

GRAND RAPIDS THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

AN EVALUATION OF THE NATURE OF CAPITALISM
IN RELATION TO THE CHRISTIAN STORY

A PAPER SUBMITTED TO
DR. WITTMER OF THE THEOLOGY DEPARTMENT
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY II

DEPARTMENT OF THEOLOGY

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GRAND RAPIDS, MI

MARCH 7, 2008

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INTRODUCTION

The recent edition of *Adbusters*, a postmodern indy magazine devoted to deconstructing how corporations, capitalism, consumerism, the media, and governments create meaning for our Western culture, reveals what Christians are now just beginning to realize: over the last four decades capitalism has created a culture of mindless, meaning-sapped consumers, the results of which are destroying our society and others. In an essay entitled “Redemption,” author Micah White explains, “The fact is that we live in a world that has been structured to produce a society of consumers, and even our inconsequential actions or desires are thereby implicated in the destruction of the physical environment. The ease of consumption, and the nonstop encouragement to consume that we receive, makes it nearly impossible for modernity to attain a detachment from consumption and think differently enough to create viable alternatives.”¹

In an another essay, entitled “Cool: The Rise, Fall and Rebirth of An Attitude,” the magazine explores how corporations have leveraged the insecurities and insatiable desires of a fallen world to milk the capitalistic system for all it’s worth by constructing a culture of cool. Author’s Dick Pountain and David Robins write: “As Thomas Frank explains in his 1997 book, *The Conquest of Cool*, bit by bit cool ‘became central to the way capitalism understands itself and explains itself to the public.’ Ad agency gurus [then] figured out ‘how to construct cultural machines that transform alienation and despair into consent.’”² As a result, “the defining problem of modern industrial society is not injustice but alienation.” Their solution? “Liberate [ourselves] from the corporate mindfuck,”³ a state of being related to our alienation from our originally created selves thanks to our communal consent to corporately constructed Cool™.

¹ Micah White, “Redemption,” *Adbusters* 76 (2008): 42.

² Dick Poutain and David Robins, “Cool: The Rise, Fall and Rebirth of An Attitude,” *Adbusters* 76 (2008): 8.

³ Poutain and Robins, “Cool,” 14.

While this characterization might cause more pietistic Christians to cringe, one thing is clear: the Other is aware of our fallen capitalistic culture and senses we need to redeem what has been lost. Humans were not crafted to mindlessly consume nor find our meaning in Cool™. Instead, we were created to live abundant lives connected to our Creator. In light of this worldview, how then should we structure modern economic systems? Should we affluent American Christian consumers blush in the face of so much affluence, let alone consumption? Doesn't capitalism provide the best means for constructing economically prosperous and socially stable societies consistent with God's original intent for Humans, despite its minor hang-ups? John R. Schneider seeks to reconcile these questions in his book, *The Good of Affluence*.

In his book, Schneider seeks to explain “the relationship in Christian theology between faith and affluence.”⁴ In the end, though, he gives capitalism a pass without seriously engaging the problems of the contemporary version of that Enlightenment economic system: consumer capitalism. This paper will examine capitalism and Schneider's claims through the Creation-Rebellion-Redemption Story of Christian spirituality to provide a balanced, more biblical understanding of 21st century capitalism and its resulting consumeristic form. While I agree capitalism in its basic rendition is the best economic system for creating economically and socially stable nations, that stability does not come without a price. *Adbusters* insists, we need to launch a “fantastic curveball into the heart of capitalism that changes everything.”⁵ I agree.

IS AFFLUENCE THE POINT?

“In the past two hundred years the greatest achievement of the modern West was to create a middle class, allowing the common man to escape from poverty and live in relative comfort.

⁴ John R. Schneider, *The Good of Affluence* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 56.

⁵ Sut Jhally “The Dreamland of American Consumerism,” *Adbusters* 76 (2008): 24

Now the United States is ready to perform an even greater feat: it is well on its way to creating the first mass affluent class in world history.”⁶ Capitalism, no doubt, has contributed to great advances in modern societies. Even in emerging markets like India, Romania, and Mexico, capitalism is providing the soil to cultivate great economic and social advances that promote God’s original intentions of abundance for those societies. And according to John A. Schneider, those affluence-creating advances coincide with God’s “cosmic good” for original Creation. Throughout his book, the the author claims the condition of affluence is a cosmic good and core to God’s eternal vision for Humans.⁷ He insists that God originally desired Humans to acquire and enjoy a good, affluent existence brimming with the good stuff of life, and for good reason. Genesis does paint a beautiful picture of a Garden overflowing with every kind of good fruit and vegetable, a safe environment to raise a family, and undefiled relationships with which to grow old. God created a good Earth and placed Humans in a good Garden to enjoy and provide care.

But does God want us to be affluent, to be wealthy? Or rather, does He desire to give us an abundant life? You may think I am quibbling over words, here, but I think the author missteps by claiming that affluence is the point. Instead, both the early Genesis narrative and Promise Land Exodus motifs give us a picture of *abundance*, not affluence. Abundance is having a more than adequate supply of something.⁸ In our case, God desired that we Humans have a more than adequate supply of food, water, security, shelter, and relationships. The same was true for His chosen people: through the Abrahamic Covenant God wanted to bless them with abundance and give them a land with more than an adequate supply of everything they would ever need.

Affluence and wealth on the other hand is having a quality of *profuse* abundance, of wealth

⁶ Dinesh D’Souza, *The Virtue of Prosperity: Finding Values in an Age of Techno-Affluence* (New York: Free Press, 2000), 16.

⁷ Schneider, “Good of Affluence,” 74.

⁸ "abundance." *WordNet 3.0*, Princeton University 2006. <http://wordnet.princeton.edu/perl/>

beyond use.⁹ It seems that the kind of economic advantage Schneider advocates is beyond what God had in mind when he created Humans, and an example from his book illustrates the point.

In advocating affluence as an original design and intent of God's good creation, Schneider insists Mercedes-Benz is an object in which people have the right to take pleasure. Of this right he says: "I also know how much pleasure they get from the nearly perfect performance of those vehicle. I think it is very like what other friends of mine get from the pieces of fine art that they own, or from the great books that they read. Outside of base resentment, I see no reason at all to think that either form of affection is unhealthy materialism. Why not instead wish that everyone could enjoy life at those levels?" In other words, Schneider believes taking delight in a \$140,000 car is a right and cosmic good. And if a person has the means by which to enjoy the tight-handling of a Mercedes through the curvy Autobahn, then should he not feel spiritually free to exercise that right?

My question is this: why do we define the enjoyment of life by a \$140,000 machine? Does God really want us to take pleasure in how a car performs? Is this how Jesus defines the life of His Kingdom? This argument sounds more like a defense of the American Dream than an explanation of the life God has for Humans. Schneider begins to fail in his defense of capitalism by getting the beginning of the Story wrong: God originally created a world of abundance for Humans to enjoy and continues to define that abundance not by the affluence of sin-marked American-Dream consumerism, but by the Kingdom of Heaven. While I believe capitalism in its basic form is good and provides a framework for private property, encourages rule of law, and insists on basic human rights, we give capitalism too much credit, especially considering it is a human construct marked by sin.

⁹ "affluence." *WordNet 3.0*, Princeton University 2006. <http://wordnet.princeton.edu/perl/>

CONSUMERISM: THE END RESULT OF SIN-MARKED CAPITALISM

In a letter to the United Nations dated September 20, 2007, Evo Morales, the President of Bolivia, outlined his frustrations with the First World and their reckless consumption. “The United States and Europe consume, on average, 8.4 times more than the world average,” he wrote. “It is necessary for them to reduce their level of consumption and recognize that all of us are guests on this same land.”¹⁰ Regardless of the abundance capitalism brings to developing societies, one thing seems clear: even capitalism is marked by sin and creates a climate of consumption that God never intended. Capitalism in all of its benefits and abilities to provide an abundant life for societies eventually morphs into a fallen form that enslaves humans to desire and consumption.

And why should we expect anything different? Capitalism was envisioned during the Enlightenment and thoroughly rooted in classic liberal and modern ideologies, the principles of which exalt the autonomous rational individual to the status of god and empower him or her with the authority to create, and consume, a tailor-made destiny. As a result, the heart of capitalism is the principle of *homo economicus*, or Economic Man. In short, it insists that Man is an independent rational and self-interested actor who desires the greatest amount of wealth (affluence) and luxuries, avoids unnecessary labor, and possesses the ability to make judgements toward those ends.¹¹ As John Stuart Mills suggests in the previous definition, the modern economic system of capitalism is rooted in self-interest and intended for individuals to create their own existence through wealth creation. Now to be sure, self-interest is not entirely bad. We do, after all, need to provide for ourselves and families and should be empowered to pursue a

¹⁰ Translated by Federico Fuentes “Evo Morales Speaks,” *Adbusters* 75 (2008): 58

¹¹ John Stuart Mills. “On the Definition of Political Economy; and on the Method of Investigation Proper to It,” London and Westminster Review, October 1836. *Essays on Some Unsettled Questions of Political Economy*, 2nd ed. London: Longmans, Green, Reader & Dyer, 1874, essay 5, paragraphs 38 and 48.

good life here on earth. But if capitalism ultimately gestates into consumer capitalism, should we fully advocate an economic model that actively promotes extreme indulgence?

One of the problems the author faces in his defense of capitalism is his failure to honestly address more problematic forms of this legitimate economic system, mainly consumerism. In his book, Schneider claims that Jesus does not call people away from the cosmic good of affluence, which is delight, but rather “directs them not to be rich in a manner that affirms the corrupt and corrupting system and the ways of the people who rule and profit most from it.”¹² The problem, however, resides in his definition, for capitalism is more about self-interest than simply delight. While I affirm the belief that God’s original intent for Creation was abundance, and He is restoring the world to an abundant land “flowing with milk and honey,” it is a far stretch to suggest capitalism is the system God is using to bring about that change. This system is rooted in autonomy, rather than theistic dependence, and self-interest, which conflicts with Jesus’ vision of the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus said His system for restoration is not of this world,¹³ and the brokenness of America’s consumer capitalistic culture confirms this.

If a society is built upon consumption, it will ultimately seek to maximize that consumption with the least amount of cost. Recent headlines confirm this and have reported on the consequences of the sin-marked status of contemporary capitalism. One of the major results of consumeristic capitalism is the use of slave labor by various corporations, and even state municipalities, to ensure maximum delight with minimum costs. On November 26, 2007, The New York Times reported on the deplorable working conditions of men in India who make manhole covers for the New York City’s Department of Environmental Protection. As the article explained, the men were shirtless, barefoot, sweaty, and whip-thin, working without even basic

¹² Schneider, “Good of Affluence,” 153.

¹³ John 18:36

humane safety standards.¹⁴ The week before, fresh revelations surfaced in the same country that Gap Inc. continues to use contractors that employ child labor, with kids as young as ten years old stitching together cute little polos for suburban ten year olds in America. Finally, contractors for yet another corporation, Victoria's Secret, force their Jordanian workers to work up to 105 hours a week, while receiving just \$.04 compensation per knitted \$14 bikini. Needless to say, several multinational corporations go to great lengths to exploit the principles of capitalism for maximum gain, usually at the expense of others downriver of the American economy.

All of this makes perfect sense, though, in light of *homo economicus*: capitalism encourages accumulating the most affluence with the least expense, even if it's at the expense of the suffering of others. While capitalism in its basic form encourages private property, the rule of law, and individual human rights, consumer capitalism warps those goods by maximizing affluence (profuse abundance) for the consumer with the minimum amount of expense, a fact Schneider fails to address. So while capitalism can help create the abundance God intended at Creation, Sin and rebellious human nature exploit its principles in ghastly ways, usually resulting in the oppression and burdening of those unfortunate enough to live in the developing world.

GLOBALIZATION AND THE BROWN MAN'S BURDEN

In the previous examples it is obvious that corporations, and even cities, have taken advantage of people groups around the world to maximize delight for the American consumer culture, and their bottom-line. Corporations that drive the American economy, and thus feed the American consumer appetite, have built themselves on the backs of the Global Brown Man, with little thought given to the consequences of their construction efforts. Unfortunately, Schneider

¹⁴ Timmons, Heather. 2007. "New York Manhole Covers, Forged Barefoot in India." *The New York Times* 26 November, A1.

fails to give due discourse to the responsibility of the powerful within American society to those on whom we've built an entire economy. If the American economy is built upon consumption—seventy percent of that economy is personal consumption—then do we not have a responsibility to those who have aided us in that building? ¹⁵ In an age where all economies are tightly integrated, American Christians need to give greater thought to how we use the Other to fulfill our consumer predilections. While the author seems to find trouble accepting our responsibilities to other nations, we need to consider the affects of sinful forms of capitalism and discuss redemptive ways to reverse the affects of that sin.

In addressing that Christian responsibility to the global poor, Schneider exegetes Amos in relationship to “normal Western Christian” participation in the global economy. According to Schneider, Amos aimed his diatribe at the rulers of Israel and the class of ruling elites that extended the arm of the king. ¹⁶ It was their responsibility to care for the economic conditions of the poor in society, and they failed to live out that responsibility. Even the wives of those rulers and ruling classes were condemned, because they used the profits of that misery to indulge themselves. Everyone involved, from the king down to the partners of the ruling class, were complicit in and responsible for the exploitation and oppression of the people they were suppose to have served. ¹⁷ But in relating the sin of oppression of the rulers of Israel to Western Christians, Schneider declares, “It seems fairly obvious that what these rich people in Amos did was as deeply evil as it could be under the circumstances. But is it at all obvious that ordinary Christians are routinely committing evils comparable to theirs? Is it clear that the behavior [Ron] Sider describes [in *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*]-giving too little a percentage of their

¹⁵ Barbario, Michael and Uchitelle, Louis. 2008. “Americans Cutback Sharply On Spending.” *The New York Times* 14 January, C1.

¹⁶ Schneider, “Good of Affluence,” 96.

¹⁷ Schneider, “Good of Affluence,” 97.

income to the global poor—is anything like what Israel’s ruling class did in spiritual and moral quality?”¹⁸ Unfortunately, the author does not explain why Western Christians are not somewhat guilty of the same negligence as the wives of Israel and the oppression of the ruling elites.

If we were to think redemptively about consumer capitalism, we might ask: When a Christian grandmother purchases a sweater at Gap made by an Indian 10 year old for her teenage grandson, is she not at least somewhat complicit in that Indian child's suffering? Or when a Christian college student buys a pound of Guatemala Antigua Blend coffee from Starbucks for \$12.95 for his late night study sessions, does he not in some way pronounce a blessing upon the Mighty Siren for the \$.40 a pound they gave the Guatemalan farmer which perpetuates his life of poverty? What we the hyper-globally connected First World should consider is how our interactions with and use of the global poor differ in spiritual and moral quality than the exploitation and oppression Israel’s ruling class bore upon their own poor. If Western multinational corporations and national economies have built their entire businesses and economies upon the cheap labor and products of the underdeveloped world, are we not responsible to those people?

While Schneider completely ignores issues of personal buying responsibility with seeming ease, failing to even acknowledge the connection between Western and developing economies, we can redeem the system by reconsidering how and where we shop. For instance, Grand Rapids church decided it was time to fairly compensate coffee farmers for a staple of the American culture. Instead of buying beans through corrupt coffee brokers, they are investing in a coffee growing family in Honduras, and return 100% of the profits back into that community at a value of \$10 a pound. Their goal is to fight corruption and greed in the coffee industry that results from American consumer capitalism, and is one way Christians can redeem the affects of

¹⁸ Schneider, “Good of Affluence,” 97.

the fall on capitalism. Before we can help, however, we must recognize our responsibility to our global neighbor and realize our buying patterns contribute somewhat to the injustice and oppression thousands of people face beneath the weight of a broken economic system.

GLOBALIZATION AND MORAL PROXIMITY

In light of our global economic dependence and examples of American economic oppression, what is our responsibility to the global poor? Without risking abusing Jesus' parable, the questions of "who is our neighbor?" becomes incredibly important. Schneider says that the principle of *moral proximity* should govern our understanding of Christian responsibility to the poor, an idea that mirrors the Roman Catholic Church's teachings on *subsidiarity*, which says the social unit closest to a social problem is most responsible and best able to bring solvency. Moral proximity says that our moral focus should normally be on the problems and issues that are nearest, that we best know and care most about the local problems.¹⁹ According to Schneider, moral proximity has bearing on this discussion, because most ordinary Western Christians are so far removed from the actual oppression and injustice wrought upon the developing world to warrant any condemnation or divine judgement.

In light of the reality of our global economic system, I find it incredibly difficult to dismiss the Christian responsibility to the global poor. Because our economy is inextricably linked to other countries and the goods we consume are connected to developing countries, I find it troubling that people like Schneider can suggest are we not at least somewhat responsible to those whom our economies depend. There should be a more nuanced, exhaustive discussion of our redemptive responsibilities toward those whom we are economically linked. Redemptive conversations should include questions that challenge Christian abundance and affluence,

¹⁹ Schneider, "Good of Affluence," 88.

including: Why do we Americans believe we have the right to two homes when others in Mexico stuff five families in a one room shack? Why do we Americans believe we have the right to a \$120,000 Lexus when people in India earn less than \$2.00 a week? Why do we Americans believe we have the right to 12 pairs of shoes when gypsies in Romania don't have a source of water in their village?

In each of these countries, goods are produced that American Christians consume en masse: Mexico produces the Chrysler P.T. Cruiser, India produces GAP clothes, Romania gives us Puma shoes. In light of this interconnectedness, then, what responsibilities do we Christians have toward those who labor for our consumption? We are much more connected than Schneider cares to admit. Because I buy beans from Starbucks, Am I not morally connected to the farmer in Kenya who is paid barely \$.40 a pound? Is that just compensation? Does that provide a decent wage and source of abundance for him and his family? If I buy clothes from GAP, am I not morally culpable for the ten year old who slaved 90 hours one week to piece together my new outfit? These are the questions Schneider and others fail to address, questions that sit at the heart of a discussion on the theology of faith and capitalism.

CONCLUSION

As I said at the beginning, I affirm the basics of capitalism and believe it is the best economic model for providing an abundant life that mirrors God's original abundant intentions for Creation. What many fail to consider, however, is that capitalism is marked by the affects of Rebellion, like all human systems. Considering that modern day capitalism is rooted in Enlightenment classical liberal ideology, an ideology that stresses the absolute freedom, rationality, and self-interest of the autonomous self, Christians should not be surprised consumerism and the pursuit of profuse abundance (affluence) is the logical extension of such an

economic system. If consumerism, then, is the final manifestation of capitalism, to what economic system should Christians turn? While we should not necessarily embrace socialism or like forms, Christians need to be sober-minded about the realities and risks of capitalism. Furthermore, we need to be honest about how we contribute to and perpetuate the injustice and oppression of the global poor through our consumption. In the end, may Christians fight for abundant living for all on earth, regardless of national origin. May we Christians take more responsibility for the ways in which we partner with the sin of consumerism that affects the world. And may we be more concerned about the vision of restoration—spiritual, social, and economic—that arrives through the Kingdom of Heaven, a true vision of abundance and shalom capitalism cannot provide.

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