since at least the late 1970s. As one economist puts

16. James Fulcher, *Capitalism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 16.

17. See, e.g., David L. Prychitko, ed., *Why Economists Disagree: An Introduction to the Alternative Schools of Thought* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1998), or Robert H. Nelson, *Economics as Religion: From Samuelson to Chicago and Beyond* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2001). See also Steve Keen, *Debunking Economics* (New York: Zed Books, 2001), 300–311. The extent to which alternative schools are indeed alternatives, and not merely variations on the dominant vision, is debated.

it, “The mainstream . . . is so dominant that the other streams have become mere trickles.”<sup>18</sup> As much as proponents of other streams may object, and whatever their future impact may be, the neoliberal vision continues to be the dominant paradigm of capitalism today.

Although the term “neoliberalism” first attained wide circulation as critics of capitalism in the global South used it pejoratively to refer to the “Washington Consensus”—that ensemble of policies and institutions supported by the United States for the sake of advancing the spread of capitalism around the globe—it has since become a common way of referring to the neoclassical vision of capitalism associated with the University of Chicago and especially Friedrich von Hayek and Milton Friedman.<sup>19</sup> Politically, it is associated with the economic agendas of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, as well as Bill Clinton and Tony Blair.

At its most general level, neoliberal capitalism is about the complete marketization of life. In particular, it is about overcoming the obstacles to and inefficiencies introduced into the market by the Keynesian or welfare-state economics of the previous generation and increasing the integration of the entire globe into the capitalist market. Although it is frequently cast as “antigovernment” by both its advocates and proponents, it is in fact fond of a lean, strong state that is “small” with regard to its interference in market processes while nevertheless retaining and even enhancing its strength for the sake of security, particularly in the face of threats to the market.

## Neither Escape nor Nostalgia

Having introduced what is meant by capitalism, it is only fitting to say a word about Christianity and how it is set against capitalism. Given that we are all capitalists now, as the theologian Michael Novak has observed,<sup>20</sup> and so certain habits of mind understandably

18. Stephen A. Marglin, *The Dismal Science: How Thinking Like an Economist Undermines Community* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 6.

19. See Enrique Dussel, *Ética de la liberación en la edad de la globalización y de la exclusión* (Madrid: Editorial Trotta, 1998), 574. For an introduction to neoliberalism, see Manfred B. Steger and Ravi K. Roy, *Neoliberalism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

20. Michael Novak, *The Catholic Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Free Press, 1993), 101.

incline one to think that the way things are is the way things must basically be, especially when the marketization of society is so deep and its bounty so integral to our lives, positing any kind of substantial conflict between capitalism and Christianity cannot help but appear to many as (irresponsible, unrealistic) escapism. Certainly it is the case that the Christian tradition contains within its folds voices and movements that thought that to withdraw or escape was indeed the prudent and necessary path in order to defeat avarice and associated economic vices. It is not my intent that my voice should be added to their number, not least because such withdraw, I believe, would be unfaithful to the church's mission in and for the world.

In a related vein, even as the critique of capitalism developed here draws on the precapitalist tradition, this is not symptomatic of a wistful nostalgia for a pristine past.<sup>21</sup> In this fallen world there is no pristine past; certainly the church has struggled with matters economic from the get-go, as the story of Ananias and Sapphira reminds us (Acts 5). Moreover, humanity has been given many goods—even if they have yet to be shared with all of humanity—in the age of capitalism, goods we would be foolish to refuse in any kind of effort to go backward.

Instead, I appeal to the past because in the church the past is never merely the past but always contributes to the present and the future. In other words, the tradition—be it the Bible, Augustine and Aquinas, the medieval monastics, or the mendicants—contributes to our present understanding and enhances the possibilities for acting and living differently in the world *today*. The tradition, if you will, is a kind of antidote to the overwhelming inertia of the status quo—the way it is is *not* the way it always has to be because it is not the way it has always been.

Appealing to a precapitalist tradition for the sake of opposing capitalism, however, is not just a matter of motivating us to do economic things differently. There are crucial theological claims being made about God and what God has and is making possible here and now.

Besides fleeing to the desert and going backward in time, there is another, subtle form of escapism that is properly resisted. As

21. For a critique of such romantic anticapitalism, see Julio de Santa Ana, *La práctica económica como religión* (San José: DEI, 1991), 15–16, and Jung Mo Sung, *Economía, Tema Ausente en la Teología de la Liberación* (San José: DEI, 1994), 99–100.

suggested above, capitalism is totalizing. The free market is a total market, a market that is at the center of life and society. By setting Christianity against this I am suggesting that the market should be neither total nor free. That is, it should not be the central institution in life and society, nor should its capitalist logic go unchecked. More specifically, I am suggesting that the market, and indeed the discipline of economics, should be subordinate to theological concerns.

Such a claim could be another form of escapism were it an attempt to construct an economy entirely from the confessions and traditions of the faith, bypassing altogether the discipline of economics and the wisdom of economists, not to mention that of laborers, managers, and owners who do not have the benefit of formal theological training.

This is not an effort to replace economics with theology or the market with the church. If in challenging the “total market” I might be said to be resisting “economics alone,” even as I turn to the tradition, I reject any kind of fideism that suggests economics can be a matter of “faith alone.” Rather, Christianity has always (if not universally and consistently) acknowledged the value of the gift of reason and so of the disciplines besides theology. Economics is one such discipline, and it has much to offer any effort to develop a theological vision and practice of economy. To take just one example, theologians and professional religious types are not infrequently accused of ignoring the general equilibrium results of the various and sundry proposals they espouse regarding social justice in economics. So in the name of charity or justice, they advocate rent controls so that poor persons may secure affordable housing, all the while oblivious to the possibilities that as a result, landlords will cut corners on maintenance or perhaps make fewer rental units available.<sup>22</sup> Put differently, deprived of hard-nosed economic analysis, too often religious efforts proceed under the illusion that solutions to various economic problems can proceed easily or painlessly.

Thus, even as I set capitalism and Christianity in opposition, I am not setting Christianity against economics in its entirety. Rather, I am suggesting that economics and economy are properly subordinated to theology in three possible senses, corresponding to three different

22. D. Stephen Long and Nancy Ruth Fox, *Calculated Futures* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), 32.

understandings of economics and economy. First, although the number is shrinking, many economists still insist that economics—like the free market itself—is a neutral, value-free enterprise that is amenable to most any ends.<sup>23</sup> The efficiency calculus at the heart of market economics does not care what you are producing, it is claimed; it simply provides a value-free assessment of whether you are producing it efficiently. To these folks I am suggesting that the ends of economy are not properly wide open, but given in the Christian confessions. Second, there are some who suggest that economics and economy are not in fact value free and morally neutral but rather depend on values supplied from the extraeconomic realms of culture and religion. To these I am suggesting that economics is subordinate to theology in the sense that theological concerns set the moral parameters for the functioning of the market (which would no longer be “free” in the classical sense). Third, some admit that economics is value laden and then argue that what is needed is a religion—Christianity, a church—shaped to serve those economic values. This is to say, theology should be subordinate to economy. I am suggesting just the opposite: the market economy should be subordinate to and so reinforce the virtuous life. For Christians the normative vision of economics should comport with Christian confessions and virtues.

Yet another form of escapism involves attributing too much significance to capitalism and its dissolution. Economists occasionally sound as if the market economy can solve all our problems. Critics of capitalism, likewise, can give the impression that all that stands between us and an era of prosperity and justice where the impoverished would be raised up and greed and envy would be no more is the abolition of capitalism. This work rests on no such illusion. Even as it is critical of capitalism, it does not begin from the premise that capitalism is the source of all evil. It is not the source of all poverty or economic injustice in the world. As the Christian tradition suggests—not to mention the tapestry of history—the peril of wealth, of the disordered desire that is avarice, precedes and will no doubt outlive capitalism. However, that capitalism is not the root of all economic evil does not mean that it gets a pass, any more than the suggestion that the poor will always be with us means we can safely ignore them.

23. See Marglin, *Dismal Science*, 173–75.



## Diaspora Economics

One might assume that opposing capitalism and escapism requires setting forth a blueprint for an alternative global economic order. While there is much in these pages that suggests the nature, dispositions, and practices that mark a faithful alternative to capitalism, the purpose and point is not to present a blueprint. Indeed, I suspect that there is not one single order but many forms of economic life that can aid desire in attaining its true end and rest.

Thus, rather than articulating a single alternative, the purpose is to provoke further reflection on the difference Christ makes to the economic life of those called as disciples of Christ. Said a little differently, it is not a blueprint for the world but a call for Christians to consider our economic lives in light of the faith we pray and practice. It is about the ordering of our desires so that we desire the good that is God and the role that economies play in that ordering.

In this regard, recall the Scripture where the prophet announces the expectation that even the household pots and pans shall be holy (Zech. 14:20). Such is the expectation not because God is a fastidious nag but because the material arrangements of our households—and incidentally, the original meaning of the word “economy” is the law or order of the household—matter. The material ordering of even the mundane tasks of our daily lives both reflects and shapes the desires of our hearts.

This, however, is only part of the story. If economy matters with regard to our loving God, then economy matters because if we love God, we will love our neighbors (1 John 4:20–21). For this reason, I suggested earlier that to withdraw would be unfaithful to our mission. Just as the Jews and early Christians were scattered (the Diaspora) for the sake of the spread of the good news of God’s favor toward all, so the church today does not seek to withdraw from the global economy to some desert but is intentionally in this capitalist world as a matter of witness or evangelism. Paul says we are the ones on whom the ends of the ages have come (1 Cor. 10:11). Discipleship is about the Christian community living now in accord with God’s economy in the midst of the worldly economies. This is to say, we labor and produce, acquire and distribute, buy and sell, trade and invest, lend and borrow, but we do so in a manner that is different from others insofar as we do so in a

manner informed by a desire schooled in virtues such as charity, justice, and generosity. This means that in many cases, our laboring and producing and acquiring and exchanging and investing and lending will look very different from that of disciples of the free market.

In this way, as we journey through this world and its economies, we hope others will see how we order our pots and pans, how we deal with material goods, and so turn and join us on our way in giving thanks to God in heaven, who is the giver of every good gift.

## Outline

This inquiry into the economic form of faithful discipleship in the midst of a postmodern capitalist economy begins with a plunge into Deleuze and Foucault in the first two chapters. Wading through their accounts of capitalism, the state-form, technologies of the self, desire, and so forth can feel like slogging through a foreign language and a strange land. But as John Maynard Keynes pointed out in the epigram that opened this book, the difficulty has as much to do with the depth and tenacity of the hold that the old ideas, the ways we are used to thinking about economy, have on us. The difficulty of thought in Deleuze and Foucault is part of the struggle of breaking free of old habits of mind, spirit, and body. They push us to bring desire and its formation to the forefront of our thinking about discipleship and economics in a postmodern world.

This leads to chapters 3–4, where capitalism is subjected to a moral evaluation. This evaluation, however, does not proceed in the usual way, asking *if* it works. Rather, it builds on the insights of Deleuze and Foucault and asks, What work does it do? How does capitalism shape human desire and so human relations with others, including God? The conclusion is that even if capitalism works and produces a superabundance of material goods, it is still wrong for the ways it deforms human desire and so warps relations with oneself, others, and God.

Chapters 5–7 appropriate the lessons of Deleuze and Foucault for the sake of envisioning the church as an alternative economy where desire is being healed by participation in the divine economy of God's eternal generosity. Chapters 5–6 introduce Christianity

as an economy of desire, and chapter 7 reflects on how Christian confessions and practices anticipate this renewed desire.

Chapter 8 introduces the practice of the works of mercy as the diaspora or pilgrim form that the divine economy takes in the midst of the world's economies.