

The Market as God: Considering Capitalism

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Thanks for having me back today. I hope you all had wonderful Thanksgivings. We're continuing last week's session, in which I made the highly controversial and discomfoting claim that the US treats capitalism and consumerism as a religion in the sense that we encounter them as a meaning system that we use to make sense of life, not just an allocation system by which we divvy up goods. Let me recap last week's comments briefly, add some further thoughts, and then invite us into a conversation.

Last week I claimed that market myths and consumption rituals fueled the taken-for-granted religion of consumerism, which has essentially no serious competitors at this time. I provided some evidence that the economic paradigm contains the major elements of a belief system, and claimed further economic meanings and values were permeating society more broadly – for example, in the idea of the student as a consumer of education and the person of faith as a consumer of religion. I further observed that consumerism offers a perfect world, demands moral commitment, and elicits sacrifice that virtually always goes unquestioned.

I began last week with two quotes, which I would like to revisit in different ways now. The second quote came from the Gospel according to Matthew, and more specifically from the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus is reported to say, “No one can serve two masters, for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.” What an uncomfortable saying.

I suspect that most of us are likely to reply that we don't serve wealth, wealth serves us. We use money, it doesn't use us. Ah, but is this always true? My particular bugaboo is not money but food, and I know my relationship with food is getting idolatrous when I obsess over food, envision what it will do for me, and sacrifice other things such as relationships, honesty and health to feed my food habit. Commercials for certain foods can reduce me almost to a drooling idiot. Do we have that kind of relationship with money or with things? Do we think that things will make us happy, that money will satisfy us? What are we willing to sacrifice for money or for stuff? When we do get what we want, does it satisfy our needs permanently or is there always something new to get, some new product to make us feel dissatisfied with ourselves as we are now? Is this what Jesus was talking about in the God and Mammon passage? My admittedly very limited understanding of the idea of idolatry is that it involves granting something power over us that can't fulfill our wishes for it. Do we idolize things? Do we idolize money? It's a question each of us gets to ask ourselves.

Last week I mentioned an article by a left Evangelical doctor, David Hilfiker. I'd like to spend the rest of my time today describing the rest of his article to you. It will provide us with further conversational opportunities, I think. (David Hilfiker, “Naming Our Gods”, *The Other Side* 34, July/August 1995: 11.)

Hilfiker draws on a basic college textbook, *Economics*, to explain what he calls the five underlying assumptions of capitalism. First, capitalism assumes that the economic system works

best if each person pursues his or her selfish good, aiming for the greatest possible profit. Second, the profit motive drives economics. The only basis for making economic decisions is whatever decision will bring the greatest profit. Third, in order to make economic decisions, everything must have a price, including human labor. Money provides the measuring rod of values. Fourth, the decision about whom to produce things for is a matter of supply and demand, by relative income. The distribution of goods and services is determined by the distribution of private wealth. Fifth, wealth is primarily private property. The net output of a business belongs to the “owner” of the capital, for example, not to the workers or to the world more generally.

I suspect we all take these assumptions entirely for granted. And they are very useful in making capitalism work as an allocation system. However, are these really moral values? And if not, what should our moral values be?

Hilfiker notes that the pursuit of self-interest, the first assumption of capitalism, shares no common ground with ethics based on love, community and justice for the poor. He proposes instead the biblical value of loving neighbor as self and treating all other human beings as our neighbors. A community or society that prioritizes this value by definition does not prioritize self-interest.

Similarly, Hilfiker observes that the profit motive, the second assumption of capitalism, is only one of many human motives and not necessarily the most ethical one. For example, we do work to make money that allows us to live and live well, but the profit motive represents only one reason that we work. We also work to express our creativity, to demonstrate our love of neighbor and community, because work is fulfilling, to make the world a better place. Hilfiker proposes that our decisions should be primarily based, not on the profit motive, but on love of God and God’s creation. What could that mean? What would that even look like? If, like me, you find it hard to imagine our society relegating the profit motive to a relatively low place on the values totem pole, think about why that might be.

Does everything have a price? This is the third assumption of capitalism. But what about love, justice, or community? Is it hopelessly idealistic to value family or meaningful work above money? Hilfiker proposes that the value of a person, product or part of nature is intrinsic, and should not be based on what people will spend on it.

The fourth assumption of capitalism reported by Hilfiker is that those who have more money get more things, which we all take completely for granted. We not only take it for granted as regards luxuries, though, we take it for granted in terms of food, shelter, healthcare, quality education and so on. But what does this say about our respect for human dignity? Why should we accept as moral a society in which a single person does not have enough to survive? Hilfiker proposes that we value instead the idea that everyone should have certain necessities before anyone has luxuries, and take the extra step of acting on this value. Hilfiker bases this idea not on Marx but on the argument that the early apostles shared what they had in such a way as to make sure that everyone had enough and no one, too much.

Finally, we all buy completely into the fifth assumption of capitalism reported by Hilfiker, which is that private property is ours to dispose of as we wish. I think all of us would be profoundly

uncomfortable with any challenge to that assumption. But doesn't such a claim make it far more difficult to build community and really commit ourselves to that community? Hilfiker proposes that we envision the bounty of the earth as a gift from God, of which we are stewards. We are certainly free to enjoy the good gifts around us, but we are not at liberty to allocate them in ways that put private well-being above the common good.

These ideas undoubtedly seem outrageous to most of us, perhaps even sacrilegious. But why? They are biblical ideas, after all. I suppose my first, quite negative response to them is to say that these ideas come from a different time and place and that we have to live in the world we live in. Fair enough. But is it not also our burden and joy to make the world what we want it to be? At the end of the day, I think our discomfort with these ideas mostly comes down to the fact that we don't want to give up our capitalist values. We like them too much. They seem to serve us well personally. Certainly, I fit into that category and perhaps most of you do as well. So, here's the hard question: What would Jesus do? Or, to be truly ecumenical about it, what would the Buddha do? What would Gandhi do? Think about the most moral people or religious figures you know. What would they do with this conundrum? Why? And do we have the courage to act like them?

Is there really a problem with how we encounter capitalism, consumerism and the market? If there is a problem, what is problematic about it? If we were to decide that we should change our values and how we lived them out, what might we do on individual, group and societal levels? What do you think?