

The Ellul Forum

For the Critique of Technological Civilization

Issue 44

Fall 2009

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“One of the results of capitalism . . . is the subservience of being to having. This result makes allegiance to capitalism virtually impossible for a Christian. For it is not a by-product . . . To the contrary, it is the inevitable consequence of capitalism, for there is no other possibility when making money becomes the purpose of life.”

-Jacques Ellul
Money and Power
(1954; ET 1984), p. 20

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For the Critique of Technological Civilization

Founded 1988

The Ellul Forum is published twice per year, in the Spring and Fall. Its purpose is to analyze and apply Jacques Ellul's thought to our technological civilization and carry forward both his sociological and theological analyses in new directions.

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Publisher

The International Jacques Ellul Society
www.ellul.org
P.O.Box 5365, Berkeley CA 94705 USA

Dues, Subscriptions, & Payment Options

The Ellul Forum is sent twice per year to all members of the IJES. An annual membership/subscription, anywhere in the world, costs US \$20. Please send check or money order (e.g., international postal money order) drawn in US funds for \$20 to "IJES", P.O.Box 5365, Berkeley CA 94705 USA---or make payment to "IJES@ellul.org" electronically at www.paypal.com. Be sure to note your address and the purpose of your payment.

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From the Guest Editor

Over the past fourteen months, capitalism has been in the news. Failures and restructurings of banks, significant drops in stock indexes, and the reshaping of the U.S. automobile industry have put workers and investors on edge. Some readers may have lost jobs in the past year, and most of us know people who have become unemployed or fear that they will be soon. Many people's retirement funds have diminished considerably. Institutions that we have counted on as being part of the fabric of our lives may have been forced to reduce services or even close. Despite recent declarations of recovery, it has not seemed like "business as usual" for those whose lives are intertwined with global capitalism.

Yet, from the point of view of certain schools of social thought, capitalism promotes this kind of convulsion. Different types of Marxism offer variants on the doctrine that the productive capacity of capitalism is based on the impoverishment of workers, sooner or later causing supply to outstrip demand and precipitating a business crisis. Even those who think that Marx got many things wrong may wonder what sort of guidance is in place to cause lenders to extend credit to projects which are trustworthy in a deeper sense – not just able to repay their loans, but promoting the long-term well-being of people and the planet.

This issue of *The Ellul Forum* looks at capitalism and life in the business world from various points of view, recognizing that it is a continuing and sometimes controversial part of our technological civilization. First, I examine Jacques Ellul's views of capitalism from the angle of the theological doctrines and social analysis behind them, showing some places where I think he leaves questions open. Next, Nekeisha Alexis-Baker's essay, edited from a presentation she has given to church groups, seeks to raise consciousness of the religious dimensions of the rhetoric and realities around investing, work, and consumerism. Finally, Bryan Winters speaks from the point of view of one who has worked in software marketing and is becoming distressed at the difficulty of rational communication in an environment where image-based spectacles are expected. Together, they show the continuing relevance of Ellul's thought on many issues – from money itself to secular religions to the properties of word and image – for economic life.

Virginia W. Landgraf

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Capitalism in the Thought of Jacques Ellul: Eight Theses

by Virginia W. Landgraf

Virginia W. Landgraf is a lay theologian in the Reformed tradition who works as an indexer-analyst at the American Theological Library Association in Chicago. Her theological education was at the Graduate Theological Union (M.A., systematic theology, 1995) and Princeton Theological Seminary (Ph.D., Christian ethics, 2003). Her dissertation focused on the role of institutions in Jacques Ellul's theology and sociology.

The purpose of the following theses is to outline how capitalism fits into the overall schema of Jacques Ellul's thought. They are intended to serve as a springboard to further work in theology and social analysis.(1) The first three are about Ellul's thought in general and serve as background for those more specific to economic life.(2) They are included because our judgments about whether he is right or wrong there affect how we evaluate his views of capitalism.

Thesis 1: The problematic that runs through all of Ellul's theological and sociological work can be expressed as follows: "How can truth break into a world in which the realm of reality is becoming more and more closed in upon itself?"

Ellul defines the order of truth as having to do with "the final or ultimate destination of the human being," as well as debates over meanings, purposes, values, and decisions with ultimate significance. The order of reality has to do with "that which is seen, counted, quantified, and situated in space." It also includes abstractions from particulars that can be depicted visually or manipulated quantitatively. Ellul believes that each of these orders has its characteristic mode and sense by which our mind receives it. Questions or judgments about truth are primarily communicated by the spoken word and received by hearing; realities are transmitted by

visible objects or images, perceived by seeing. Each order also has its own characteristic logic. Arriving at truth requires time and includes a dimension of mystery, and words allow multiple interpretations. Reality requires space, definability, and unequivocity. Claims within the realm of truth are backed by the personal word of a committed witness; within the realm of reality, they are backed by impersonal evidence. The position of the self with respect to the world is different within the two orders: waiting for the other and giving the other freedom when it is a question of truth, but grasping at the world outside oneself and manipulating the other when it is a question of reality. The former is a stance of love, the latter of power.(3)

Given this distinction, Ellul's sociological works depict the realm of reality closing in upon itself and increasingly drawing human beings into its machinations: the contemporary technical phenomenon as a matter of the absolutization of quantitative knowledge and effects;(4) propaganda as a phenomenon whereby words are detached from a committed subject and used to manipulate behavior (reality);(5) politics as impervious to values because it is driven behind the scenes by the technical phenomenon;(6) the growth in the power of the bureaucratic state, abstracted from any personal ruler, to manipulate a similarly abstract citizenry;(7) etc. His theological works express hope that Truth, the Word of God, may break into such closed systems (8) and disappointment that Christians have grasped at visible structures within the realm of reality (moral and legal codes, institutions, political accomplishments) (9) instead of being open to where God might be calling us next. Occasionally Ellul's sociological works include hypotheses about how vicious circles may be reversed or descriptions of characteristics societies should have to meet the challenges that they encounter. Examples include his

call for contemplation in *Autopsy of Revolution* (10) and the argument from information theory in *The Political Illusion* that resilient societies must include a diversity of components and room for dialogue among them.(11) Both of these examples presume the idea that the realm of reality needs transcendent input to avoid becoming a vicious cycle that consumes human beings.

Thesis 2: Ellul's statements about the absoluteness of quantitative judgments gain their force not from the inner logic of mathematics but from Ellul's belief that a desire to grasp at reality is intrinsic to fallen human beings.

Ellul states that because the difference in size of two numbers cannot be changed by anyone, methods which are based on quantitative results are similarly indisputable.(12) This inference ignores the fact that many mathematical equations have more than one solution. Another factor of decision must be introduced to narrow down the results to a single number or point. These decisions may be forced not by the calculations of technicians but by the mass psychology of the technical phenomenon: “the larger one” (or, as the trend became later, “the smaller one”) or “the faster one.”

Ellul believes that the inner structure of our minds as we encounter the realm of reality drives such decisions. All human beings, he thinks, have in our minds an image of us as possessing and manipulating reality. This image intervenes with our immediate experience of the visual, quantitative, abstracted realm to make our relationship with our environment into one in which we are the subjects and the environment is the object. Eventually, we construct a world surrounding ourselves in which everything is made by people. Yet, as we realize our dependence upon this environment, we are struck with horror.(13) Further attempts to master this environment perpetuate this vicious circle.

Because multiple solutions exist for many quantitative problems, the belief that people have this image in our minds seems to function as a proxy for original sin in Ellul's sociological work. It intervenes between temptation to manipulation (seeing reality) and the manipulation itself (grasping at it). Its presence helps explain why Ellul sees societal trends based on the manipulation of quantitative or abstract data as so impervious to claims from the realm of truth.

Thesis 3: Ellul's absolute disjunction between love and power and his doctrine that God characteristically works through love rather than power make it hard to conceive divine action as working directly through mechanical sociological or economic processes to create positive goods.

Ellul believes that the Truth who can ultimately break into closed systems of reality is the God who created the world, chose Israel, became incarnate in Jesus Christ who died for humanity's sins on the cross, and will ultimately purge the world of evil in the last judgment. The ultimate purpose of human life is to be in relationship with this God and obey this God's commandments.(14) Among these commandments are “Thou shalt not kill”(15) and commandments to love one's neighbor and enemy. One caught in a cycle of grasping after reality risks drowning out the word of God with concerns over finite things and crushing other members of creation by the desire to possess them.

Ellul thinks that both divine action and the interaction with creation that God wants from human beings are expressible in terms of love, not power. In Ellul's doctrine of divine action, God does not pre-ordain the future but takes human decisions into account when intervening in history and when building the new Jerusalem.(16) God knows what is best for human beings and intervenes in blocked historical situations, using natural and historical forces and human decisions to upset the existing imbalance.(17) When Ellul links blind historical forces to God's activity, he is usually talking about God's judgment, not God's continuous maintenance of the world as in a more conventional doctrine of providence. God may turn aside and be silent,(18) and then the workings out of mechanical processes (e.g., violence begetting more violence) are a way that God's judgment falls on those who choose means which are unfitting for creatures created in the image of a God of love.(19) God suffers when creatures experience these punishments,(20) but God does not indefinitely wallow in the fallen creature's condition. In Jesus Christ God has taken on the condemnation that creatures deserved, showing that God's will is for pardon beyond the temporary chastisements and for the ultimate redemption of creation. This process of bringing human beings to account, which might be termed “benevolent coercion” (although Ellul never uses this term), is consummated in the last judgment, in which every human being is stripped of works which are opposed to God's will. Ellul believes that God has the power to damn creatures but has

renounced it.(21) He thinks that instances that look like manipulative or crushing power in the Bible – such as the Flood or the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah – are recorded precisely because they are abnormal.(22) Ellul sees the character of God's love revealed and accomplished not by such acts but by a stance of “non-power,” e.g., Jesus' decision not to use power to defend himself (Matt. 26:52-54).(23)

This disjunction between power and love – with benevolent coercion hovering implicitly in the background but not thematized by Ellul – raises a fundamental question relevant to economic life. Does God ever work through mechanical sociological processes *non-paradoxically* (i.e., not as the “judgment” term in the sequence bad direction – judgment – redirection) to create positive goods? Doctrines of providence that include such a component have been common among Christian apologists for or opponents of capitalism, whether they point to Adam Smith's doctrine of the “invisible hand” or believe that God is working through class struggle described along Marxist lines. Yet Ellul does not take that route. He refuses to call his doctrine of divine action “providence” because he thinks such a term implies mechanical or totalitarian determinism.(24) Furthermore, as the following theses will show, what many of his predecessors and contemporaries call “progress” Ellul sees as trends wherein God seems increasingly silent.

Thesis 4: Ellul thinks that neither work nor progress are worth the trust that modern ideologies (capitalist or socialist) have placed in them, either on the basis of biblical revelation or concrete results.

Ellul does not accept the myth that work brings abundant life. From a material point of view he finds its track record poor. He accepts the findings of Georges Hubert de Radkowski and others that poverty was not widespread in primitive societies, but when work for hire available in a society increased, poverty increased also.(25) He thinks that the modern exaltation of work dates only to the eighteenth century and is associated with a certain ideology of happiness (*bonheur*) associated with material comfort.(26) Ellul sees this increased standard of living as more of a temptation or a curse than a boon. Even were this level of material well-being available to all, the same problems of grasping for it and being horrified at it apply as with any other element in the realm of reality. (Here they are expressed as a preoccupation with achieving or maintaining one's material security.) Moreover, Ellul

sees the industrial production methods that have brought increased levels of material comfort as leading inevitably to the proletarianization of some (see thesis #5).

Ellul thinks that the Bible justifies no ideology of work as virtue or freedom, contrary to modern ideologies promoted by capitalistic bourgeois, socialist or fascist governments, or even the church. Before the fall, human beings' interactions with creation resembled play more than work. Our relation with creation became toilsome as a result of the fall, and we aggravate our burden by trying to save ourselves through our work. Work is simply one of the necessities of life and should not be sacralized. The occasional warnings in the Bible that spendthrifts or idlers will lack material sustenance are recognitions of how the fallen world works, not exaltations of work as heroism.(27)

Mea Culpa

Because of editorial mistakes, a number of errors were introduced in Erik Persson's *Cybergnosticism Triumphant?* in *Ellul Forum* issue #43 (Spring 2009).

- Erik Persson's credentials were not correctly stated in the article. Whereas he worked as an assistant professor at the Department of Informatics at Lund University during 2003-2006, he is currently at LDC (Lund Computer Centre) at Lund University, working with software development.

- p. 4, second column, near the end of the page: “Arguably ... technology. This seems” does not make sense. The text should read: “Arguably, their and their scholarly defenders' neglect or facile rebuff of the, to the common sense at least, rather obvious negative consequences and conspicuous dangers of these technologies seems to confirm Jacques Ellul's famous thesis of the fundamental deceitfulness of technological discourse, “le bluff technologique” (see [Ellul90]), whereby all negative aspects of technological “progress” are swept under the rug or made light of in the interest of the “wager” (“l'enjeu du siècle”) in that we shall be able to control technology to our own advantage, the unspoken premise of which being “after us the deluge”.”

- p. 8, first column, last sentence: Instead of “as the replacement, in the gnostic's view, of the imperfect unjust, and evil order of the present world” the text should read, “as the replacement of the in the gnostic's view imperfect, unjust, and evil order of the present world.”

The *Ellul Forum* Editors apologize to both the author and the readers for these oversights and errors.

Similarly, Ellul finds no justification in either concrete results or the Bible for a belief in progress: that the course of history is such that conditions of life will continually improve. Looking at history over the last several centuries, he sees a growth in technical power and a growth in the power of the abstract, bureaucratic state, to the point where alternative ways of being are increasingly being squeezed out of social currency. The state and technique do not counterbalance each other but act synergistically; technique increases the power of the state over its citizens, and the state gives a sanction to the demand for technical “progress.”(28) Such a growth in technical power is at best morally ambiguous, because of the increased danger to life from maleficent uses, accidents, and systemic unpredictability,(29) and the fact that beneficent uses entail a whole series of prior technical inventions, some of which may have maleficent uses tempting to fallen human beings.(30)

Furthermore, Ellul thinks that Christians who read history as progressing incrementally towards the kingdom of God, especially through our works, are misinterpreting the Bible. The new creation is a gift of God and comes only after judgment. Although God takes some of our works into the new Jerusalem, we cannot know which of them they will be.(31)

Thesis 5: Ellul takes over Karl Marx's thesis that capitalization entails the proletarianization of those without capital and widens it to include labor camps perpetrated by statist Marxist regimes and the replacement of traditional human contacts with technical work and entertainment among workers in societies dominated by technique.

In his account of original capitalization and proletarianization Ellul hews closely to Marx. The process depends on a labor theory of value and the existence of some kind of “primitive capitalization,” where some have capital (and hence the ability to hire others and benefit from their services), and others have nothing to sell but their labor. Because labor is the measure of value, if capitalists do not pay workers the entire difference between the price of the finished product and the cost of the raw materials, they are in effect stealing from the workers (the “alienation” of labor). The workers' labors under capitalism increase the capitalists' power at the expense of their own power. The cycle thus continues, with capitalists becoming more powerful and workers not able to command wages beyond what is necessary for their reproduction as a laboring

class. Workers in such a situation constitute a proletariat, bearing within themselves the alienating side of all the characteristics of capitalism: the need to conform themselves to means of industrial production; the lack of roots in a particular place and the difficulty of sustaining culture in general (because of the need to move where the work is and the lack of time to spend in a place apart from work); and the lack of family life apart from mere biological reproduction (and the early co-optation of any children into the industrial system).(32)

Ellul believes that such a process of proletarianization occurs during *any* process of industrialization, whether undertaken by private actors or governments. Besides the proletarianization during the Industrial Revolution described by Marx, he sees the process as having happened under Communist regimes in the USSR, China, Vietnam, and Cambodia. In each case, the government mandated some kind of industrialization; in each case, people sent to forced labor camps constituted a new proletariat: people deprived of all but the most basic material sustenance and cut off from roots and family. Marxist regimes extolled the value of work and developed bureaucratic structures to keep those who questioned this ideology in line. The ostensible purpose of the labor camps was to “re-educate” recalcitrants into believing in work. Ellul does not see the massive de-urbanization undertaken by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia as a romantic return to the countryside or to pure Khmer culture but as an attempt to build irrigation works industrially.(33)

A third type of proletariat Ellul sees might be termed the “technical proletariat.” These are people who, though not materially miserable, are alienated from roots, family, and culture because they are too caught up in technical work methods and entertainments to want anything else. Their leisure activities do not cause them to question demands for technical progress but serve to better integrate them into these demands.(34)

Thesis 6: Ellul thinks that money is a power that has its own force and direction, setting itself up in opposition to God, and that component practices of economic systems based on monetary transactions involve manipulative power and/or trust in money rather than the God of grace.

Ellul believes that Jesus' designation of money by a personal term (“Mammon”) expresses a spiritual reality: that money has power over us that cannot be

explained by its rational function in society as a means of exchange. This power is shown by the fact that money is one of contemporary human beings' sacred things: impolite to discuss among the bourgeois and presumed to solve all problems by the working class. It sets itself up as being our personal master and savior, and Jesus demands that we choose between it and God. Ellul's warnings about money go beyond its purely quantitative nature and role in facilitating abstractions. Monetization implies not only preoccupation with the realm of reality but also serving a power that inhabits realities and claims ultimacy (a false "answer" in the realm of truth).(35)

Ellul thus thinks that it is very difficult to use money rather than being used by it. He sees savings or insurance as expressions of trust in money rather than God, although he does not condemn savings for near-term, concrete purposes such as buying a house or gift, to tide oneself over during slow periods in lines of work with irregular income, or to meet the costs of continuing one's business (e.g., retaining seed corn or replacing worn-out equipment). He considers any act of selling an attempt to gain power over another, not a service to another. His logic is based on the nature of God. The God who becomes incarnate in Jesus Christ and dies for humanity's sins is a God of grace; monetary transactions, by their very nature, involve not giving something away but rather asking a price for it, and hence they are not grace. Jesus Christ already paid the price for our sins, so we should not pay that price to a false god.(36)

Thesis 7: Ellul believes that choosing God rather than Mammon means siding with human life against money, which puts some basic practices of capitalism in question, but also implies liberation from worry and from the enslaving power of money.

Ellul believes that loving God rather than Mammon is not merely a matter of internal direction but should be expressed in concrete ways, which can be characterized as personalization and desacralization. Personalization means siding with human life against money: recognizing those with whom one has financial relationships as whole people rather than reducing them to their economic function. Relationships where there can be grace and freedom should take precedence over the desire for personal advantage or the need to follow the letter of contracts. Ellul believes that the biblical legislation against lending at interest to neighbors or members of one's community (Ex. 22:25, Lev. 25:35-38), against taking pledges overnight or taking anything

necessary for livelihood as a pledge (Ex. 22:26, Deut. 24:6-13), and against holding back wages (Jas. 5:4) are primarily a matter of choosing human life over Mammon and only secondarily a matter of justice for one group of people over another. Choosing Mammon brings accursedness and enslavement on all sides, both of the less powerful who are immediately crushed and of the more powerful (who nevertheless bear responsibility for their deeds) who are worried about maintaining their position. Choosing life against money also implies refusing to treat money as sacred, giving money away and eschewing indeterminate savings.(37)

Ellul's beliefs about how Christians should personalize economic relationships and desacralize money put basic practices of capitalism in question. Although he acknowledges that the Old Testament allowed lending at interest to distant Gentiles, he does not seem to believe that Christians should treat anyone as less than a neighbor. He does not say that Christians are forbidden from charging interest, but he implies that a Christian entering into a non-neighborly financial relationship should personalize it (presumably no longer caring about receiving interest). Ellul explicitly states that profit is ruled out by the call not to hold back wages;(38) as in thesis #5, he holds to a labor theory of value inherited from Marx. Ellul's call for Christians to refrain from saving except for near-term purposes implies the curtailment of lending from fractional reserves. Lending at interest, profit, and lending from fractional reserves are three pillars of the expansion of economic activity brought on by capitalism. Ellul seems to imply that all of these occur because people are trusting in Mammon rather than God. When combined with his belief that industrialization brings proletarianization (thesis #5) and that work has a poor track record in providing what human beings really need (thesis #4), one is led to the conclusion that Ellul thinks that capitalistic economic expansion is a huge mistake.

Ellul's calls for Christians to live contrary to capitalistic expectations should not be seen as legalistic restrictions but as ways to live out liberation. He wants to free people from enslavement to money. He believes that living according to God's grace means freedom from financial worry.(39) If we trust that God knows that we need the means of material sustenance, we will be free to adopt the counter-cultural practices he recommends.

Thesis 8: Ellul's call for Christians to incarnate God's love where they are rather than withdraw from the world presents ambiguities for Christians in capitalistic societies, because any economic act can have multiple meanings and consequences.

Ellul does not counsel escape from monetary entanglements as a strategy for Christians to avoid being enslaved by money but believes that Christians should personalize economic relationships and desacralize money where they are.(40) Christians are thus placed in situations of ambiguity. One ambiguity comes from the fact that the normal condition of human beings at the end of life is inability to provide for one's basic needs. Saving for old age could then be seen as rational planning for a particular purpose or as balancing out the irregular income that all of us have if our life is seen as a whole. Ellul would probably find this interpretation a rationalization on the slippery slope to trust in Mammon. (Our expenses during retirement are an unknown quantity and unnecessary if we die suddenly while still working.) But the possibility of framing retirement savings this way exemplifies Ellul's refusal to provide hard-and-fast rules about where one must desacralize money and where one may follow procedures which those who trust in Mammon would find prudent.

* * *

Taken as a whole, these theses show why Ellul does not recommend capitalistic activity as a strategy to help transcendent input break into vicious circles of reality. The methods of capitalism are based on preoccupation with the realm of reality and/or a power which inhabits reality and sets itself up as a false god, and they lead to consequences deleterious to human life. The fact that Ellul says all these things about statist Marxist regimes as well does not erase his negative judgment of capitalism. At the height of the Cold War, he was saying, "A pox on both your houses!"

At various points people concerned with Ellul's problematic might draw different conclusions. Is his account of vicious cycles of reality, based on the belief that fallen human beings grasp at reality, watertight? Does his doctrine of divine action adequately account for how God relates with non-human realities? Is his account of the impoverishment attendant upon work for hire an accurate reading of economic history? Is Marx's labor theory of value correct, or can just wages

coexist with just profits? Are all buying-selling relationships expressions of the desire of one party to have power over another, or can monetary transactions exist where both parties benefit?

One might answer several of these questions differently by questioning Ellul's absolute disjunction between love and power. Are the categories of love-as-dialogue and power-as-manipulation adequate to describe the raising of children, care for the mentally disabled, or the tending of plants or animals? It seems that a third category, analogous to artistic creation respectful of one's materials, would help fill the gaps. There are biblical precedents for seeing some of God's activity in this way (e.g., God as the potter in Jer. 18:6-10). Such a category could help make the concept of benevolent coercion explicit, depict non-manipulative relations with realities, and form part of a doctrine of providence that could imagine God's positive action through mechanical sociological processes. Specifying how to formulate such a doctrine so as to avoid the triumphalism of previous descriptions of economic or political providence (whether of left or right) goes beyond the scope of this essay.

Notes

1. In another project, I was struck by the contrast, over many different areas, between what apologists for and opponents of capitalism believed about what is fixed and what is changeable about human life (Virginia W. Landgraf, "Competing Narratives of Property Rights and Justice for the Poor: Toward a Nonannihilationalist Approach to Scarcity and Efficiency," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 27 (1) Spr/Sum 2007: 57-75). I find both sides to be too triumphalist in what they affirm and too demonizing in what they oppose. Ellul's thought is an interesting starting point because he wants to avoid triumphalism and because he is willing to acknowledge both good intentions and bad results on both sides.

2. The first three theses are condensed from portions of Virginia W. Landgraf, *Abstract Power and the God of Love: A Critical Assessment of the Place of Institutions in Jacques Ellul's Anthropology of Dialectical Relationships* (Ph.D. diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 2003).

3. Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word*, trans. Joyce Main Hanks (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 5-42.

4. Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, trans. John Wilkinson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964), 79-85.

5. Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, trans. Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 25-32.

6. Jacques Ellul, *The Political Illusion*, trans. Konrad Kellen (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), 68-95.

7. One of the subsections of Ellul's *Histoire des institutions* is entitled, "Mainmise de l'état sur la nation" (Takeover of the nation by the state). Jacques Ellul, *Histoire des institutions*, vol. 4, *XVI^e-XVIII^e siècle*, 6th ed. (Paris: PUF, 1969), 79. For how revolutions against centralized power ended up reinforcing it, see Jacques Ellul, *Autopsy of Revolution*, trans. Patricia Wolf (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), 160-163.

8. For instance, from various angles, Jacques Ellul, *Apocalypse: The Book of Revelation*, trans. George C. Schreiner (New York: Seabury, 1977), 144-170; Jacques Ellul, *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 198-199; Jacques Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 60-66.

9. This is the theme of Jacques Ellul, *False Presence of the Kingdom*, trans. C. Edward Hopkin (New York: Seabury, 1972), and Jacques Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986).

10. Ellul, *Autopsy of Revolution*, 285-286.

11. Ellul, *The Political Illusion*, 206-223, 236-238.

12. Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 80.

13. Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word*, 11-12.

14. Jacques Ellul, *Reason for Being: A Meditation on Ecclesiastes*, trans. Joyce Main Hanks (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 295-299.

15. Cf. Ellul's statement that what differentiates human beings from animals is the commandment "Thou shalt not kill." Jacques Ellul, *Violence: Reflections from a Christian Perspective*, trans. Cecelia Gaul Kings (New York: Seabury, 1969), 146.

16. Jacques Ellul, *What I Believe* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; London: Marshall Morgan and Scott, 1989), 218-223.

17. Ellul, *What I Believe*, 158-161.

18. Jacques Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, trans. C. Edward Hopkin (New York: Seabury, 1973), 114-117.

19. Ellul, *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man*, 111-118.

20. Ellul, *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man*, 110.

21. Ellul, *What I Believe*, 190-192, 210-213, 196.

22. Jacques Ellul, *Anarchy and Christianity*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 33.

23. Jacques Ellul, *Si tu es le Fils de Dieu: Souffrances et tentations de Jésus* (Zurich: R. Brockhaus Verlag; Paris: Centurion, 1991), 99-100.

24. Ellul, *What I Believe*, 156.

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Market Capitalism: The Religion of the Market & its Challenge to the Church

by Nekeisha Alexis-Baker

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My assertion in this essay is that Christians concerned with economic justice should not understand market capitalism as merely an economic system nor see our participation within it as being “responsible consumers.” Rather market capitalism is a religion with the market as its god. Therefore, resisting the effects of market capitalism is to resist participation in idolatry. Many people have discussed market capitalism as a religion. I will present their arguments and bring in some of my own reflections. After examining several definitions of religion, I came up with a working definition that includes the following elements: a narrative of a transcendent being or beings that relates to history (myth); truth statements on the way the world works and the role of the created order (doctrine); and a set of practices (social institutions, rituals, experiences) and values (ethics) that form persons to participate in that world. As I will show below, the market has a myth, doctrines, and practices that form a religious system. I hope to enable readers to reflect on the ways Christianity is weakened in the face of market capitalism and how the church might regain its potency.

The myth of the market and doctrines of its transcendence

In investing journalism and websites the market tends to be discussed as three different but interconnected beings: the bull market, in which prices of securities are expected to rise; the bear market, in which such prices are expected to fall; and the market as a whole. The bull and bear markets may be named for the

attack postures of the respective animals: the upward thrusting motion of the horns of an attacking bull and the downward motion of a bear paw when it strikes. The warring animals of the market have particular characteristics: growth and optimism in a bull market, and decline and recession in a bear market. Yet bull markets can limp and even die, giving birth to the bear market. The bear market is responsible for the bull's demise until the market is able to roar, surge, and resurrect itself once again (1).

The seriousness with which people take the inner battle of the market is one indicator of its transcendence. In a bull market all is well with the world. Profits are high, wealth overflows, investors and shareholders are confident, the economic system is in good shape, and consumers can shop without restriction. In a bear market, the very foundation of our society is threatened. Bear markets are blamed on declines in the economy and in the corporate arena, poor government policies, and bank failures that can “paralyze the financial system, causing a persistent slump.”(2) Investopedia's first piece of advice to investors in a bear market is, “Don't despair.” The article goes on to say, “[T]he best thing to do during a bear market is to play dead – just like you should if you met a real grizzly in the woods....By staying calm and not making any sudden moves, you'll save yourself from becoming a bear's lunch.”(3) The market's performance then is figuratively a matter of life, death and resurrection. It can affect everything from employment to the value of our homes to the way we act as consumers and investors.

A key indicator of the market's transcendence is that its proponents refuse to intervene with it. Economists tend to believe that the market is a natural phenomenon that has been in existence at least as long as human beings. A striking example of this

belief can be found in a 1999 *Wall Street Journal* article called, "A New Model for the Nature of Business: It's Alive!" Author Thomas Petzinger Jr. quotes from and reflects on the words of anthropologist and economist William C. Frederick:

"All living things...harbor an impulse to economize, to accomplish more with less. This is life's bulwark against the universal propensity toward the loss of energy and form, the unstoppable force called entropy. 'This economizing process is the only way to survive, grow, develop, and flourish,' says Dr. Frederick. 'Overall, life on earth has been a roaring economizing success story' ... The genes that create us humans have programmed us for business, 'the main economizing vehicle on which organized human life depends,' Dr. Frederick says. Trade, technology and the division of labor, the three foundations of business, all predate agriculture, government, religion, law, symbolic communication and probably every other organizing social force, except the nurturing of progeny.'"(4)

In other words, business and economics are natural and life-giving, explain the way all life is organized, and are a permanent part of our history. David Loy explores this rationale: "In this calculus...intervention in the ongoing economic system is a threat to the natural order of things, and hence to future human welfare."(5) This view conveys that we who are controlled by a fundamental "impulse" to do business cannot control the movements of the market. We who do not have arms like God cannot contend with the Almighty (cf. Job 40: 2, 9).

Since the market is natural it follows that it is also objective, if not just. If economics is related to genetics, then economic inequality is simply a matter of natural selection. As a lion can't be blamed for eating a gazelle, the market can't be blamed if some become poor and others rich. Loy explains: "If market capitalism does operate according to economic laws as natural as those of physics or chemistry...its consequences seem unavoidable, despite the fact that they have led to extreme social inequality and are leading to environmental catastrophe."(6) The advice of the market to the poor is simply to have faith in its workings. Often, none of the models of development offered to poor countries provide an alternative to capitalism. Advocates of globalization have even suggested that poverty-stricken nations should "let the free market do the work of deciding a) What goods and services

to produce...b) How to produce them...and c) How to distribute them."(7) These theories propose that if the market is allowed to exist without intervention then development will naturally occur.

Another truth statement in market capitalism is that the market is all-knowing. Harvey Cox writes, "The market, we are taught, is able to determine what human needs are, what copper and capital should cost, how much barbers and CEOs should be paid, and how much jet planes, running shoes and hysterectomies should sell for." Cox notes that this wisdom may not last long. When the article was written in 1999, there was already the language of a "total market" and the emergence of an economic trend to "apply market calculations to areas that once seemed exempt such as dating, family life, marital relations and child rearing."(8) The market cannot be omniscient without assistance from trend-spotters, motivational researchers, marketing specialists, and psychologists. These intermediaries work to understand and exploit people's wants, needs, fears, and insecurities in order to offer them solutions for the right price, increasing people's dependence on the market and ensuring that it continues to expand.

Note how in the above truth claims several properties that Christian theology traditionally attributes to God are applied to the market: killing and making alive, omnipotence, righteousness, and omniscience.

Doctrines of the market: cosmology, anthropology, and salvation

Market capitalism not only has truth claims about the market but also statements about the role of nature in the world, human beings as workers and consumers, and salvation through accumulation of possessions.

In the cosmology of the market, land, animals, and creation as a whole are worth only as much as the price they will sell for and the products they can be used to create. Everything is for sale. This approach to creation is vastly different from traditional religious understandings of nature. Christians are increasingly beginning to understand creation as signs of God's blessing, glory, and care, and are viewing humanity's role as partner with and caretaker of the earth. Historically other belief systems have worshipped parts of creation as gods: the sun, earth, trees, and other natural elements. The market has no room for such sentimentalities. Cox refers to market capitalism's doctrine on creation as a process of reversed transubstantiation. Instead of the belief that

bread and wine become the sacred body and blood of Christ in communion, “in the mass of the Market... things that have been held sacred transmute into interchangeable items for sale.”(9) Land provides a good example of this process. All the complex meanings land has held for people over millennia dissolve into the single criterion of what is advantageous for its function as real estate. If an acre of trees must be removed to build one suburban home,(10) real estate takes precedence over trees. If drilling in Alaska is needed to unearth oil, then let the oil rigs roll. In market capitalism, everything has a price tag, and creation as a whole is an exploitable natural resource.

In market capitalism people are workers and consumers and can function as either at any given time. This doctrine is based on the belief that we are primarily individuals interested in self-preservation and self-fulfillment. We work to earn enough money to fulfill our ever increasing and expanding needs. As John Mizzoni puts it: “*Homo economicus* is an economic being who toils in order to satisfy material needs and desires. In this capitalist economic approach, work is conceived as an activity one engages in order to maximize utility... all that counts is the consequences an action will have for his [or her] interests and desires on each particular occasion.” He further discusses how “a social environment thoroughly infused with capitalism encourages people to see their lives in purely economic terms,” citing studies that involved face-to-face interviews with workers in various kinds of jobs. In the first study, most workers described themselves as “mules, machines, objects, robots, and tools.” In the second, workers expressed similar sentiments in their interviews, but their personal journal entries indicated that they were satisfied with their jobs. The workers' reluctance to admit publicly that their work was challenging and engaging seemed to come from the fact that “when it comes to work, people do not heed the evidence of their senses... and base their motivation instead on the strongly rooted cultural stereotype of what work is supposed to be like.” In market capitalist faith, work is not meant to be enjoyable but to secure a paycheck. I think that workers are discouraged from recognizing the joy they may get from their jobs because if we consciously made joy one of the main criteria for employment we would stop working when it became drudgery. Instead, “economic rationality, a chief attribute of *Homo economicus*, encourages people to look at work in purely economic terms of a cost-benefit analysis: what is the least amount of effort

one can discharge for the most amount of monetary return... How can I maximize utility?”(11)

Mizzoni believes that the best way to combat this rationale is to see work as a calling. However, Max Weber sees the language of calling as essential to the capitalist spirit. In the capitalist system, “labor must be performed as if it were an absolute end in itself, a calling.”(12) A calling to a particular kind of work may imply that the work in and of itself is worthwhile to do, particularly for the fulfillment of the person doing it and, in some cases with the added benefit of helping other people. However, whether work is understood in economic terms or as a calling, the focus remains on the self-fulfillment of the individual. Both of these approaches also sustain the market through the continued production of goods for sale and accumulation. Mass volunteering is probably a bigger threat to the market capitalist doctrine of work than describing employment as a calling.

In the anthropology of market capitalism the consumer is an economic being that compliments the worker. While *homo economicus* works to gain buying power, *homo consumens* exercises that power through the purchase and accumulation of goods. The market communicates that “Our lives can only be lived well (or lived at all) through the purchase of particular commodities. Thus our major existential interest consists of maneuvering for eligibility to buy such commodities.”(13) As James B. Twitchell puts it, “[H]uman beings, throughout history, have sought material luxury.”(14)

The consumer is essential to the survival of the market as a whole and the bull market in particular. According to an article in *Money* magazine, “consumer spending is the main engine of the US economy, accounting for approximately two-thirds of the gross domestic product.”(15) Consumption is so crucial to the market's survival that when the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001 threatened its stability, US Congressional members not only encouraged people to return to work but to “shop, go to the stores – get ready for Thanksgiving, get ready for Christmas.”(16) It didn't matter what people bought as long as they bought something.

The consumer is also concerned with personal survival. People are encouraged to purchase the latest products to keep up with society. This sentiment is most clear in the realms of technology and fashion. Always, some new gadget assures us that it is necessary if we are to survive in today's

changing world, society, or business. Richard H. Robbins says that fashion generates “anxiety and restlessness over the possession of things that [are] not 'new' or 'up to date.' Fashion [pressures] people not to buy out of need but for 'style'--from a desire to conform.” Consumerism helps people fit in and feel relevant. The consumer is driven by fear of obsolescence. Greed, happiness, appeasement of “free-floating desire,” fear of suffering, and the quest for luxury are other motivators.(17)

Loy takes this idea of survival one step further. He identifies market capitalism as a “salvation religion” and suggests that the consumer is ultimately engaged in the pursuit of salvation. “Salvation religions are often revolutionary due to the prophecy and charisma that motivate them and missionary because they inject a new message or promise into everyday life... Market capitalism not only began as, but may still be understood as a type of salvation religion: dissatisfied with the world as it is and compelled to inject a new promise into it.”(18)

Market capitalism promises that the accumulation of material possessions can bring new life and hope in the present, through the gracious bounty of the market. As Jon Pahl puts it, “[P]eople seek to 'save' themselves – whether from disease, failure or death does not much matter – through economically driven projects... the hopes and dreams people once sought to realize through traditional religious symbols and the institutions associated with them, are now sought through economic accumulation, status display, and shopping at the most fashionable malls.”(19) Consumers work and buy more because of this promise of deliverance.

Market practices and institutions: advertising as evangelism and malls as sacred spaces

In 1923 an advertising promoter said to Philadelphia businessmen: “Sell them dreams – dreams of country clubs and proms and visions of what might happen if only. After all, people don't buy things to have things. They buy hope – hope of what your merchandise will do for them. Sell them this hope and you won't have to worry about selling them goods.”(20) Advertising is market capitalism's vehicle for injecting new promises and hope into everyday life. It spreads the market's gospel of consumption as a means of salvation, and those who accept this message experience conversion and are formed into consumers. According to Robbins, “[T]he goal of advertisers was to aggressively shape

consumer desires and create value in commodities by imbuing them with the power to transform the consumer into a more desirable person... [Advertisers] began to emphasize the alleged effects of the products and its promise of a richer, fuller life.”(21) Advertising forms people to participate in the world according to market capitalism.

One of the biggest indicators of the importance and effectiveness of market evangelism, aside from over-consumption in capitalist societies, is the increased spending on advertising. In 1880 a mere thirty million dollars was invested in advertising in the US.(22) In 1998 national, local and private spending on advertising in the US totaled over 201 billion dollars. A mere five years later that figure had risen 15% to 237 billion dollars.(23) In 1998 the only national spending greater than advertising was spending on the military.

Just as advertising converts and forms people into consumers, malls are sacred spaces in which the consumer finds community, engages in the formative practice of shopping, and embodies the spirit of the market. Pahl's work is a useful starting point here.(24) Malls serve the function that congregations and church buildings serve for Christianity. They are gathering spaces for believers in the promise of salvation in market capitalism. Two important thoughts to keep in mind are that malls are *planned* and *constructed* spaces – nothing about a mall's exterior or interior is created by accident – and that most of the indicators of the mall's sacredness are widespread, transcending geographic differences.

The mall is a communal space for consumers. The Mall of America, for example, boasts between more than 520 stores with 35-40 million visitors annually.(25) James Rouse, one of the most famous and earliest architects of the mall, said this about its function: “[I]t is in the marketplace that all people come together – rich and poor, old and young, black and white. It is the democratic, unifying, universal place which gives spirit and personality to the city.”(26) Malls are taking over where religious institutions left off. They are open seven days a week, providing a space for people to gather. Personnel treat visitors with patience and care, striking up conversations as they offer advice on what the consumer should purchase. People who go to the mall will likely run into someone they know or meet someone new. In short, “malls have become sacred places because traditional churches, synagogues, temples and mosques have failed.”

While churches remain closed several days out of the week and are perceived as places of exclusion and judgment, the mall welcomes those who want to spend as well as those who seek to be in a place where they feel connected. Forty percent of visitors to the mall go there without intending to purchase anything.(27)

Malls are filled with religious symbolism. Most malls include popular religious symbols in their interior and exterior design. Their architecture usually provides for some kind of non-utilitarian water (e.g., fountains or reflecting pools); natural lighting (skylights, especially placed as central drawing points); and vegetation (artificial or evergreen, but never dying). Water, light, and vegetation are important religious symbols in many faiths. Ever-flowing water conveys to the visitor that the space and the activities that take place there are life-giving, soothing, refreshing, and purifying. Ira G. Zepp notes that malls usually have “a huge skylight or a colorful and often circular series of lamps shedding such bright light...that you know you are in a space set apart...malls, at their centers, strive to be places of vitality and energy.” Lighting is not solely utilitarian; it is used to highlight the ways the market promises to make us happy and invite consumers to spend. (Although forty percent of mall visitors do not intend to buy anything, only ten percent leave without actually having done so.) There are usually lush trees, flowers, and plants throughout a mall's interior. Regardless of the season outside, the plants in the mall are in full bloom. Vegetation in a mall makes sense when water and light are also present. Altogether they give a message of “life – abundant, even eternal... Malls thus play upon the human desire to experience growth and new life,” reinforcing the idea that consumerism is natural. The undying vegetation in a mall connotes a message of “the Garden of Eden without the fall, the resurrection without the cross, spring and summer without fall and winter... that entices us to imagine that we're inhabiting a garden of free delight.”(28)

Although Pahl identifies several other indicators of the mall as sacred space, such as pilgrimage and the display of bodies, this is the point that I find most interesting. One can get married, plan a birthday party, and shop to one's heart's content in a mall. But it seems unlikely that malls have divorce lawyer offices, funeral planning supplies, or debt counseling services. There are no signs of pain, suffering or death there. Rather, the mall is a manifestation of

market capitalism's promise that there is only happiness, devotion, love, abundance, and growth in the lives of those who are willing to consume. Shopping can assuage hurts or make one feel alive. All of these messages form consumers into persons that are willing to appease their desires and ease their troubles without a thought for tomorrow or the consequences that may arise.

Ultimately the mall is a place where consumers can not only be in the presence of the market but breathe life into it. It is a mechanism of support for a god that depends on the confidence and participation of people for its survival. This is made even clearer when one considers the transformation of the mall into open-air “lifestyle centers.” As consumers have outgrown traditional, boxed-in, temperature-controlled malls, the market has been quick to respond, creating a new sacred space that looks a lot like urban centers the old malls replaced.(29)

A challenge to the church

“When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, 'Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.' Aaron said to them, 'Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.' So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” (Ex. 32:1-4, NRSV)

Market capitalism's religious function, while masked by the assertion that it is valueless and secular, is evident in the reverence of its mythology, doctrine, missionary zeal and sacred institution. Yet the market, like the golden calf, is created by human beings and is dependent on humans for its survival. This fact reveals claims of the market's transcendence, omnipotence, and omnipresence to be false. Still the church as a whole has not been able to name it as a false god, in large part because the church doesn't acknowledge its claims of holiness. The end result has been that the church has either attempted to peacefully co-exist with market capitalism, relegating our Christian beliefs to Sunday morning, while we invest in Wal-Mart, shop at the Mall of America, and work on Wall Street the rest of

the week. Or the church has emulated the market's evangelical success, building "megachurches" with roller rinks and fast-food restaurants, proclaiming a health and wealth gospel, and churning out widgets in the name of Christ. Both responses cause the church to lose its focus and its message of salvation. There is a reason why malls can contain Christian bookstores, chapels, and designated prayer rooms, and François and Marithé Girbaud feel free to portray Jesus' Last Supper with female models in expensive designer clothes: Christianity in its current form is not a threat to the market's growing reign. Cox writes, "I am beginning to think that for all the religions of the world, however they may differ from one another, the religion of the market has become the most formidable rival." (30) Loy concurs, saying "The major religions... have been unable to offer what is most needed, a meaningful challenge to the aggressive proselytizing of market capitalism, which has already become the most successful religion of all time." (31)

Reflecting on this challenge leads me to ask several questions: how can the church faithfully counter the proselytizing of the market without succumbing to its recruitment tactics? Has the church made peace with the market in an unhelpful or detrimental way? If consumerism is idolatry, how can we resist it? What can we offer to the hungry and hurting people trying to shop their way into spiritual well-being? These questions must be asked if Christians are going to move from trying to participate responsibly in the market to not being participants in it at all.

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The Triumph of the Image Over Reasoning

Thoughts On the World of Computing

by Bryan Winters

Bryan Winters lives in New Zealand. His career in Market Development for IT Companies runs alongside his lifelong interest in the writings of Jacques Ellul.

The move from text-based software to graphical applications was as agenda-based as any other race for “progress.” It was heralded as bringing computing from the ivory towers of government and multinational corporations to the people. We saw the rise of upstart companies, complete with illustrations of the throwing off of chains, of liberation of information power, of triumphing over the “Big Brothers” of the industry. A now-legendary Super Bowl commercial by Apple promised, “1984 won’t be like 1984.”(1)

My interest here is in the effects of the media shift on the computing world. I will give a ringside view of the move from text to graphics in the I.T. world and associated shifts in business relationships and work practices. To those familiar with Jacques Ellul, especially *The Humiliation of the Word*, this may seem curious. Ellul wrote the work in 1979 conceding little to computers. “Computers are sometimes useful in their narrow domain (very narrow despite their many possible applications) ... pretentious devices that arrogantly substitute themselves for the word and for reason.”(2)

I don’t think Ellul saw how far-reaching computers’ impact would be. Sometimes he speaks of audiovisuals and graphics in the same paragraph as a reference to computers, but not in the sense we understand today. In 1979, computers were mainframes, running banking and government applications, not colorful personal computers downloading movies and chirping to us when email

arrives. In this essay I am going to “drill down” into this industry, within the text to graphics shift in the I.T. world itself. I believe that Ellul’s concepts shed light on how that transition and changing work practices are weaved together.

Throughout the period I discuss I was employed in marketing by IBM in both New Zealand and Southeast Asia as well as by other smaller I.T. companies. Any viewpoints or opinions expressed here are from the perspective, say, of campaigning in the PC operating system wars, being present at the famous competing launch of Microsoft Windows 3.1 and IBM’s OS/2 at the same huge hotel in Singapore, on the same day, on the same floor. I refer mainly to these direct experiences rather than the literature. Some reference to technology is unavoidable, and the writer expresses empathy with any who struggle with the terms.

The triumph of the image

At the beginning of the 1980s, IBM, the I.T. industry leader, was six times larger than its nearest rival, a dominance based on scalable mainframes. Software applications were textual, requiring the user to enter data in a set order into open fields. Any computer games were text-based, quiz-like affairs.

Application development was a strict discipline. User analysis was followed by specification, then design confirmation. If one had to wait months or years for software, there was always a technical justification. The great banking and legacy applications appeared during this era, many of which still silently operate today in secure premises far from the public eye. They were robustly designed, perhaps missing a couple of digits to save space – hence the Y2K scare – but they worked nevertheless.

Cost and skill availability limited computing to large organizations, particularly financial and government entities. Operating systems and databases matured via version releases, not complete renewals. Hardware sales were far more profitable than software, so suppliers focused on moving iron. This fact enabled mainframe suppliers to build their operating systems up over many years, fixing field-discovered errors painstakingly. One did not throw out an operating system lightly, as it had tens of thousands of person-hours invested in it.

At this time, none of the big companies had a vested interest in personal computing, so it fell to Apple and Commodore-sized firms to start that now global industry in backyard garages. Start it they did, easily gaining press as the new arbiters of information freedom. IBM's hand was forced. In the early 1980s it commissioned its first personal computer, legitimizing the very term "PC." Short of both microcomputer chips and a PC-sized operating system, IBM contracted two then unknown firms, Intel and Microsoft, for supply. Both were clever enough to negotiate non-exclusivity agreements.

Growing under IBM's wing, the personal computer industry expanded throughout the 1980s, albeit still using the text-based DOS, or Disk Operating System, that every programmer understands to this day. On left stage, the maverick Apple, sticking with its own hardware design and operating system, launched the world's first graphical user interface. IBM and Microsoft together promised that they would deliver one as well.

When powerful enough, Microsoft chose to go it alone. Pushing their graphical Windows PC operating system, an inferior offering still running on DOS, they cut ties with IBM. The latter concentrated on its own Operating System 2, or OS/2, a technically superior platform by most analysts' assessments.

But IBM had the lost the battle for hearts and minds, and the world saw a chance to be free of the Big Brother that charged millions for mainframes and had been party to the perceived delays in application development. Watching Asian customers walk back and forth between IBM and Microsoft on that jubilant day of the launch in adjacent hotel conference rooms, one gained the sense of excitement and camaraderie that pervaded Microsoft, versus the easy confidence of IBM, smugly content with their better system.

Microsoft threw its weight behind those independent programming houses who were deciding whom to hitch their horses to. IBM, on the other hand, simply assumed that the independents would follow. The result was predictable and swift. Right from the start, the earliest graphical applications followed Microsoft's lead. Within a few years, OS/2 was silently dumped.

Beguiled by the colors and charts of graphical user interface software, senior management in companies worldwide made the decision to move. Compared to lines of green text, a multicolored panel with buttons one could visibly press was irresistible. Half-completed, untried applications lined up for multi-million-dollar deals. Once, in Malaysia, we became the key part of a thirty-million-dollar consortium after a five-minute exposure of a new Windows product to the decision maker, whom I had not met before. It didn't matter that the software was functionally slower – it was the graphical future. I also recall sitting with test users for a major Singaporean government entity who were upgrading a counter-front system in the mid 1990s. As they realized that moving between fields on the new graphics-based screen necessitated using the mouse, rather than the "enter" key as in the old text-based systems, their jaws dropped. Everyone could see that the older text system actually permitted faster data entry. Blame was assigned to the new application, but it belonged to the operating system, the framework within which the end-user application was developed.

Frequently, companies didn't know what they were looking at. I have sat in countless software demonstrations and recall several, over two continents, where the entire system crashed in front of the customer executive team. Without a hiccup, a cool presenter would act as if nothing was the matter and chat away on a related topic while the software team, present in the very same room, keyboarded the system back up again. The executive teams were completely unaware that anything bad had happened. They simply never saw it. Later we would discuss this almost with disbelief. It dawned on me that purchasing decisions were based not on a methodical walk-through of the product but on the settings in the room, our professional demeanor, and the distracting colors and shapes being presented to them on the screen. At times I felt as if we were selling not applications to fulfill business functions but artwork. It is legendary that in the mid to late 1990s, commercial, off-the-shelf software packages (not just

custom software) were sold to huge corporations before they were even written, such were the sleight-of-hand skills of software presenters. Hence the term “vaporware.”

By far the greatest impetus to the revolution was the explosion of public computing. Those of us in the industry have always found it interesting to hear householders tell us about when computers “first came out.” By this, they mean personal computing, mostly graphical user interface Windows-based applications. The public marketplace had its own impacts:

1. Every programmer dreamed of writing his or her own consumer application and becoming a millionaire. This drew away talent from the pool maintaining dull legacy text-based mainframe applications. Only shrewd old baby-boomer programmers, who knew they couldn't compete with graphical user interface whiz kids, would do that. This shrinking of skill for industrial-strength applications acted as another pressure to change.
2. It became publicly accepted that bug-ridden software was the norm. In its bid for information freedom, the world had opted for a firm that relied on the sale of operating system software. Microsoft must sell new operating systems to survive. Thus all PC users are confronted with a new Windows version every two or three years. This turnover foists bug-ridden operating systems on the public, as they have not had enough time to be hardened with many fixes generated from field discovery of errors before they are replaced with a new one. To this day, home PCs stop, seemingly of their own accord, from time to time. The phenomenon has been likened to cars suddenly stopping on the highway and requiring installation of a new engine to keep running. Most users are already content with the functionality provided by their existing version and now display the opposite reaction to that of thirty years ago – they want to stay on the same platform, not move. The same is true for the core Office applications, as the public furor over accepting both Vista and Office 2007 illustrates.

3. But the biggest demand was for games. In order to market to families, I.T. firms took to giving away software encyclopedias so that one could justify the purchase as educational for the children. As soon as the home computer was installed, on went the games. Consumers may say they buy PCs for Internet access or to write letters and emails, but mainly they load games and movies or spend time on social networking sites, perhaps another form of gaming. The term “infotainment” is quite valid.

The 1990s also saw the emergence of the Internet, originally a library information research system. Its popularity surprised even Microsoft. Internet programming has spawned a huge industry of its own as every company, small or large, “needs” a website. Broadband is also seen as an essential part of economic progress, enabling visual applications to be brought into every home. The Internet has added further to the demand for advanced graphical applications. Early Windows software displayed colorful panels with fields for the user to fill in by means of mouse and keyboard. Graphical applications today are replete with imagery about nearly everything. A clothing company may have hardly any words on its home page. Visitors may be greeted by pictures of Greek horsemen whose colors and coats change when the mouse floats over them. One may go several pages deep, roaming through a visual store of images, needing to read text or enter data only when selecting something to buy. This process is meant to simulate the real shopping experience, which is visual, exotic, and emotive.

Technological divergence also affects the PC graphical sphere. Historically, the media told us that technologies will converge, enabling us to do such things as run the Internet on our TV screens. This once hyped commitment has not materialized. Many commentators now hold that technologies diverge.⁽³⁾ Instead of mere cellphones, we have phones that specialize in camera technology, Internet connectivity, or diary functions. TV screens have diverged into LCD, plasma, wide-screen, and HDTV-compatible or not. In the programming world, divergence means that different companies splinter and develop different pieces of the graphical puzzle. Conflicts arise between hardware, operating system, screen drivers, and data compression algorithms, and much finger-pointing about others' lack of compliance takes place. Consultants market skilled services to organizations to enable them to stay on a

converged technology track. Without skilled effort, an entire organization may end up hostage to technological divergence.

Considering technological divergence and the overall thrust to graphical solutions, we find a number of factors leading to less functional software than many text-based mainframe applications several decades ago:

1. Graphical mouse-stimulated imagery takes time to download, which requires skill investment into picture quality and data compression.
2. It also requires “plug-ins” to work. As applications grow more graphical, more extras are required, such as Adobe Flash, screen software drivers, and new browser releases. Making a highly graphical application work is a challenging and changing skill set in its own right.
3. Therefore programmers find themselves diverted from application function into making the graphical system robust. It becomes difficult to separate application function out from graphical skill. In an earlier generation of text-based applications, little or no thought had to be put into whether the application could actually be seen on the screen in all its glory, because there was no glory. It was simply functional text, and the programming team could concentrate on function. Today, programmers have to concentrate on the ever-shifting world of graphics, and function comes in second place.
4. In many cases the old disciplined rules of analysis and development have disappeared. In a technology cycle too short to reintroduce discipline, programmers simply try different things until something works. This way of working also wreaks havoc with the concept of programming person-hours.
5. The most obvious result is the phenomenon of highly visual websites with spelling mistakes and grammatical errors in what sparse text remains within them.

The computer press predicted the mainframe's demise years ago. Contrary to such expectations, IBM had a

banner year for mainframes in 2008. I suggest this resurgence is in part related to the failure of the modern graphical computing environment to provide solid backbone industrial applications, so the old ones remain. To put it bluntly: would you like your bank accounts to be run on a computer like the one you operate?

Finally, we note the incorporation of gaming into modern business computing. The boundary between games, advertising and software programs has blurred. Games are now part of the workplace. In previous eras, software products were launched complete with training programs. Assigned personnel attended classroom courses or sequenced computer training about the new application. Now new education techniques are emerging. Training courses can be constructed as online games, complete with all the graphics, thrills and competition of home computer gaming. Employees are encouraged to play these during work time to learn the firm's new application. Even online retail applications come with built-in games. A small but growing international pizza chain, Hell Pizza, leads the world in percentage of orders placed online. As the consumer decides what to order or awaits confirmation of credit card billing, he or she can fill in time playing with little demons running around the screen.

There will be no immediate end to this. The next generation of touchscreen technology is about to sweep through the marketplace. The futuristic computer workers in the Tom Cruise film *Minority Report* are a reality.⁽⁴⁾ To watch it is beguiling. It is the triumph of the image.

Work in the new paradigm

We westerners are subjected to 3400 marketing messages a day, if we simply swivel around in our chairs and start counting the logos in our living room, let alone our billboard-infested highways, websites, sidewalks and newspapers. Everyone seems to be wearing two or three brands as a “personal statement.” This proliferation of imagery is largely due to the growing power of computer graphics, which has spilled into every other audiovisual medium now.

We are all more wary of marketing. I consult to companies selling complicated, high-value, high-technology products and services. We teach them how to sensitively use multiple forms of media to

begin positive relationships with prospective customers. Such a concept or means of employment would have been meaningless thirty years ago. Then one simply phoned up prospective clients and arranged an appointment. That is almost impossible today. Businesspeople have barricaded themselves against the 3400 daily messages, including restricting salespeople from calling them. Therefore we employ short, targeted, business benefit statements using subtle combinations of media. These are psychological steps along the path to gaining face-to-face meetings.

This situation itself illustrates a shift in personal relationships. I give the following comparison as a trend I have noticed in business dealings:

1. Thirty years ago, in a sparser media environment, one could arrange a business meeting more readily, as outlined above. One needed a reasonable marketing pretext, but it was easier than today. At that meeting, the marketing company was given a chance to present its case. The prospective purchaser would listen to the pitch and watch the other party. Then a reasoned discussion would take place and judgments made about proceeding further, perhaps to another more detailed meeting, or perhaps to go no further.
2. Today, the prospective client may be subjected to a campaign using a variety of media, including emails, letters, CD or online video, brochures, webinars, newspaper or periodical branding, etc. Eventually a face-to-face meeting is arranged, but I have noticed by that time, the prospective client has often come to the conclusion in his own mind that he is buying. Simply agreeing to a meeting after the media campaign signifies a much higher percentage chance of a sale. But the media campaign was necessary in order to get the meeting.

An article recently appeared in New Zealand's major newspaper about new human relations methods. A young human resources manager at one of the country's leading companies revealed that he investigates new job applicants' profiles on Facebook before deciding whom to shortlist.(5) Presumably he assesses how competent they are at digital relationships, since that part of their job may be more important than face-to-face interaction.

Has the digital media explosion weakened abilities to handle personal relationships and decision making? Let me side with Ellul on this one. "We are not sure we can understand thoroughly what really has happened to each of us, but I believe one of the decisive factors in the mutation is that we live continually in a world of images."(6) Further, "A person must believe in language if he is to be open to the meaning of a reasoned argument."(7)

I welcome research into this field.

Reasoning and the image

We turn here to Ellul's comparison between the word and the image. Even if it does not aspire to theological truth, a basic property of word-based communication is that even a single sentence has a beginning, and it must be listened to or read over a period of time in order to gain its full import. On the other hand, an image, as we open our eyes, is instantly there. Images fit into what Ellul calls "reality."

I will make an analogy between a book and a computer program. A program is also a story. It has a beginning, a sequence of events, and concludes with an output of data. It has both a writer (most likely writers) and "readers," or users. Marshall McLuhan's concept of hot and cool media (8) is useful in this context. Text-based computing could be termed a "cool" medium, one that is low-definition in terms of data. There are written instructions and fields to fill in. The user can concentrate on these, because there is less distraction than in a graphical media environment. An earlier world of "cool" software applications required concentration and training on the part of both programmer and user. The programmer put a lot of thought and effort into logical functioning and sequential events. He or she was trained for this task. The user also needed to concentrate carefully to fill in the correct sequence of data, of menu choices, etc., and was accordingly trained.

Now we find a different set of expectations. Software has become a hot medium, rich with imagery, not portrayed as a story but as an adventure, game, experience, or simulation of real life. The user does not expect to have to learn anything to deal with representations of "reality." Just as one does not need training to browse through a shop, one does not require it to use a computer program or website. Or training can take place by a computer game, played

because it is thrilling. Users also expect to deal with applications quickly, as if examining a picture. So they blunder rapidly on. This is a two-edged sword for programmers, who know that this will take place. They have tried their best to account for it by placing signs like “invalid choice” or “incomplete entry,” hoping for user success. In a modern application, up to 70% of the software code simply stops users from doing wrong actions. But if users run into too many walls, they give up and inform management that the software is too difficult to use.

Or do programmers really try their best? They live in the same world of instant expectations as users. Faced with programming issues we have alluded to earlier, they simply try things out, hoping that something will work. One theory of programming teams is that if a team encounters too large a problem in writing a given function, they do not add more brains to solve it but instead abandon the module and reassign the team elsewhere. This form of “agile development” assumes from the start that programmers will encounter issues that they cannot handle.(9) Perhaps this assumption helps explain why up to 53% of software computing projects fail to deliver on time, or budget, or function. Therefore programmers are equal to users in their responses. Have both been infected by their orientation to the image? Both seem to be losing an earlier generation's capacity for reasoning and reflection.

Ellul entitles a chapter in *The Humiliation of the Word* “The Image-Oriented Person.” There he says, “Experience tends to show that a person who thinks by images becomes less and less capable of thinking by reasoning, and vice versa. The intellectual process based on images is contradictory to the intellectual process of reasoning that is related to the word.”(10) Does this also shed light on the phenomenon of businesspeople who are less able to reason and reflect through personal conversational discourse and instead make their decisions based on images presented to them? Like Ellul, I cannot state confidently how far the digital image revolution has affected us, or what quarters of society are particularly influenced. However, he speculated, prophetically in my opinion, on the emotional intuition of the image-driven mind. “A sort of sympathetic vibration of knowledge is established between those who are indwelt by the same images. Sometimes they would have enormous difficulty expressing in words what this means.”(11)

In an almost eerie fulfillment of this statement, Leonard Sweet, a Christian writer who claims to be postmodern, speaks of showing his son a website that interested him.

“Dad, this is not a website.”

He clicked onto another and made the same pronouncement . . . I insisted he tell me in words I could understand why these web sites weren't web sites. After some struggle, he said, “Because nothing moves.”

“So what?”

“Dad, I can't see it if it doesn't move.”(12)

Notes

1. Search www.youtube.com using “Apple 1984 superbowl advert” key words.
2. Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word*, trans. Joyce Main Hanks (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 258.
3. See e.g. <http://www.technologyreview.com/business/12434/>.
4. For examples search www.youtube.com using “Microsoft Surface Demo” key words.
5. *New Zealand Herald*, April 25, 2009.
6. Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word*, 208.
7. Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word*, 215.
8. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 22-23.
9. Cf. Luke 14:28-30: “Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? For if he lays the foundation and is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him, saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish’” (NIV).
10. Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word*, 214.
11. Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word*, 212.
12. Leonard Sweet, *Soul Tsunami* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 219.

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Book Review

From Faith to Fun: the Secularization of Humor

by **Russell Heddendorf**

Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2008.

ISBN-13: 978-1-55635-202-7.

Reviewed by Anthony Petrotta

Rector, St. Francis of Assisi Episcopal Church,
Wilsonville OR

Books on humor are seldom humorous and often are not taken seriously. *From Faith to Fun* is not terribly humorous, but it should be taken seriously. Professor Heddendorf writes on the way that traditional religious values of culture have been replaced by secular ones and the role that humor plays in that change: "This book is an attempt to come to grips with the problem of a fragmented and often dissolute culture."

Heddendorf draws upon Jacques Ellul's description of ancient Israel's use of humor as they adjusted to life in a foreign culture where, particularly, wordplay subverted the culture by turning one word into another, thus undercutting the force of the original word. The ancient Hebrews did not cut themselves off from the dominant culture; they simply made it say "other things." This, says Ellul, is the "subversion of culture."

Many books have been written on the "curative" effects of humor; Heddendorf, however, focuses on the *erosive* effects. Humor is a "powerful cultural force" and, since the eighteenth century, has increasingly become a substitute for faith.

In the chapter "Secular Fun," Heddendorf makes his claim on this shift to fun *as faith*. Fun "balances" the paradox in our lives of the "real" and "unreal" by illusion. In our postmodern world (post-therapeutic; post-faith), fun has become both "fundamental" and "functional." In a "religious worldview", humor looks at the world as God does, whereas in a "cultural worldview," humor looks at the world as fun does.

Fun is typified by finding chaos, focusing on the imminent; it denies the tension of paradox, masks rather than reveals, provides a misapprehension of good will among others, and subverts moral boundaries.

In the chapter, "Sacred Fun", Heddendorf argues that even those aligned with "orthodox" faith settle for an "uncritical" reconciliation of the divergent worldviews of the religious and cultural. The "high value" of personal and social well-being is co-opted by the cultural. He further argues, though, that fun can also lead to faith.

In a study of the Southside Gospel Church, Heddendorf finds an instance of fun leading to faith. The Southside community understands paradox as "divine incongruity" and, through faith, leaves the solution to God. "Unbelievers" are more likely to "trivialize" immediate incongruities with fun and laughter. Discernment, he concludes, allows us to a proper use of both the humor and the seriousness of our world. "Indeed, one can often laugh at a culture of fun while also laughing with it."

Heddendorf again quotes Ellul in the conclusion: "When God enters the picture, He destroys man's sacred." Heddendorf reiterates the value of humor and fun as we attempt to balance work, relationships, and so forth. He also warns the reader, "Humor may become a ubiquitous commodity that suffocates us with its banality."

Heddendorf then addresses the obvious question, "How," then, "can humor be rewarding without being reckless?"

Reckless humor lacks "accountability." It ignores logic, morality, and meaning. It holds no responsibility to "the other." Fun without faith, "wears a halo of its own making." "Rewarding humor," on the other hand, recognizes the "mystery of God's penetration into our world"; it joins the transcendent with the terrestrial.

From Faith to Fun is a complex book, as is befitting of a book on humor, that most protean and gratuitous of all human responses to the complexity of our lives. I wanted to hear more; I had many questions and points to argue, but in the end Heddendorf has done his job well, pushing me to consider the paradox of faith and fun.

Money and Power

by **Jacques Ellul**

L'Homme et L'Argent (1954)

ET: InterVarsity Press, 1984; Wipf and Stock, 2009.

**From the introduction to the new edition by
David W. Gill** (St. Mary's College, Moraga)

Money and Power was one of Jacques Ellul's earliest theological/ethical. The title "Money and Power," is not misleading, but it should be noted that Ellul's title was more broadly "Man and Money" ("Humanity and Money"? "Money and Human Existence"? Even simple phrases can be hard to translate in a way that captures the nuance).

Money and Power has a wealth of information that will take your education to the next level. It is also full of typically Ellulian provocative opinions and challenges. If you want a mild, sanitized, middle-of-the-road essay, look elsewhere. Ellul's approach will throw down a challenge to you or your book study group. You will be exposed to biblical teaching you may not have previously known; and some old scripture will be read in new ways. But as Ellul often said, he is not seeking disciples; he just wants to give us resources to work out our own understanding in faithfulness to our Lord.

Money and Power is delivered in five chapters. First, Ellul surveys the ways our culture, our economic thinkers, and our church traditions have thought about money. One of the takeaways is that the answer to the problem of money cannot be left to economic systems and structures; there always remains centrally, "how are we personally going to relate to money?" The second chapter is an exhilarating tour of biblical, especially OT, teaching and stories about wealth, money, and poverty. We meet Abraham, Job, Solomon and company, along with Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.

The third chapter is a marvelous series of studies, drawing in Jesus and the Apostolic teaching and practice, about how money can become a "principality and power" (very much as we saw that technique can become a god) --- "Mammon." Ellul comments on interest and usury, saving and hoarding, wages and inheritance, on Jesus' parables about money and his relations both to the poor and the rich. He points out that the best way to "profane" a god is to treat it with disrespect and in a cavalier fashion. What better way to profane and reject Mammon, Ellul says, than to be recklessly generous in giving it away. Brilliant lesson! Ellul concludes with some advice on teaching our children about money (chapter four) and with a strong call to understand the cry of the poor as God's challenge to us (chapter five).

Too often Christian reflections on politics, economics, and other life topics feel as though the author's socio-cultural location really drove their point of view, and the scriptures were just cherry-picked to support and justify the position they started with. *Money and Power* and Ellul's other books never leave us so comfortable or reassured. This is a prophet worth listening to.

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