

# The Mechanisms and Morality of Capitalism: A Brief Christian Critique

Dennis Hiebert, Providence University College, Canada

## Abstract

After centuries of near consensus among Western Christians about the virtuous merits of capitalism, the Great Recession of 2008 shook cultural confidence in it, and triggered a more honest and earnest debate about its morality. Reviewed here are sample Christian defenses of capitalism, Marxist critiques of capitalism, and Christian critiques of capitalism, all of which were voiced in the decade following the Great Recession. Focus is maintained mostly on the internal mechanisms or social structure of capitalism, not on the morality of individual capitalists operating within it. Drawing primarily on theological ethicist Daniel Bell Jr.'s analysis, ten characteristics of capitalism are then identified which constitute what he terms *homo economicus*, the capitalist's anthropology, and which contrast sharply with Christian moral imperatives. Concluding Christian assessments of capitalism point to the need for, and possibilities of, systemic economic change.

**Key Words:** capitalism, Christianity, economy, morality, social structure, desire

By the end of the twentieth century, most Western Christians felt vindicated by the collapse of communism, as Francis Fukuyama (1992) proclaimed the triumph of democratic capitalism to be “the end of history.” Many American Christians deemed winning the Cold War with the “evil empire” of the Soviet Union to be only the most recent historical validation of what they had long taken for granted. Capitalism was indeed God’s will for God’s people today. Max Weber’s (1958) well-known thesis explicated how, from the Reformation onward, the Protestant “ethic” had animated the spirit of capitalism. British sociologist Colin Campbell’s less-known *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumption* (2018) explicated further “how [Calvinist] theology and ways of life laid the groundwork for the later Romantic preoccupation with self and the self’s pleasures” (Clapp 1997:178). Thus until recently, Christianity and capitalism have been convergent for the large majority of their adherents in the global north, though not so much for Christians in the chagrined global south.

Other Christians, such as Catholic theologian Tom Beaudoin, had argued not that capitalism is conjoined with Christianity, but rather that capitalism functions as religion in itself. Though not a sociologist, he employed classic Durkheimian reasoning to posit that religion is defined functionally by what it does, not substantively by what it is. And what Beaudoin termed “theocapitalism” offers, in no particular order, “1) a consistent, coherent identity, in which you are told about your true self; 2) membership in a community; 3) an invitation to unconditional trust; 4) an opportunity to make meaningful a desire for ecstatic experiences; 5) an opportunity for mediation of faith through sacred images; 6) the promise of conversion, a new life; and 7) a way to satisfy one's restless heart” (Beaudoin 2002:366). If identity, community, trust, ecstasy, imagery, conversion, and satisfaction are deliverances of religion, capitalism certainly qualifies.

However, only two years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Craig Gay published *With Liberty and Justice for Whom? The Recent Evangelical Debate over Capitalism* (1991), the very same year that James Davison Hunter published his definitive *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (1991). Gay described the defense of capitalism by the evangelical right majority as a classic liberal-individualist paradigm of modernization, and the critique of capitalism by the evangelical left minority as a Neo-Marxist paradigm of economic imperialism and oppression. The evangelical center, Gay asserted, was torn between the poles, viewing capitalism as a “cause for concern,” but offering no alternative paradigm. And then, in the new century, the Great Recession of 2008 rocked Western cultural confidence in capitalism, and invigorated the Marxist countercultural critique of capitalism that had been slowly gaining voice since the social upheavals of the 1960s. Therefore, when the American sub-prime mortgage market triggered the global financial crash of 2008, offending many, defenders of the economic faith rushed to legitimize and even venerate the economic system, as grave questions about capitalism reverberated throughout a shaken populous.

## Christian Defenses

For example, in *The Virtues of Capitalism: A Moral Case for Free Markets* (2010), Scott Rae and Austin Hill argued that the economic crisis resulted primarily from the failure of powerful individuals to act virtuously, not from any glaring fault within capitalism itself. People who wielded great power to influence the economy had acted greedily, while the poor had acted irresponsibly, and therefore immoral individuals, not the economic system, were to blame for the excesses and failures. Unfortunately, this is much like arguing that patriarchy is a good social system, but bad guys give it a bad name. Furthermore, Rae and Hill lauded capitalism for the personal values it nurtures, highlighting creativity, initiative, cooperation, civility, and responsibility in particular. Unfortunately, this is not unlike arguing that organized crime nurtures the virtues of collaboration, loyalty, discipline, courage, and sacrifice. Hence their book was reviewed as “shallow” and “thin,” a “quick apologetic for capitalism” that

“lacked a robust examination of the first principles undergirding capitalism’s deepest assumptions” (Evangelical Outpost), and as “displaying a shameless ignorance of history, literature, and economics” (New York Journal of Books).

That same year, in *Money, Greed, and God: Why Capitalism is the Solution and Not the Problem* (2010), Jay Richards provided a slightly more substantial and certainly more commended Christian defense of capitalism. Writing as more of a scripture-quoting economist than a moral philosopher or theologian, Richards sought to dispel eight supposed myths that had cast aspersions on capitalism. First, contrary to the nirvana myth, there is no perfect economic system, and capitalism simply works better than other live alternatives or unrealizable ideals. Second, contrary to the piety myth, only our actions and their unintended consequences matter economically, not our good intentions, which Richards exemplified by asserting that free trade lifts people out of poverty more effectively than fair trade, and that child labor is better than leaving those children in the streets. Third, contrary to the zero-sum game myth, trade does not necessarily produce win-lose transactions, but can produce win-win transactions when it is free of deception or coercion, though he did not acknowledge how rarely those conditions of trade occur. Fourth, contrary to the materialist myth, the amount of wealth in the world is not fixed because wealth can be created, and wealth creation, not more equitable redistribution, is the solution to poverty.

Fifth, contrary to the greed myth, capitalism is built on the self-interest assumed in the Golden Rule, not on *The Virtue of Selfishness* espoused by Ayn Rand (1964), even while the free market transforms both the virtue of self-interest and the vice of greed into public goods via its trickle down effects. Sixth, contrary to the usury myth, charging interest on money lent is not inherently exploitative because it generates wealth. Seventh, contrary to the artsy myth, only materialism is ugly and sinful, not capitalism, and privileging local business hinders the free market, while consuming more than necessary is not the same as gluttony because bounty is a sign of God’s blessing. Eighth, contrary to the freeze-frame myth, resources are infinite, because a technological fix is created for every disappearing natural resource, and anyway, most people create more than they consume. Oh, but climate change is an actual myth.

Also that same year in the wake of the Great Recession, Neal Johnson published *Business as Mission* (2010), and a whole new global BAM movement began, seeking “to understand God’s redemptive work through business in the world,” and to “untap business resources in the church globally...for missional impact” (<http://businessasmission.com/>). Public policy think tanks, such as the libertarian Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty co-founded by Fr. Robert Sirico, stepped up their promotion of free market economic policy framed with Christian interpretations and applications of morality.

Two years later, Sirico published *Defending the Free Market: The Moral Case for a Free Economy* (2012), a treatise appallingly bereft of reference to the record of history. Exegetically, Sirico observed that “thou shalt not steal” only makes sense if the Bible is presupposing the

validity of private property, and “private property confers on individuals and families an area of autonomy that is necessary for human freedom and civil liberties” (2012:36). Theoretically, he described “a virtuous circle at work. Christianity...played a role in paving the way for economic globalization, and economic globalization then played a role in bringing more people in contact with other cultures and, with it, Christianity, which in turn brings more people into the fold of Christianity” (2012:79). Employing consequentialist reasoning, he conceded that greed will always be with us, but capitalism’s feat has been to provide the greedy with a means to convert private vice into public benefit, “a socially beneficent alternative to exploitation” (2012:82). In seeking to dethrone the “idol of equality” (2012:99), he argued that inequality does not matter morally, and is in fact a good and necessary aspect of an economic system that benefits everyone. In the end, Sirico gushed that capitalism “emerged from an exalted vision of man and his inherent and transcendent destiny” (2012:182).

More recently, Brent Waters extolled *Just Capitalism: A Christian Ethic of Globalization* (2016) while avoiding more sophisticated critiques of capitalism, and coming nowhere close to Dotan Leshem’s erudite theological genealogy of the secularization of capitalism in *The Origins of Neoliberalism: Modelling the Economy from Jesus to Foucault* (2017). Waters’ “principal contention is that globalization is the only credible means at present for alleviating poverty on a global scale. Consequently, a well-ordered global capitalism is compatible with such core convictions as a preferential option for the poor and promoting human flourishing” (2016:ix).

## Marxist Critiques

These sample Christian defenses of capitalism in the decade following the Great Recession were put forward in the face of an avalanche of academic publications predicting the collapse of capitalism. Influential authors such as James Galbraith (2014), Meghnad Desai (2015), Robert Gordon (2016), Richard D. Wolff (2016), and Giacomo Corneo (2017) documented the growing disillusionment with capitalism. Immanuel Wallerstein (2013), Randall Collins (2013), and Wolfgang Streeck (2014) gave capitalism at most a few more decades to live. Harry Shutt (2010) and Paul Mason (2015) already perceived the rise of post-capitalism. Of course, as early as 1850 Karl Marx famously averred that capitalism carried within itself “the seeds of its own destruction.” In mid-twentieth century, Joseph Schumpeter echoed the same “tendency towards self-destruction” in capitalist society, which would “inevitably” lead to its “decomposition” (1942:162).

Perhaps the most definitive description of the current crisis of capitalism is David Harvey’s *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism* (2015). The first seven contradictions Harvey detailed are “foundational,” the second seven are “moving,” and the final three are “dangerous.” Of the latter dangerous three, the first is capital’s need to accumulate and grow endlessly, expanding the commodification of everyday life. A zero-

growth, steady-state capitalist economy, Harvey observed, is a logical impossibility that “simply cannot exist” (2015:232). The second danger is capitalism’s intensification of the environmental crisis. “[W]e are now at a key inflection point in the exponential growth rate of capitalist activity” that is leading to “an increasingly cancerous spread and degradation in the qualities of capital’s ecosystem” (2015:253-4). This point was made most emphatically at the popular level in Naomi Klein’s *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate* (2014). The third dangerous contradiction is the fundamental tension developing between the logic of capital and the interests of the majority of the population. The only way capital could perhaps survive would be by “the mass genocidal elimination of much of the world’s surplus and disposable population while enslaving the rest and building vast artificial gated environments to protect against the ravages of an external nature run toxic, barren and ruinously wild” (2015:264). Restraining the remaining population would require “fascistic mind control and the continuous exercise of daily police surveillance and violence accompanied by periodic militarized repressions” (2015:264).

As a leading practitioner of modern Marxist scholarship, Harvey is in company with other contemporary scholars who not only critique capitalism, but also counter the popular notion of socialism. This rather simplified concept of socialism is conventionally taken to be the only alternative to capitalism, though what is usually referenced is more precisely the state socialism that was perhaps the greatest experiment in social engineering of the twentieth century, and otherwise known as communism. And surely nothing has been more anathema to most Western Christians. Communist regimes have been justifiably condemned for their brutality, but the crucial point is that they cannot be conflated with Marxism. It is no more valid to blame Marx for the communism of the twentieth century than it is to blame Jesus for the Spanish Inquisition of the sixteenth century. Neither is responsible for the distortions created and atrocities committed by their followers. There is an enormous difference between the small-scale socialism Marx advocated and the state socialism practiced by Soviet, Chinese, and other communist regimes. In fact, Marx protested that if state socialism was the manifestation of Marxism, then he himself was not a Marxist, because state socialism simply replaced one power elite with another, one oppressor class with another. So it is that Marx must be rescued from popular notions of Marxism, not unlike Christ must be rescued from Christianity, which is the Christian pursuit of political power for the purpose of implementing Christian positions as public policy (Sullivan 2006).

In *Why Marx Was Right* (2011), British scholar Terry Eagleton addressed ten common objections to the overall opus of Marx’s work. For each, he offered rebuttals by one or more of the following methods: 1) pointing out that the claim is irrelevant to what Marx actually said, 2) recognizing the truth in the claim and demonstrating how this truth is compatible with what Marx actually said, 3) pointing out that the negative consequences highlighted in the claim are often more evident in capitalism than in socialism, or 4) pointing out that the claim is simply

untrue. Nevertheless, the name Karl Marx now regrettably symbolizes to the general public much more and other than what his actual ideas convey. That he is commonly demonized by Christian capitalists is a measure of their desire to silence opposition by scapegoating him, however hastily and unfairly. But with the collapse of communism and the globalization of capitalism having now created the world economy detailed in Wallerstein's world systems theory (1974/2011), one that functions as "global governance without global government" (Stiglitz 2002:21), Marx's analysis is more relevant and accurate than ever.

Overall, the debate over capitalism is largely between supportive economists who focus on the productivity of the economic system, critical sociologists who focus on the social consequences of the economic system, and theological ethicists who are divided on the issue. Is capitalism an amoral economic system? Is it a neutral means toward an end that only becomes (im)moral according to the ends toward which it is put? Or are the inherent mechanisms of capitalism (im)moral in themselves, regardless of the ends toward which it is put? In addressing this issue, focus must be kept on the (im)morality of the economic system rather than on the (im)morality of individuals caught up in it. After all, it is just as possible to have good people operating in bad social systems, such as benevolent dictators, as it is to have bad people operating in good social systems, such as sexual predators in churches. We rightly do not accept the morality of an individual as the measure of the social system in which the individual operates, or vice versa. Nevertheless, the (im)morality of systems and individuals are mutually formative, and a capitalist economy molds the capitalist in profoundly moral ways. The social structure of capitalism shapes the agent within it, and the Christian agent is called to resist and reform the social structure of capitalism.

## Christian Critiques

Some scholars have implored the various religious traditions to add their perspectives and voices to the academic critique of capitalism. For example, the leading anthropology textbook *Global Problems and the Culture of Capitalism* (2019) ends with an ironic and irenic admission by the self-proclaimed atheist senior author that, in the end, humans will find no motivation to save what they find no reason to love – the earth and its people. The last paragraph of the book contains the stark realization that "without some moral, religious, or spiritual imperative, the kinds of changes that are required to solve the questions cannot be addressed with any sort of urgency, if at all....There must be some philosophical or religious foundation to impel us to restore our waning natural, political, and social capital" (Robbins and Dowty 2019:376). However, other scholars recognize already extant critiques of capitalism within the various religious traditions, to which academic perspectives and voices need to be added. Toward the end of *Seventeen Contradictions*, Harvey asserted that "[t]here is, I believe, a crying need to articulate a secular *revolutionary* humanism that can ally with those religious-

based humanisms (most clearly articulated in both Protestant and Catholic versions of the theology of liberation) to counter alienation in its many forms and to radically change the world from its capitalist ways” (2015:287). The searching, self-reflective question for Christians is whether they actually do preach and practice a “religious-based humanism,” or theology of liberation, or whether they are as complicit in capitalism, or more, than their irreligious neighbors.

More recently, in *Redeeming Capitalism* (2018), theological ethicist Kenneth Barnes contemplated not whether capitalism needs to be reformed, but rather whether it deserves to be reformed. Barnes noted how Adam Smith, the “father of economics” (Norman 2018), articulated the mechanisms and principles of capitalism in his seminal *Wealth of Nations* (1776) while assuming they would be embedded in the moral virtues he had articulated earlier in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759). Indeed, Smith was far from being a naïve advocate of a value-free market. But value-free is exactly what the free market has become, and Barnes, echoing Smith, argued eloquently that it can only be redeemed, and function redemptively, when capitalists are committed to the common good and guided by Christian virtues. Contending that capitalism is not beyond repair, Barnes concluded that capitalism must be salvaged, if only for want of a viable alternative.

In *The Economy of Desire: Christianity and Capitalism in a Postmodern World* (2012), Daniel M. Bell, Jr., the contemporary theological ethicist, not the twentieth century Harvard sociologist, made the case that capitalism is not just a mode of production, but an “economy of desire.” Bell confronted the neoliberal capitalism of Friedrich von Hayek and Milton Friedman (and its theological justification by Michael Novak) that produced “the complete marketization of life” (2012:10). But to the reader’s relief, he shifted the focus away from the tired capitalism versus socialism debates toward capitalism versus what he termed the divine economy. Ironically, Bell drew helpfully on the thick thought of two French, atheist, Marxist, social theorists of the late twentieth century (“What has Paris to do with Jerusalem?”) to make his case that capitalism is an economy of desire. Gilles Deleuze (1987) helps us to see beyond the macro-politics of statecraft that grounds reality in a static state of being, and to apprehend the “micro-politics of desire,” a dynamic, “infinite, multiplicity of becomings.” Michel Foucault (1980) helps us to see beyond a state-centered view of power, and to apprehend the relations of power always produced, present, and potent in all dimensions of life, from the social and civil to the personal and familial. As an illustration of Deleuze’s notion of desire and Foucault’s notion of power, Bell unpacks the driving forces behind the 1999 Battle in Seattle.

Furthermore, Deleuze outlined how the state first claimed sovereignty over the economy, then was reduced to regulating the economy, and now merely serves the economy. Foucault detailed how the technologies of domination and the technologies of the self combine to function as “governmentality,” what Foucault himself described as “the fascism in us all...that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us” (in Deleuze

and Guattari 1983:xiii). In Bell's words, we can "be enslaved to the capitalist market in a way that we actually want or desire that captivity, all the while calling it and claiming ourselves to be free" (2012:60). Obviously, this is not true freedom, but rather "a display of a different cultural logic or discipline" (2012:58). Bell's comparison of Mardi Gras revelers exulting in their "freedom," compared to the "freedom" of the sweatshop workers in China who make the Mardi Gras beads, is a gripping illustration of how capitalism forms and disciplines markedly contrasting desires.

Undoubtedly capitalism works, and together with industrialization has more productive capacity than any other economic system on human record. But *how* does it work? What are the mechanisms by which it produces goods and services? Moreover, what is the moral status of those mechanisms? Perhaps most searchingly, exactly what work does capitalism do? What does capitalism do *to* people, not just *for* them? And what are people ultimately *for*? If, as theological tradition has maintained, we are made for desiring and delighting in God and community, then privileging any other desire is disordered. Granted, every economic system addresses human desire, but the capitalist system works uniquely and powerfully in the cultural, social, and personal dimensions of life as well.

More than merely an economic system, "capitalist realism.... is more like a pervasive atmosphere, conditioning not only the production of culture, but also the regulation of work and education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action" (Fisher 2009:16). Consumer capitalism is a whole way of life that pervades all aspects of life, becoming a complete cultural ethos. Individuals in a capitalist system are encouraged to think of themselves first and foremost as consumers of goods and services, not as citizens who are members of a community for which they are responsible. Indeed, individuals are in fact constantly addressed as consumers by social institutions other than the economy, such as the polity, media, education, and all too often, religion.

Rodney Clapp wrote incisively about the history, character, and consequences of "the theology of consumption and the consumption of theology" (1997:169). Consumption has become a right, a therapy, and an identity, and individuals orient themselves to the world not just as consumers of material goods and social services, but also as consumers of experiences, relationships, ideas, and images. In *Capitalizing Religion* (2014), Craig Martin offered a compelling account of how being "spiritual but not religious" in particular, in which individual freedom of choice is sacralized, is driven by consumerist ideology. Hence Christian sociologist Os Guinness lamented "the 'commodification' of everything, the reduction of the human to the economic, behavior to self-interest, wisdom to 'cost-effectiveness,' success to 'productivity,' society to 'an arena for competitive individualism,' public life to the 'marketplace,' and human beings to 'consumers' and 'maximizers'" (1994:84).

Most recently, in *Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism* (2019), theologian Kathryn Tanner pushed further the question of what capitalism does to people in the process of

forming them into its image. However, though Weber concluded that the Protestant ethic's "elective affinity" with capitalism contributed to human flourishing, at least economically, Tanner concluded the opposite. The spirit of finance-dominated capitalism, she asserted, is inimical to Christian visions of human flourishing. Though she addressed economic inequality, structural under- and unemployment, and capitalism's unstable boom/bust cycles, her critique is focused insightfully on the alienating power of money, thereby echoing Marx. "In financial terms, money is the universal equivalent, the value that underlies that of every other commodity. For Christians, God is the universal equivalent of all objects of value in that their ultimate, underlying value is to enable all our pursuits to be turned toward God" (Pauw 2017:23). Instead of God putting every other good into perspective, in capitalism, money does, alienating humans from God.

### ***Homo Economicus***

Therefore, "it is entirely appropriate to ask if our lives are ordered economically in such a way that they nurture rather than corrupt desire, enhance rather than hinder faithful discipleship, and foster rather than obstruct communion" (Bell 2012:89). At the heart of Bell's analysis is an examination of the theological character of capitalism, "what it says about desire's nature and end, and the relation between the two" (2012:92). Raw, unbridled capitalism in truth at bottom orders our lives in such a way that corrupts rather than nurtures desire, hinders rather than enhances faithful discipleship, and obstructs rather than fosters community. The inherent means and mechanisms of capitalism, apart from whatever (ig)noble ends to which it may be devoted, contrast sharply with classic Christian conceptions of the person and moral human relations. A fuller picture of these means and mechanisms, or what sociology terms the social structure of capitalism, can be painted by adding four sociological characteristics of that structure to summaries of Bell's six characteristics of *homo economicus*, the capitalist's anthropology. Ten traits emerge, as follows.

#### 1. Autonomous Individuality

Classic liberal individualism sees the self as the primary reality, and thus as having priority over the community, which is merely the contractual relationships that individuals enter into in order to advance their self-interest. The capitalist is a self-made, possessive, detached, and ultimately alienated individual who values creativity and self-expression over community and obedience. In contrast, the Christian is a person who finds their meaning in the body of Christ, who holds the gifts of life loosely rather than as possessions, and who is intrinsically and intentionally dependent on God and others for their welfare.

## 2. Negative Freedom

The capitalist is free to choose, and indeed, considers the expansion of choice to be a virtue in and of itself. However, this freedom to choose is decidedly negative in that it is freedom *from* any kind of intervention or interference, instead of a positive freedom *for* any noble purpose. The Christian, in contrast, is free in Christ, released from the bondage of 'doing whatever I want,' drawn out of self-absorption, and responsive to the call of God and the collective good.

## 3. Maximized Self-interest

The capitalist believes that a free market will transform simple egocentric greed into shared public goods, and is thereby emboldened to maximize self-interest. Therefore, by the internal logic of capitalism alone, the capitalist cannot be held morally responsible to pursue directly the unity and well-being of humanity. Moreover, love and loyalty are simply inconceivable as economic motives, because any such obligation abolishes the freedom at the core of capitalism. In contrast, the Christian seeks the common good, understanding that nothing more can be done to advance our ultimate individual human interest which God alone secures. Hence work is about our vocation or calling, not about our wanting and gaining.

## 4. Insatiable Desire

The capitalist has unlimited wants and insatiable desire, and measures economic health not in terms of functionality or sustainability, but in terms of growth. More is always not only simply better, but necessary. The Christian, in contrast, concurs that "growth for the sake of growth is the ideology of the cancer cell" (Abbey 1977:183), and therefore inhabits a different, more spiritual space, resting in God, being satisfied with enough. As ancient sages put it, "[The one] who knows that enough is enough will always have enough" (Lao Tzu), whereas "nothing is enough for [the one] to whom enough is too little" (Epicurus).

## 5. Privatization of Property

The privatization of property is a cornerstone of neoliberal ideology. The capitalist cannot imagine why anyone would behave responsibly toward anything if they did not first own it as their personal property, and use it for their personal gain. So natural resources are privatized, because people only really take good care of material goods they own. Public institutions of the common good like schools, hospitals, and prisons, are recast as money-making opportunities for entrepreneurs. In contrast, the Christian views natural resources and public institutions as shared human rights that extend human flourishing in relationship, not as assets and enterprises to be exploited for the profit of private owners. Environmental sustainability is a collective mandate of creation, not the end for which private ownership is the most efficient means.

## 6. Commodification of Everything

According to Marx, a commodity is any good or service that is offered in exchange, anything that can be bought or sold. Prior to capitalism, commodities were produced so that they could be sold for money, which would then be used to purchase a different commodity that was needed ( $C \rightarrow M \rightarrow C$ ). But the capitalist uses money to buy a commodity, not to use the commodity, but to sell it again to acquire more money ( $M \rightarrow C \rightarrow M$ ). The actual properties of the commodity, or the human needs that it might meet, are effectively irrelevant to the capitalist. Other human beings are likewise commodified and valued according to their marketability in a coldly calculating, superficial, and transient fashion. The Christian, in contrast, values goods and services only for their inherent instrumental value, not the monetary value they might procure, and likewise refuses to reduce the immeasurable value of wisdom, citizenship, and public life to the monetary value they might fetch.

## 7. Surplus Value

According to Marx, surplus value is the difference between the cost of the materials plus labor that goes into creating a material commodity, and the subsequent price of its sale. This amount is determined by whatever the seller can get away with, based on the commodity's use value, scarcity, or the subjective personal sentiment or collective fashion attached to it. The inherent production and use value of the commodity itself thereby becomes irrelevant, as the contrived market value based on social relations determines its price of sale. The capitalist calls this surplus value the rate of profit, or the return on investment. The Christian calls it the rate of exploitation, because, while the rewards to labor are fixed and minimized as much as possible, the rewards to the capitalist are fluid and maximized as much as possible. As such, the capitalist gets something for nothing, taking out more than was put in, not unlike the robbery of organized crime. Add to this the practice of usury, which is charging interest on money lent. Usury simply dispenses with the bother of an intervening commodity, and uses money to make more money. It is forbidden by the biblical text, especially regarding the poor, it was denounced by the early church fathers, the medieval church, and the Reformers, but it is a pillar of modern banking and capitalism, and again is not unlike the extortion of organized crime.

## 8. Competition

The capitalist relates to others through the *agon* of competition, the struggle and conflict that at times degenerates into a commercial war of all against all. Human relations become merely contractual, a series of formal agreements between near strangers that are limited in obligations, temporary in terms, and voluntary in choice, altogether a far cry from neighborly. Worse, human relations also frequently become exploitative, using the other for one's own advantage, to their disadvantage. In contrast, the Christian relates to others as gifts

from God for the purpose of community, not merely as means or obstacles to the attainment of self-interest as determined by their market value. Sharing and solidarity are sought through non-competitive, complementary exchange, grounded in the ultimate mutuality and loyalty of covenant.

### 9. Personal Justice

The capitalist relates to others as if justice is strictly personal, and is realized when the terms of voluntary, contractual exchanges are fulfilled, not when any particular distribution of goods is achieved. Capitalist justice, like its freedom, is essentially negative in that it is concerned only with non-interference in free choice, not with positive duties or obligations. By itself, capitalism cannot imagine or comprehend social justice. That some people succeed and others fail through no merits or demerits of their own may be tragic, but it is not deemed unjust. And an unfettered market shows no mercy. The Christian, in contrast, has a “sense of justice as the nurturing of solidarity in the shared love that is the common good” (Bell 2012:174). Justice and mercy are not seen as opposing logics, because justice is about restoration, not a ruthless efficiency in calculating the distribution of what is due. Only when all are mercifully liberated from all that obstructs the fellowship of love has justice been realized. Therefore justice entails obligations and responsibilities to care for others, because justice at bottom is deeply social, not personal.

### 10. A Distance, Stingy God

Instead of the God from whom all blessings flow, the Giver of every perfect gift, the hidden God of capitalism is *deus abscondus*, present only in the divine providence of Adam Smith’s “invisible hand” of the free market. Accordingly, pursuit of self-interest functions sacramentally to transform private vice into public virtue. Instead of the real presence of “God with us” being active in redeeming us from sin here and now, as Christians maintain in every other moral realm, the God of capitalism redeems humanity only in the hereafter, because the justice and love of the kingdom of God are supposedly not of this world. The best we can do economically in the here and now is to manage sin stoically and do the lesser evil. Instead of the God of abundance who has given us all we need to flourish if distributed righteously, the God of capitalism compels us to exercise our creativity so as to remedy the scarcity resulting from God not having created enough. Yet in the absence of social justice, there is no guarantee that someone will succeed, or even survive. As Bell put it, “God is cast as a kind of sadistic cosmic Easter bunny, hiding stuff from humanity so that in competition to find it, individuals will develop various [capitalist] traits and capacities” (2012:116). Finally, instead of Jesus as Lord and the Spirit as healer of desire here and now, the God of capitalism casts the corporation as messiah, and Adam Smith as its prophet who taught us how to transcend zero-sum exchanges, embrace usury, and create wealth.

## Conclusions

The portraits painted here of the capitalist and the Christian respectively appear to be those of two different, opposite, alien creatures, but the ruse of the Christian capitalist is to combine them into one, instead of remaining either/or and mutually exclusive. Yet the sum total immorality of the internal mechanisms of capitalism is insidious and overwhelming. James K. A. Smith observed that “by locating the challenges to Christian discipleship in sexual temptation, or the ‘secularizing’ forces of the Supreme Court, evangelicalism misses the fact that the great tempter of our age is Walmart” (Bell 2012:10). Driven by contrived notions of scarcity, capitalism does not seek to heal desire, but instead exploits disordered desire, leaving those in its clutches far short of the fifty-nine compassionate “one anothers” in the New Testament, and in constant conflict with their neighbors. The egocentric short-sightedness of what Cornell West (2004) termed “free market fundamentalism,” and the consumer culture it spawned, is bent on making earth environmentally hellish for humans within the next generation, and therefore is perhaps the consummate expression of human depravity.

This is not just the “ideological” conclusion of Marxists in the academy, but equally that of multiple, honest, blunt Christian leaders whose tone is no less strident. A century ago, in *What I Saw in America* (1922), the British Catholic essayist G. K. Chesterton observed that

A wise man's attitude toward industrial capitalism will be very like Lincoln's attitude towards slavery. That is, he will manage to endure capitalism; but he will not endure a defence of capitalism. He will recognise the value, not only of knowing what he is doing, but of knowing what he would like to do. He will recognise the importance of having a thing clearly labelled in his own mind as bad, long before the opportunity comes to abolish it. He may recognise the risk of even worse things in immediate abolition, as Lincoln did in abolitionism. He will not call business men brutes, any more than Lincoln would call all planters demons; because he knows they are not. He will regard alternatives to capitalism as crude and inhuman, as Lincoln regarded John Brown's raid; because they are. But he will clear his mind from cant about capitalism; he will have no doubt of what is the truth about Trusts and Trade Combines and the concentration of capital; and it is the truth that they endure under one of the ironic silences of heaven over the pageants and the passing triumphs of hell. (1922:138)

A decade ago, in *Everything Must Change* (2007), Brian McLaren, a leading figure in the emergent church movement, drew on Joel Bakan's *The Corporation* (2005), who in turn drew on FBI consultant Dr. Robert Hare's six characteristics of transnational capitalist corporations: “1) they show a callous unconcern for the feelings of others; 2) they display an incapacity to maintain enduring relationships; 3) they show reckless disregard for the safety of others; 4) they manifest habitual deceitfulness, lying, and conning others when it is profitable to do so; 5) they fail to conform to social norms with respect to lawful behaviors, and 6) they demonstrate an incapacity to experience guilt” (McLaren 2007:197). Pointedly, these six characteristics were

drawn directly from the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV)*, and together constituted the diagnosis of psychopathology. But overall, McLaren described capitalism not merely as psychopathic, but as the economic prosperity component, together with the political and military components, of our collective Western suicide machine.

Then, a few years ago, Pope Francis personalized the stench of capitalism during a speech in Bolivia in 2015, reviling unbridled capitalism as the revolting "dung of the devil." Some biblical texts have been interpreted to suggest that capitalism is not just repulsive in itself, but combative with the cross. "Many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomachs (appetites), and their glory (fullness) is their shame" (Phil. 3:18-9).

Instead of smug complicity with this arguably greatest "principality and power" of the world today (Wink 1992), Christians ought to be at the forefront of working toward a truly virtuous economy. The communism of the twentieth century was the opposite side of the same coin, an equal and opposite immorality, but there are more Christian alternatives already in existence. The mixed economy of the modern welfare state would certainly seem to be one, as it was able to temper capitalism's worst features throughout most of the middle of the twentieth century (Corneo 2017). That globalized capitalism was able to begin dismantling the welfare state toward the end of the twentieth century, despite growing public disillusionment with the free-market system, says more about the egregiously aggressive nature of capitalism than about the merits of the welfare state, best modelled today by Scandinavian nations. Yet even state welfare merely attends to the victims of the free market without challenging the market, thereby enabling the market. In its impersonal and bureaucratic manner, state welfare also fails to nurture community, leaving givers and receivers disconnected strangers to each other. Government welfare "walls us off from one another such that we are in a sense responsible *for* each other but we are not responsible *to* each other" (Bell 2012:204).

Given the myriad political and ecological developments currently unfolding globally, such as the collapse of not only capitalism but democracy as well (Temelkuran 2019), the definition of a "viable alternative" economic system may well be reduced to whatever is a "survivable" system, likely much closer to the local, small-scale socialism that Marx envisioned. Toward that end, Scott Carlson summarized Harvey to be asking readers "to imagine an economy in which the necessities of food, housing, and education don't go through a profit-maximizing market system; in which money 'rots,' so it can't be hoarded; in which the pace of work slows down to accommodate creative endeavors and social life; and in which a 'zero-growth' economy is a desirable stasis, not a national emergency" (Carlson 2014:B13). Whatever its specifications, a truly Christian economy would surely bring "the conflict of humanity with itself, creation, and God to an end, re-establishing communion" (Bell 2012:185).

## References

- Abbey, Edward. 1977. *The Journey Home: Some Words in Defense of the American West*. New York: Plume.
- Barnes, Kenneth J. 2018. *Redeeming Capitalism*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Beaudoin, Tom. 2002. "The Church: Defender of Theocapitalism?" *Currents in Theology and Mission* 29(5):362–387.
- Bell, Daniel M., Jr. 2012. *The Economy of Desire: Christianity and Capitalism in a Postmodern World*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academics.
- Campbell, Colin. 2018. *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumption* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Carlson, Scott. 2014. "Mapping a New Economy." *Chronicle of Higher Education* 60(35):B11-B14.
- Chesterton, G. K. 1922. *What I Saw in America*. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company.
- Clapp, Rodney. 1997. "The Theology of Consumption and the Consumption of Theology: Toward a Christian Response to Consumerism." In *The Consuming Passion: Christianity and the Consumer Culture*, edited by R. Clapp. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
- Collins, Randall. 2013. "The End of Middle Class Work: No More Escapes." In Immanuel Wallerstein et al. *Does Capitalism Have a Future?* New York: Oxford University Press.
- Corneo, Giacomo. 2017. *Is Capitalism Obsolete? A Journey Through Alternative Economic Systems*. Harvard University Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. 1983. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translated by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translated by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Desai, Meghnad. 2015. *Hubris: Why Economists Failed to Predict the Crisis and How to Avoid the Next One*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Fisher, Mark. 2009. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Washington: Zero Books.
- Foucault, Michel. 1980. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, edited by C. Gordon. New York: Pantheon.
- Fukuyama, Francis. 1992. *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: The Free Press.
- Galbraith, James K. 2014. *The End of Normal: The Great Crisis and the Future of Growth*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Gay, Craig M. 1991. *With Liberty and Justice for Whom? The Recent Evangelical Debate over Capitalism*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

- Gordon, Robert. 2016. *The Rise and Fall of American Growth: The U.S. Standard of Living since the Civil War*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Guinness, Os. 1994. *Fit Bodies, Fat Minds: Why Evangelicals Don't Think and What to Do About It*. Grand Rapids: Baker.
- Harvey, David. 2015. *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism*. London: Profile Books.
- Hunter, James Davison. 1991. *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*. New York: Basic Books.
- Johnson, C. Neal. 2010. *Business as Mission: A Comprehensive Guide to Theory and Practice*. Downer's Grove, IL: IVP Academic.
- Klein, Naomi. 2014. *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate*. New York: Penguin Random House.
- Leshem, Dotan. 2017. *The Origins of Neoliberalism: Modelling the Economy from Jesus to Foucault*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Martin, Craig. 2014. *Capitalizing Religion: Ideology and the Opiate of the Bourgeoisie*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. 1850. "Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League." London.
- Mason, Paul. 2015. *PostCapitalism: A Guide to Our Future*. London: Allen Lane.
- McLaren, Brian D. 2007. *Everything Must Change: Jesus, Global Crises, and a Revolution of Hope*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.
- Norman, Jesse. 2018. *Adam Smith: Father of Economics*. New York: Basic Books.
- Pauw, Amy Plantinga. 2017. "From God-talk to God's Work. *Christian Century* 134(14):22-25.
- Rae, Scott, and Austin Hill. 2010. *The Virtues of Capitalism: A Moral Case for Free Markets*. Chicago: Northfield Publishing.
- Rand, Ayn. 1964. *The Virtue of Selfishness: A New Concept of Egoism*. New American Library.
- Richards, Jay. 2010. *Money, Greed, and God: Why Capitalism is the Solution and Not the Problem*. San Francisco: HarperOne.
- Robbins, Richard H., and Rachel A. Dowty. 2019. *Global Problems and the Culture of Capitalism* 7<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: Pearson.
- Schumpeter, Joseph A. 1942. *Socialism, Capitalism, and Democracy*. New York: Harper Bros.
- Shutt, Harry. 2010. *Beyond the Profits System: Possibilities for a Post-Capitalist Era*. London: Zed Books.
- Sirico, Robert A. 2012. *Defending the Free Market: The Moral Case for a Free Economy*. Washington: Regnery.
- Smith, Adam. 1759. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. London: A. Millar, A. Kincaid and J. Bell.
- Smith, Adam. 1776/2003. *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. New York, N.Y: Bantam Classic.

- Stiglitz, Joseph E. 2002. *Globalization and Its Discontents*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Streeck, Wolfgang. 2014. "How Will Capitalism End." *New Left Review* 87:35-64.
- Sullivan, Andrew. "My Problem with Christianity." *Time*. May 15, 2006.
- Tanner, Kathryn. 2019. *Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Temelkuran, Ece. 2019. *How to Lose a Country: The Seven Steps from Democracy to Dictatorship*. London: Fourth Estate.
- Waters, Brent. 2016. *Just Capitalism: A Christian Ethic of Globalization*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Wallerstein, Immanuel. 1974/2011. *The Modern World-System Vol. I-IV*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Wallerstein, Immanuel. 2013. "Structural Crisis, or Why Capitalists May No Longer Find Capitalism Rewarding." In Immanuel Wallerstein et al. *Does Capitalism Have a Future?* New York: Oxford University Press.
- Weber, Max. 1958. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- West, Cornell. 2004. *Democracy Matters*. New York: Penguin Press.
- Wink, Walter. 1992. *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.
- Wolff, Richard D. 2016. *Capitalism's Crisis Deepens: Essays on the Global Economic Meltdown 2010-2014*. Chicago: Haymarket.

**Direct correspondence** to Dennis Hiebert at [dennis.hiebert@prov.ca](mailto:dennis.hiebert@prov.ca)