

*Theological Reflections on the Spirit of Capitalism*¹

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Introduction

According to the federal Treasurer, Peter Costello, Australians are living in economic paradise right now. Apparently the times we live in are completely unprecedented in the history of our nation. Average household income is at its highest level ever. The rates of both unemployment and taxation are at the lowest they has been in forty years. The community, in other words, is absolutely awash with money and jobs, money and jobs that allow us to exercise our potential as free individuals on a scale never before seen in this country. Surely there can be no doubt that the Prime Minister's vision of Australia as a 'relaxed and comfortable' nation has been fulfilled. Capitalism, the economic system based on the exchange of goods and services in a (mostly) free market, is finally delivering what Adam Smith (the modern theorist of capitalism *par excellence*) promised it would deliver: the kingdom of God on earth!

What you will not hear Howard and Costello talk about, however—except with great reluctance—is the miry underside of all this apparent wealth and freedom. In his very sobering book, *Affluenza*, Clive Hamilton points out that while average weekly incomes are indeed higher than they have ever being, Australians are also more indebted than they have ever been. So while our houses are four times the size they were in the fifties (when our families were four times the size they are now), and while we increasingly drive what used to be called 'prestige' cars, most of this expense is met not from our savings, but from scarily huge bank loans. Add to this the stubborn persistence of genuine poverty in Australia. According to the Australian Council of Social Services, a massive 13% of Australian families live in poverty, with the most vulnerable groups being Aboriginal people, people with disabilities or chronic illnesses, and the persistently under-employed. Of course, many of those who live in poverty are members of more than one of these groups. Like my father, for example, who is a member of all three. I could go on to talk about the psycho-social significance of the fact that we are at war with ourselves in the figure of the Middle-eastern or Muslim 'other', and that we disown our own moral failure in the shape of off-shore processing-centres for asylum seekers, but that is a story for another time.

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Suffice to say, for now, that what we are dealing with here is the very nature of capitalism as a system that works off the phenomenon of surplus value. You will recall the classical description of Marx in *Das Kapital*: capitalism is that system by which a surplus-value is generated through the exchange of goods and labour which, precisely by that exchange, is alienated from its origin and reinvested for the sake of creating yet more surplus value. In strictly Hegelian terms, then, Capitalism's inexorable drive towards the ever-greater accumulation of surplus-value inevitably incurs various figures of loss or alienation as its underside or anti-thesis. Like monetary debt or poverty. Like the depletion of natural resources. Like the effects that are usually referred to as 'anti-social behaviour'. All of this is well-trodden ground. But what I would like to discuss with you tonight is a somewhat more disturbing effect of this dialectic: that the insatiable hunger for surplus-value necessitates not only the exploitation of existing resources but also the exponential production of the very hunger that creates these debts. Capitalism, in other words, thrives on the production of an ever increasing desire for a phantasmal 'real' that it can never actually deliver. Which means, for the purposes of tonight's *theological* investigation, that the usual description of logic of capitalism as essentially materialistic is quite mistaken. Because the only substance that capitalism actually delivers is a disembodied hunger or desire, the real terminus of capitalism, its 'real-referent' if you like, is actually *nothing*, nothing material, nothing real, but a phantasmagorical *geist* which, finally, has nothing to do with the salvation of this world. What I shall finally argue, then, is that the spirit of capitalism is the most modern form of the ancient Gnostic heresy, which sought to transform the essential materialism of the Christian gospel into an other-worldly spirituality of escape and this-worldly negation.

The materialism of the gospel

That the gospel made known in Jesus Christ is essentially a materialist gospel may, perhaps, come as a surprise to some of you, especially if you are accustomed to thinking about the faith as a kind of inner orientation or attention toward a disembodied personality or presence called 'God'. You will forgive me if I take a moment to disabuse you of that understanding by summarising what I understand of the primitive Christian community's understanding of the matter.

First, there is a recognition in the New Testament that the God of Jesus Christ is not a different God than that of the Jews. The first Christians were, as you now know, Jews. They therefore inherit from the Jewish people an understanding of God as one who has promised to

be with and for God's people always—down amongst it, in the nitty-gritty of their very fleshly, material lives—even if they often fail to do the same for God. What Christians then add is this: that the clearest embodiment of the covenanting God of Judaism is the particular life of Jesus of Nazareth. Here the often mysterious God of the Hebrews comes to dwell in human form and flesh. What Christians learn, in Jesus, was that God was not only with and for us *in spirit*, as it were, but that God was also with us *in the flesh*, living the very life that we live, respecting its limitations and yet showing us how those limitations may be transcended. What Christians learn from Jesus was that the God of the Jews has a human face, that this God does not abandon us to the tragic consequences of our greed, our pride, or our lust for power over others, but comes to remonstrate with us, passionately, in the form of a very human life that is able to encounter and experience exactly how powerful these forces can be.

Second, the God of Christians is a God of *love*. Perhaps you have heard that before. But let me pause for a moment to reflect something of what a *Christian* means by love, for love in its modern and post-modern incarnations is seldom the same as Christian love. First, in the Christian lexicon, love is first an imitation of Christ's radical form of friendship, the willingness to lay aside one's own life in order that another's life may flourish. It is, in the words of Paul Ricoeur, the apprehension that the other person has a claim on me, and that I am no longer responsible only for myself, but that I share in the responsibility to insure that the life of my brother or sister is able to flourish as well, to become what God intends that it may become. Second, the language of laying down one's life refers, of course, to a particular history: the real, materially tangible, event of Christ's crucifixion. It should be remembered, however, that the crucifixion represents not just the love of a singular man at a particular time, for a particular community. The crucifixion is a sign in the world of the communal love of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit for every single creature, in every time and place. The cross enacts in human history what the event we call 'God' has been like, and will be like for eternity: love. A third point is this, that Christian love is not a spiritualist ideal, hanging in the heaven like the 'platonic love' of the Greeks. It has form and shape and a particular history in the world. And that is really what the language of 'commandment' is about, in the New Testament. Christians are commanded to love not because God is a bully and they are his slaves. On the contrary, as the Jesus of John's gospel says, Christians are no longer slaves of God, but friends; but this is only the case insofar as they are willing to love particular, that is *real*, others. The command to love, you see, is also (and somewhat paradoxically) the means by which God frees us from our bondage to self. If Christians did

not love, they would still be slaves to all that our selves are apart from Christ—a series of basic, and seemingly irresistible, drives derived from DNA, from family, from the capitalist system, or where-ever. In love, however, we learn to listen for another voice. The voice of God, who alone knows how it is that human beings may flourish. The command to love is therefore, in its most basic form, an apprehension of the *pressure* God exerts, within the real material world, towards our freedom, our liberation towards life not only for ourselves, but for the people around us as well. The command to love reminds Christians that love cannot be what human beings would like it to be. Love can only be what God is. A costly pressure within the world of bodies toward justice, peace and reconciliation.

Third, the God of Christians is a *human* God. This is implied in what I have said already about the identity of Jesus. Karl Barth put it something like this: in Jesus we learn that God has chosen to *become Godself* in, with, and as a human being. What this means is that the very great distance between creatures and the creator has been overcome, not ontologically (not, at least, in the static sense in which ontology was understood before Heidegger), but existentially. In Jesus we learn that God freely chooses to embrace humanity, even to the point of becoming human, and therefore submitting to the very worst that human beings can do to one another. Yet, this is done not for the sake of some kind of powerless solidarity that is not able to do anything about our situation. God does this, rather, because God is love. God traverses the very great distance in order that we may know this, and therefore realise the power of this love to transcend our limitations and *actually and really* embody the divine love in a way that repeats and prolongs the transformation of created life that took place in Jesus of Nazareth.

The significance of the Johannine insistence that Christians are those who acknowledge that Jesus has come in the flesh, and thus bear witness to an irreducibly *embodied* grace and truth is born out, also, in the essential nature of the Christian community as a liturgical assembly, whose ‘work’ is nothing other than a repetition of the divine story of God-in-Christ within the concrete embodiments of political life. The dismissal of Paul’s image of the church as the body of Christ as a ‘mere metaphor’ therefore misses the point. The church is indeed the body of Christ in ‘transubstantiated’ form: that fleshly community in which the Spirit of Jesus is actually celebrated and suffered. ‘Celebrated’, because the church embodies an alternative political practice where all people, even those who are as ‘nothing’ to the capitalist system, are recognised as valuable because God has declared them valuable. ‘Suffered’, because the capitalist system neither understands nor values the ethics of embodied love, and therefore

attempts to push the actual communal practice of such virtues out into an invented nether-world of what we call ‘private’ beliefs and practices which have no bearing on the ‘really real’. The disappearance of ‘public’ Christianity in modernity is therefore a symptom of this pressure: only where Christian truth is preached and lived as ‘public’ truth is the body of Christ actually alive.

The Gnostic heresy as the ‘spirit’ of capitalism

Contrast all of that with the essentially spiritualist soul of ‘gnosticism’. You will recall that the Gnostics, in various ways, were essentially pessimistic about the world we actually inhabit. They saw the fleshly life of human beings as not only fallen and flawed, but also irredeemable, incapable of transformation. They therefore dreamed of ways in which human beings might ‘take flight’, departing the historical world of flesh and suffering, for a world of pure spirit in which the terrible gravity of flesh could be done away with forever. At the centre of the gnostic spirit, then, is a particular kind of desire: a desire for a real that never actually presents itself within the nitty-gritty of the lives we actually live.

Slavoj Žižek has written about the soul of global capitalism as a contemporary form of the ‘gnostic heresy’. Unlike the essentially materialist spirituality of the New Testament—which understands that spirituality should not be dissociated from the lives we actually live in human communities, so that spiritual desire is properly directed at material, embodied outcomes—global capitalism inscribes a form of desire which actually brackets out our real lives by producing a desire that is directed at nothing that is real, except perhaps desire itself. For what capitalism produces is the desire for desire. We are induced to desire something, and to realise that desire by going out to buy it. But at the moment we buy it, we realise, instead, that we do not really possess what we really desired. All that we have is desire itself, which will then drive us to go and buy something else, which will again turn out to be nothing else but a chimera and shadow of the Real Thing. Desire itself then becomes the substance of a post-modern kind of spirituality: the experience of passing from one object of desire to another without ever really finding what you are looking for. Of course, if the object of desire is not real, not flesh and blood but a disembodied sense of nothingness in which desire finally ceases to produce itself, then the only way to achieve that is to disappear into nothingness through self-medication or the mantra-like repetitions of dance clubs or neo-Buddhist meditation practises. But of course, in the spiritualities of capitalism, New Age or Western Buddhist as they usually are, these respites from desire are actually ways of keeping the desire

for desire alive. They are carefully designed illusions by which a person can be 'refreshed' for a renewed engagement with capitalism. They are the religious practices that you have when you don't have a religion that can actually release you from the never-ending production of desire.

In this environment, the success of a novel like *The Da Vinci Code* is completely understandable, is it not? For what *The Da Vinci Code* gives its readers is an experience of being 'spiritual' without being religious, that is, actually engaged in the communal practice of the faith of Christ in the church. It pretends to let the reader in on a 'secret' about the real nature of Christianity. Our desire for a spirituality that can help us escape from the banality of our lives is aroused. But of course, in the end, the 'secret' is nothing that makes any real difference to the way we live. It is not an alternative way of life that is *really* able to save us from our addiction to desire itself. Instead, we are left with the tantalising sense that we have glimpsed something important, that we could perhaps find out more about by going to see the movie or buying more books, or perhaps consuming some other pastiche of religious goods. What *The Da Vinci Code* promises is exactly what the gnostics promised: salvation through the discovery of a secret. But of course, as with the gnostics, the 'secret' is just an experience that you have to produce for yourself, over and over again and in ever-more novel ways because, in fact, there *is* no secret that has any real, flesh and blood, reality. The secret is nothing other than an insubstantial nothing, so alien that it can have no real impact or gravity in the real world of flesh and blood.

Christians claim that the Real has come to visit us in Jesus of Nazareth. They also claim that the Real continues to be with us in the flesh and blood reality of the Christian community, which is the body of Christ in which his Spirit continues to dwell. Desire, for Christians, is not about the discovery of a secret. The secret is already out. Nor is it about the production of the desire for desire, as in the spirit of capitalism. No, Christianity has always provided the moral foundation for our most trenchant critiques of capitalism. Nor is Christian desire directed towards an alien reality that is somehow beyond this world. No, Christian desire is directed very much at the transformation of *this* world of flesh and blood after the flesh-and-blood model of human love that was revealed in Jesus and in the early Christian communities. For Christians, there is no escaping this world though some kind of secret knowledge. There is only the possibility of transformation, a possibility inscribed in the irreducibly material and bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

David Bentley Hart has observed that capitalism not only has a spirituality as its secret core, but this spirituality is actually non-materialist, a project which—far from aiming to transform this world into the image of justice and reconciliation inscribed in the body of Jesus Christ—actually aspires to an escape from this world into the disembodied nihilism which functions as the hidden supplement of every version of modernity. Capitalism is therefore the arch-enemy of Christianity, and should be resisted even to the point of martyrdom, which represents, of course, the holy foolishness of the crucified in a system obsessed with ‘nothing but its own creations’: a phrase (as Jacques Lacan would have it) that hides its own true meaning and supplement: that the purpose of the system is, precisely, to create nothing—and to do it over and over again, mechanically, in an eternal return of the same.

The surplus of grace that swallows up nothingness

This eternal mechanical loop of capitalism, that can only produce the nothingness it already is, suggests a potent analogy between the Gnostic impulse and the ‘Western Buddhist’ notion of ‘karma’. Karma is the power of necessity, the *compulsion* we feel to ‘get ahead’ by paying our dues, working hard, and keeping our patrons happy. It is that constant feeling that we have not really produced what the system promises we can produce. It is the surplus of desire over production. Of course, we would not feel such compulsion unless we believed in karma ourselves, if we did not *want* to get ahead, if we were not already *invested* in the very system that enslaves us because we believe it will reward us. Yet this is where most of us are. Compelled, entranced, invested. Yet, the karmic system can only ever lead us to despair, for it condemns us to reap only what we sow. It is like capitalism, which delivers to us only what we produce ourselves – images of the real, but not the real itself. The real eludes us, for we are not God. We cannot create even ourselves, let alone what we need for happiness or peace!

Christians believe that there is another power in the world, the power of grace! Grace is the opposite of karma or capitalism or Gnostic nihilism. It is a different kind of surplus: the surplus of uncreated blessing. It is like the blessing of children of which the Psalmist speaks. Children cannot be produced by the machinations of our human longings, needs or planning. They are not a reward for our labour or a right to be possessed. Children come, as many of you know very well, as a sheer gift from God, without reason or foretelling. Children are therefore signs to us of grace, that condition of blessedness and peace which comes not from ourselves but from somewhere other, from God. Grace is that which comes to question, to interrupt, to displace and even destroy the cycle of despair which is karma. With the gift of

grace, we reap what we have *not* sown, and live in the power of that which we have *not* produced or made for ourselves. In grace we experience the love of God shown in Christ's self-sacrifice. In Christ, God is totally for us, even to the point of so identifying with us in our karmic cycle of despair that he suffered the full consequence of what that cycle produces: nothingness, and only nothingness.

Of course, having given itself over to nothingness and to death, grace is not exhausted. It rises, from the power of its own superabundance, and proceeds to infect the karmic system like a virus which cannot be quashed. In the gospel story, this power or property is called resurrection. It is the perseverance of love in the face of death and despair, the never-depleted surplus of possibility over necessity. For Christ himself, and for all who follow his way of the cross, it is only by dying to the demands of the capitalist system that we shall find ourselves free of its determinations. For while we are indeed part of the system we inhabit, and should never pretend otherwise, that system need not possess us thereby. For we are Christ's, and our truest selves are hidden with Christ in God, as the apostle says. Therefore we are being freed from the desire to get ahead, to succeed in terms determined by the law of karma. We are people who know a love which is stronger even than death, and the gift of a life and future we have not produced. Therefore we choose, over and over again, in all the minutiae of life, to serve God in our neighbour, without thought of cost or ego. For the price is already paid. What can karma produce in us that Christ has not already given?

You should all go and see what Hollywood is doing these days. A system of karmic despair if ever there was one, it has nevertheless been infected with the virus of grace. The last *Matrix* movie is called *Revolutions*, the third volume in a three-fold re-telling of the gospel as I have proclaimed it today. In that story, it is at the precise moment when the new Son of Man, Neo Anderson, gives himself over to the power of karmic inevitability, that the revolution begins. As he lies crucified upon the power of the machines, absorbed, it seems, into the power of the same old thing, a miracle begins to happen. What was absorbed begins to absorb. What was dead now begins to infect the whole system with life. What had been given away now returns more powerfully to inhabit all the world, bringing light and life and peace where once there was only darkness, death and enmity. This is what grace can do to capitalism, if we surrender ourselves to its logic with absolute trust and abandon.

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