

## BOOK REVIEWS

THE ECONOMY OF DESIRE: CHRISTIANITY AND CAPITALISM IN A POSTMODERN WORLD By Daniel M. Bell Jr., Grand Rapids, Baker Academics, 2012, 224 pp. \$18.95.

At the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, most Western Christians felt vindicated by the collapse of 20<sup>th</sup> century experiments in state socialism, and some proclaimed the triumph of capitalism to be the end of history. But during the economic crisis of 2007 and the Great Recession that followed, confidence in capitalism wavered and the critique of capitalism was revitalized, its relative moral merits and demerits again subjected to vigorous review. Outside of academia and the Christian left, capitalism had been mostly taken for granted as God's will for God's people today, the Protestant ethic itself having given rise to the spirit of capitalism, as Max Weber famously argued. Christianity and capitalism were coterminous for the strong majority of their Western adherents, and for their anti-Western opponents.

With grave questions about capitalism reverberating throughout a shaken populous, some defenders of the economic faith rushed to bolster the system. For example, Scott Rae and Austin Hill argued in *The Virtues of Capitalism: A Moral Case for Free Markets* (2010) that the crisis of 2007 resulted primarily from a failure of individual actors 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, much like only bad guys give patriarchy a bad name. Furthermore, Rae and Hill lauded capitalism for the personal values associated with and potentially developed by the system, highlighting creativity, initiative, cooperation, civility, and responsibility in particular. Unfortunately, this is not unlike arguing that organized crime nurtures virtues of collaboration, loyalty, discipline, sacrifice, and courage (neither is likening capitalism to organized crime a novel comparison). 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), "displaying a shameless ignorance of history, literature, and economics" (New York Journal of Books).

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

Fifth, capitalism is built on the self-interest assumed in the Golden Rule, not on the selfishness espoused by Ayn Rand (the greed myth), even while the free market transforms both the virtue of self-interest and the vice of greed into public goods. Sixth, charging interest on money lent is not inherently exploitative (the usury myth) because it generates wealth. Seventh, only materialism is ugly and sinful, not capitalism (the artsy myth), 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, resources are infinite, because a technological fix is created for every disappearing natural resource (the freeze-frame myth), and besides, most people create more than they consume. Oh, and climate change is a myth too.

Thankfully, other Christian scholars have done better than such crude, naïve, and self-serving theorizing. In *The Economy of Desire: Christianity and Capitalism in a Postmodern World* (2012), Daniel Bell Jr. (not to be confused with the late Harvard sociologist) effectively counters such facile contentions, gaining some sociological, theological, and ethical depth in the debate. Bell's project is part of Baker Publishing's "The Church and Postmodern Culture" series edited by James K. A. Smith. It focuses most properly on the morality of the economic system rather than on the morality of individuals caught up in it, two distinct and separate levels of analysis that are best not conflated. 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. But Bell's brilliance lies in showing how the two are nevertheless connected, and in particular how a capitalist economy moulds the capitalist in profoundly moral ways. His study is a classic example of how social structure shapes the agent within it, and how the Christian agent is called to resist and reform the social structure of capitalism.

Casual readers will be challenged by the dense and abstract social theory at the outset of Bell's treatise, and the equally heady theology toward the end, but they will be rewarded with a clear and concrete explication and exposé of capitalism in light of meatier Christian values sandwiched in the middle sections.

Bell confronts the neoliberal capitalism of Friedrich von Hayek and Milton Friedman (and its theological justification by Michael Novak) that produces "the complete marketization of life" (10). But to the reader's relief, he shifts the focus away from the tired capitalism versus socialism debates toward capitalism versus what he calls the divine economy. Ironically, Bell begins by drawing helpfully on the thick thought of two French, atheist, Marxist, social theorists of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century ("What has Paris to do with Jerusalem?") to make the case that capitalism is not just a

---

mode of production, but an economy of desire. Gilles Deleuze 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” (42). Michel Foucault 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 outlines how the state first claimed sovereignty over the economy, then was reduced to regulating the economy, and now merely serves the economy. Foucault details 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” (59). 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” (60). Obviously, this is not true freedom, but rather “a display of a different cultural logic or discipline” (58). His comparison of Mardi Gras revellers 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 has more productive capacity than any other economic system. But Bell’s more searching question concerns exactly what work capitalism does. 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, capitalism is a complete cultural ethos. 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” (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” (92).

Bell contrasts six characteristics of *homo economicus*, the capitalist’s anthropology, with classic Christian conceptions of the person and human relations. First, the capitalist is an autonomous, self-made, possessive, detached, and finally alienated individual who values creativity and self-expression over obedience and communion. In contrast, the Christian is a person redeemed by the body of Christ, intrinsically dependent on God and others for welfare, who holds the gifts of life loosely rather than as possessions, and who takes no usury from others. Second, 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 interference or intervention, instead of a positive ‘freedom for’ any particular object,

---

end, or 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 good.

Third, the capitalist is a self-interest-maximizer who, by the internal logic of capitalism alone, cannot be held socially responsible for any substantive notion of a shared purpose or a common good that unites humanity. Love is simply inconceivable as an economic motive, because any such obligation or constraint 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 human interest that God alone secures. Hence work is about vocation or calling, not about wanting and gaining. Fourth, the capitalist has insatiable desire and unlimited wants, and measures economic health not in terms of full functionality or sustainability, but in terms of growth. More is always simply better. Yet as Edward Abbey put it, "Growth for the sake of growth is the ideology of the cancer cell." The Christian, in contrast, inhabits a different, more spiritual space, rests in God, and is satisfied with enough.

Fifth, the capitalist relates to others through the agony of competition, through struggle and conflict that at times degenerates into a commercial war of all against all. Human relations are distorted into increasingly viewing everyone as a dehumanized commodity, persons who exist for one another only in an instrumental fashion that is coldly calculating, superficial, and transient, persons who are valued primarily according to their marketability, profitability, and consumability. Human relations then become contractual, that is, 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. In contrast, the Christian, relates to others as gifts from God for the purpose of communion, not merely as means or obstacles to the attainment of self-interest as determined by their exchange or market value. Sharing and solidarity are sought through non-competitive, complementary exchange, grounded in the ultimate mutuality and loyalty of covenant.

Sixth, 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 attained. 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, it cannot comprehend or imagine social justice. That some succeed and others fail through no merits of their own may be tragic, but it is not unjust. "An unfettered market system shows no mercy" (174). The Christian, in contrast, relates to others with a "sense of justice as the nurturing of solidarity in the shared love that is the common good" (174). Justice and mercy are not opposing logics, because justice is about restoration, not a ruthless efficiency in calculating the distribution of what is due. Only what best promotes the communion of humanity in divine love is of God. 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.

---

Just as capitalism distorts the Christian conception of the human and human relations, so too it distorts the Christian conception of the divine. Instead of the God from whom all blessings flow, the Giver of every perfect gift, the hidden God of capitalism is *deus abscondus* who is only present in the divine providence of Adam Smith's "invisible hand" of the free market. According to its logic of unintended consequences, 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 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 that 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 we will succeed or even survive. "God is cast as a kind of sadistic cosmic Easter bunny, hiding stuff from humanity so that in the conflict and competition to find it, individuals will develop various (capitalist) traits and capacities" (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.

To critique capitalism does not necessarily obligate one to supply an effective alternative – if one were readily available it would have surfaced by now – though Bell does not shrink from the challenge. But here, predictably, like all theorists before him, he is less convincing in suggesting an alternative system for providing daily bread. In a chapter entitled "Is Another Economy Possible? The Church as an Economy of Desire," Bell writes not about the eradication of desire, but about the (re)forming, deepening, redeeming, and healing of desire in the kingdom of God at hand, not just in the future. This involves disciplines of renunciation and stewardship such as those practiced in medieval monasticism. In a chapter entitled "The Economy of Salvation," Bell asserts that "the atoning work of Christ is indeed an economic act. It is a movement of the divine economy of plenitude, ceaseless generosity, and superabundance. As such it runs counter to every economy that operates on the basis of scarcity, debt, desert, and a strict accounting of what is due" (152). While this is rousing, though at points opaque theology about the social and spiritual realm, Bell does not make clear how this economy would be implemented and enacted as an actual societal economy responsible for literally putting food on the table.

In the end, Bell is not categorically opposed to a free market economy, and seeks only to put it in its place, limiting it by prohibiting usury, by providing just prices and just wages, by basing the value of material commodities on their usefulness instead of the market, by recovering a sense of enough, and by accepting responsibility for the common good. Though Bell does not acknowledge it, this sounds much like the welfare state, except that he does not want it practiced at the level of the state. Instead, he urges the pursuit of historic Christian "works of mercy" beyond mere personal philanthropy and state welfare. Capitalist philanthropy offers no critique

---

of market arrangements, and serves only to “launder” its profits by diverting attention away from how those profits were made, winning admiration for philanthropists, and insulating them from questions of justice. At its core, mere philanthropy is mostly about the self-expression of the giver, and a product and privilege of private ownership, private interest, and private desire. It severs giving from mutuality, failing to create, extend, or renew human relationships, or build community. In contrast, works of mercy are neither private nor optional, but public and expected of everyone as acts of justice, not pity.

So too state welfare merely attends to the victims of the market without challenging the market, thereby enabling it. 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” (204). Alternatively, works of mercy in the divine economy are all the opposite, by being personalist yet public, by being concerned with more than meeting basic needs, and by not operating according to a strict logic of merit. They are evident in practices of simplicity and solidarity, exercising hospitality and sanctuary, and calling for the restructuring of the global economic system. Bell cites the Catholic Workers Movement, the New Monasticism, the Economy of Communion, Seeds of Hope, Church Supported Agriculture, and fair trade among others as examples of the truly righteous way forward. Today, he would likely add the emerging peer-to-peer sharing economy that exchanges goods and services through our advanced communications technologies.

Overall, Bell brings theological ethics to bear on capitalism far more incisively and lucidly than conventional Christian defenders and advocates of capitalism have done, as numerous reviewers have noted. The resultant critique shatters smug Christian complicity with arguably the most powerful social force in human life today. But Bell could have gone further. In challenging how the unintended consequences of capitalism somehow supposedly transform private vice into public virtue, he could have drawn more attention to how the economic system that led to not only unprecedented but heretofore unimaginable production and consumption has brought us to the brink of environmental apocalypse. If everyone in the world consumed as much as the average American, it would require 4.2 earths. Many environmental scientists are now saying that the option of sustainability is already a historical moment past, and that at the current rate, the earth will become humanly uninhabitable somewhere between 2030 and 2045. In its selfish short-sightedness, free market fundamentalism and the consumer culture it spawned is bent on making earth hellish for humans within the next generation, and thus is perhaps the ultimate expression of human depravity. As Chesterton put it, a wise person “will not endure a defence of capitalism,” but will instead “clear (their) mind from cant about capitalism,” knowing that it “endures under one of the ironic silences of heaven over the pageants and the passing triumphs of hell.”

In his forward to Bell’s book, series editor James K. A. Smith observes astutely that “by locating the challenges to 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" (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 human flourishing and in constant conflict with their neighbors. "There is neither peace nor rest from the agony of the market" (185). Only a truly Christian economy brings "the conflict of humanity with itself, creation, and God to an end, re-establishing communion. Christ is our peace, breaking down the walls of hostility, putting an end to the agony of sin (Rom. 6:11; Eph. 2:14)" (185).

Dennis Hiebert  
Providence University College