



4-2017

A Postmodernist Theologian's Critique of Capitalism

Clive Beed

Retired Department of Economics, University of Melbourne, Australia, cncbeed@netspace.net.au

Cara Beed

retired Australian Catholic University, cncbeed@netspace.net.met.au

Follow this and additional works at: <http://via.library.depaul.edu/jrbe>

Recommended Citation

Beed, Clive and Beed, Cara (2017) "A Postmodernist Theologian's Critique of Capitalism," *Journal of Religion and Business Ethics*: Vol. 3, Article 7.

Available at: <http://via.library.depaul.edu/jrbe/vol3/iss2/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the LAS Proceedings, Projects and Publications at Via Sapientiae. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Religion and Business Ethics* by an authorized editor of Via Sapientiae. For more information, please contact mbernal2@depaul.edu, wsulliv6@depaul.edu, c.mclure@depaul.edu.

INTRODUCTION

In their critique of capitalism, contemporary theologians belonging to the “Radical Orthodox” school (Milbank, Cavanaugh, Tanner, Long, Smith, Bell), argue that they are formulating an alternative but operative Christian economics, qualitatively different from the economics most Christian economists recognize. This paper explores the validity of their claims, but only as expressed through the latest work of one leading exponent of the thesis, Daniel Bell, Jr.¹ Among Radically Orthodox thinkers, Bell is the most explicit in formulating a Christian economics program dissimilar to the existing discipline of economics, relying on the postmodernist thought of Deleuze and Foucault. Lunn² had reviewed a selection of Radical Orthodoxy proponents, excluding Bell, a leading figure in the movement. McMullen,³ likewise, assessed a selection of Radically Orthodox work, but excluding Bell, 2012. Bell (and Smith), however, make more explicit use of postmodernist concepts than other Radically Orthodox theologians. Indeed, the series of which Bell is part “is clearly premised on the notion that postmodernism has something to teach the church.”⁴

The first three sections of this paper examine why a particular perspective in postmodernism has suddenly become an analytical vogue for some theological adherents of Radical Orthodoxy, what postmodernism is taken to mean in the work of Bell under scrutiny, and what postmodernism has to offer the church. The argument in these sections is that postmodernism is not necessary input to criticize existing capitalism, to formulate alternative Christian economic arrangements from those prevailing under present capitalism, or to make these issues clear to the church. Section four discusses two postmodern notions Bell regards as central to his thesis — Deleuze’s concept of desire, and Foucault’s notion of power, but neither is assessed here as vital to the project of analyzing capitalism or illustrating the alternative economy.

Section five evaluates how Bell sees the term, capitalism, and what he regards as wrong with capitalism. The argument of this section is that he presents no non-capitalist system as an operationally viable replacement for capitalism. The few illustrations he gives of alternative arrangements already operate within the existing capitalist system. It is possible to suggest, however, that God’s economy on this earth is in process of being constructed incrementally through a multitude of non-standard, cooperative creations, outlined in section six. These can be regarded as consistent with a capitalist orientation, but one vastly different from the present.

¹Daniel Bell, Jr., *The Economy of Desire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012).

²John Lunn, “Capitalism as Heresy: On Why Theologians Criticize Markets,” *Faith & Economics*, 57 (2011): 1-23.

³Steven McMullen, “Radical Orthodox Economics,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 43, no. 4 (2014): 343-364.

⁴Bell, *The Economy*, 18-19.

WHY IS POSTMODERNISM INFLUENTIAL IN BELL?

A first reason, according to the preface of Bell, is that “current discussions” in church congregations “are increasingly grappling with philosophical and theoretical questions related to postmodernity.” This development “has engendered a new confessional ecumenism.”⁵ No evidence is provided for this taking place, and it is difficult to think of examples of its occurrence. Even if it were valid, whether postmodernist concepts unavoidably expose more truly the nature of Christian belief and its relation to contemporary society than alternative modes of analysis, such as realism, is moot.

Partly, this is because there is a wider critique of postmodernist notions for analyzing society, not pursued here, given the intention of assessing Bell’s case alone. This critique would hold that no *a priori* presumption exists that continental postmodern philosophy is necessarily a superior way to those existing of analyzing social processes, even if it does use “high-level work in postmodern theory.”⁶ Suffice to note that the value of postmodernist thought for theology continues to be debated by Christians, with no clear winner in sight. In the main, protagonists of postmodernist theology, such as Smith, and Bell⁷ give little attention to this debate, aside from Smith’s comments on Carson in Penner.⁸ Other recent Christian critics of postmodernism include Erickson, Sweetman, Lee, and Thiessen.⁹ Christian philosophical realists, such as Roger Trigg,¹⁰ have maintained a running critique of postmodernism, as have secular commentators, such as Sokal.¹¹ This debate is overlooked by postmodernist theologians.

A second reason for the growing influence of postmodernist thought in theology is the allegation that, historically, Christianity has accommodated to the *status quo* against the intentions of its founder, Jesus Christ. This is a view held even by non-Christians, such as Noam Chomsky, who asserted that

⁵Bell, *The Economy*, 7.

⁶Bell, *The Economy*, 7.

⁷James Smith, *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006); Bell, *The Economy*.

⁸Myron Penner, ed. *Christianity and The Postmodern Turn: Six Views* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2005).

⁹Millard Erickson, *Truth or Consequences: The Promise and Perils of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove, Ill: Intervarsity Press, 2001); Brendan

Sweetman, “Lyotard, Postmodernism, and Religion,” *Philosophia Christi* 7, no. 1 (2005): 139-151; Hock Lee, Christianity and the Postmodern Turn: A Critique of Postmodern Epistemology, *Master Of Theology Thesis* (South African Theological Seminary, Johannesburg, 2009); Elmer Thiessen, “A Critical Review of James K. A. Smith, *Who’s Afraid Of Postmodernism*,” *The Evangelical Quarterly* 83, no. 4 (2011): 347-351.

¹¹Roger Trigg, *Rationality and Science* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993); *Rationality and Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998); *Ideas of Human Nature* 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999); *Understanding Social Science* 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001); *Philosophy Matters* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).

¹²Alan Sokal, *Beyond the Hoax* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

“Jesus himself, and most of the message of the Gospels, is a message of service to the poor, a critique of the rich and the powerful, and a pacifist doctrine. And it remained that way, that’s what Christianity was... until Constantine. Constantine shifted it so the cross, which was the symbol of persecution of somebody working for the poor, was put on the shield of the Roman Empire. It became the symbol for violence and oppression, and that’s pretty much what the church has been until the present. In fact, it’s quite striking in recent years, elements of the church, in particular the Latin American bishops, but not only them, tried to go back to the Gospels.”¹² The justification for using postmodernist modes of analysis is that, supposedly, they can reveal the true and original nature of Christian belief, as evidenced by Chomsky’s quote, more so than other forms of analysis. This can then be pitted against the substance of existing capitalism, for which postmodernist analysis is necessary to expose its true nature.

Bell expresses this idea that “Christianity was deeply inscribed in the patterns and processes of the modern Western world.”¹³ From the advent of postmodernism (say, the 1950s), this adjustment has been under attack from the likes of liberation theology. However, it is not stretching the argument too far to say that the attack far preceded the 1950s. Christian socialism in the UK and Europe became an articulate voice in the late nineteenth century, and persists in the International League of Religious Socialists, stemming from the 1920s. Walter Rauschenbusch and the Social Gospel movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were early protagonists, and even the papal encyclicals of the time criticized both capitalism and socialism. The debt of liberation theology to Catholic social thought cannot be ignored, as Bell recognizes.¹⁴ A restricted flow of non-liberation theological literature pointed in the same direction, such as by John Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas. There is no evidence in all this work that postmodernism has been necessary to expose the true teachings of Jesus Christ.

A third reason why postmodernism has become a vogue in Radical Orthodoxy is that it is taken to be the only valid way of exposing the erroneous claims of economics. A true Christian economics can be constructed only via postmodernism. These assumptions are also debatable. Christians have been criticizing economics for at least forty years without postmodernism. If Bell’s central claim is that “the discipline of economics, should be subordinate to theological concerns,”¹⁵ various Christian economists have previously made and given substance to the same claim, such as North, Hay, Tiemstra et al., Chewning, Mason, and Beed and Beed.¹⁶ Part of these

¹³Naom Chomsky, Lawrence Krauss, and Sean Carroll, “Science in the Dock,” *Science And Technology News* March 1 (2006).

¹⁴Bell, *The Economy*, 17.

¹⁵Bell, *The Economy*, 45, 104.

¹⁶Bell, *The Economy*, 26.

¹⁷Gary North, *An Introduction to Christian Economics* (Nutley, NJ: Craig Press, 1973); Donald Hay, *Economics Today: A Christian Critique* (Leicester, UK: Apollos, 1989); John

economists' exercise was to analyze economic phenomena in the light of biblical precepts, to show how this produced results different from orthodox economics, and to present alternative economic arrangements to the *status quo*. Unfortunately, Radical Orthodoxy ignores this work. It ignores also previous work by Christian economists who have discussed the relation of economics to postmodernism.¹⁷ A useful exercise would be to ascertain how these strands could meld with the theologians to develop an alternative Christian economics.¹⁸ This is apposite because many in the enterprise have the aim of formulating a divine economy whose hallmarks, like Bell, "are not struggle, competition, and strife but sharing and solidarity; noncompetitive, complementary exchange; and mutuality."¹⁹

Unlike some of the aforementioned Christian economists, Bell does not want "to replace economics with theology," for economics "has much to offer any effort to develop a theological vision and practice of the economy."²⁰ In terms of Bell's conception of what economics is, this contention has little validity. Bell castigates economics for being identified with free-market and capitalist economics, and neoliberalism.²¹ These are things to be replaced, but it is unclear what is left. Whether he believes that the project of present economics is unredeemable, except as it can be transmogrified into his idea of Christian economics, is unclarified. Yet, Bell wants it both ways — capitalist economics should be expunged, but capitalist economics is valuable because it can validly analyze socio-economic phenomena. He gives an example of the value of economics as though it were some neutral tool that can perform this task. This is that theologians and churches are frequently accused of advocating "rent controls so that poor persons may secure affordable housing" but, as a result, landlords may "cut corners on maintenance or perhaps make fewer rental units available." It is dubious to think that "hard-nosed economic analysis" is needed to assess this issue.²² Common sense analysis²³ can function just as well, and produce comparable results. Probably, a more useful project for the church than advocating rent controls, if it does, would be for it

Tiemstra, Fred Graham, George Monsma Jr, Carl Sinke, & Alan Storkey, *Reforming Economics* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1990); Richard Chewning, ed. *Biblical Principles and Public Policy: The Practice*. Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1991; John Mason, "Biblical Teaching and the Objectives of Welfare Policy in the United States, in *Welfare In America: Christian Perspectives on a Policy in Crisis*, eds. S. Carlson-Thies & J. Skillen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996): 145-185; Clive Beed & Cara Beed, *Alternatives to Economics* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2006).

¹⁸Roland Hoksbergen, "Is There a Christian Economics? Some Thoughts in Light of the Rise of Postmodernism," *Christian Scholar's Review* 24, no. 2 (1994): 126-142; John Lunn and Robin Klay, "The Neoclassical Economic Model in a Postmodern World," *Christian Scholar's Review* 24, no. 2,(1994): 143-163.

¹⁹McMullen, "Radical," 360-363.

²⁰Bell, *The Economy*, 170.

²¹Bell, *The Economy*, 26.

²²Bell, *The Economy*, 23-24.

²³Bell, *The Economy*, 26.

²⁴John Coates, *The Claims Of Common Sense*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

to assist in the construction of housing units with the aid of poor people, and make these available for rent and purchase by them.

Bell's target is free-market economics, bundling all economist critics of this paradigm into its gambit. He dismisses the critics on the grounds that they are likely to be "merely variations on the dominant vision."²⁴ This is an exaggerated judgment that cannot be drawn from the three critical economists he cites, Prychitko, Nelson, and Keen.²⁵ In citing just these three, the large output of heterodox economics since 2001 (including Keen's second 2011 edition) is overlooked. It also ignores writings in the *Real-World Economics Review*, *Journal of Economic Issues*, *Review of Radical Political Economics*, *Journal of Post-Keynesian Economics*, *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, *Feminist Economics*, and the vast number of other more recently formed economics' journals that take a critical stance toward free-market economics. To group all this critical writing into a "universal" school tolerating or promoting neoliberalism is incorrect. It is not inconsistent with this view to agree that the free market paradigm is dominant in modern economics, as Bell believes it to be,²⁶ and as Christian economists have expressed previously.

THE PRESENTATION OF POSTMODERNISM

The argument so far has been that the case for regarding postmodernism as necessary to formulate an alternative Christian way of thinking about economic processes from the prevailing dominant paradigm in economics is unsustainable. The Christian economists cited above who are pursuing this task are witness to this enterprise. The claim of the necessity for postmodernism requires assessing what postmodernism is, a term used in diverse ways. Jameson is cited favorably by the series editor for the *Economy of Desire*, Smith, describing postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism.²⁷ Whenever "late capitalism" emerged is unspecified. If it dates from the 1950s, as mooted above, it is unclear from Bell or Jameson how this culture differed from the capitalism of the twentieth century up to that time. For Smith, late capitalism is dominated by "consumption and the unique malaise that characterizes" it.²⁸ Consumption and malaise are not new phenomena. The Great Depression of the 1930s was also dominated by "consumption." Its malaise was that many people in the US, the most advanced capitalist economy, could not get enough to eat. The malaise they suffered was not from over-consumption. This is comparable to the majority of people in the

²⁵Bell, *The Economy*, 23.

²⁵David Prychitko, ed., *Why Economists Disagree* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1998); Robert Nelson, *Economics as Religion* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2001); Steven Keen, *Debunking Economics* (New York: Zed Books, 2001).

²⁶Bell, *The Economy*, 24.

²⁷James Smith, Introduction, in Bell, *The Economy of Desire*, 9; Frederick Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

²⁸Smith, Introduction, 10.

developing world today. They are not suffering from a malaise of over-consumption, nor experiencing “banality”²⁹ in their consumption.

The pervasiveness of postmodernism today is supposed to be indicated because the world “is one completely saturated and dominated by the forces of modernity.”³⁰ What modernity means is left hanging in the air. Even if modernity could be described, why call the present situation postmodernism? Better to say late modernism, intensified or saturated modernism. Postmodernism suggests that modernism has been usurped by something else — that it has come after modernism — a notion Smith is anxious to avoid. In his view, postmodernism is not discontinuous from what came before. However, what those forces of modernity are remains unclear. At most, Smith indicates them from a novel, *Infinite Jest*, set in an environment far removed from present reality. To claim that postmodernism is indicated by “the world where ‘we’re all capitalists now’,”³¹ depends on what is meant by capitalism and capitalists, so far undefined. To say that postmodernism is modernism intensified is as unrevealing as to say that capitalism drenched in capitalist traits is post-capitalism or late capitalism. Another way of looking at postmodernism is to say that it depicts the disintegration of positivism as a philosophy of science and of social science, with no uniformly accepted philosophy replacing positivism. However, this is not a perspective on postmodernism pursued by Radical Orthodoxy.

Bell flags the content of postmodernism via a melange of personal experiences.³² Yet, each one can be perceived as operating during the reign of capitalism before the advent of postmodernism. For example, professors have always argued about the constituents of great literature; in the developing world, gut-wrenching poverty has long existed side by side with novelty favored by the rich; political marches have invariably disbursed into tangential strands; denominations have often fought over whether moral absolutes exist. All this strikes Bell as “carnavalesque,” but he would be hard pressed to argue that it did not exist before the 1950s, as though the two world wars and the 1930s depression did not also produce anarchy, where “the old order is submerged in disorder,” “where the traditions and foundations of the past seem to crumble into so many fragments.”³³

Postmodernism is also signalled by the proliferation of new social snares to Christians and others. Smith suggests that “the great tempter of our age is Walmart.”³⁴ In fact, many social traps are ready to trip up Christians and others, and always have been, including non- and anti-Christian fashions in philosophy. Comparable consumption tempters to Walmart today are legalized gambling, the idolization of entertainment heroes, the adulation of

²⁹Smith, Introduction, 10.

³⁰Smith, Introduction, 10.

³¹Smith, Introduction, 10.

³²Bell, *The Economy*, 15-16.

³³Bell, *The Economy*, 16.

³⁴Bell, *The Economy*, 10.

professional sport, overseas holidays, SUVs, new information technology, and aiming to maximize wealth. Many of these were always available to the rich. There is no need to stop at Walmart look-a-likes that probably tempt middle income earners and below who are also susceptible to conspicuous consumption. Higher wealth holders are tempted by a different range of conspicuous consumption contained by industries geared entirely to their wants, such as luxury yachts, described by Frank.³⁵ It is not only “technologies” that prime, point, and “habituate us toward certain ends.”³⁶ It is also the motivations of the people who develop and market the technologies, some of whom may be capitalists, and some who assist them, like the advertising industry. Reporting this lure of consumption in capitalism goes as far back as Veblen who originated the term “conspicuous consumption,” and has produced a steady stream of literature since, including Christian.³⁷ Today, it is epitomized by the term “affluenza,” explored by such as James.³⁸ Conspicuous consumption is not a product of postmodernism, and predates it by at least fifty years. At the same time, as Bell recognizes, conspicuous consumption manifests in ways unknown in Veblen’s time.³⁹

If postmodernism is capitalism to the nth degree, what *prima facie* case is there that it should be investigated by postmodernist thinkers, and what are their tools of investigation? Is it necessary to utilize “the theoretical resources in thinkers such as Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault to enable us to see anew just what’s at stake — and what’s going on — in the banality of consumption that surrounds us?”⁴⁰ Numerous analysts have examined similar issues (such as Alperovitz, and Offer),⁴¹ without mentioning postmodernism, highlighting the accentuation of the costs of late capitalism. The burgeoning literature of happiness studies is one example, as are the effects of capitalism on sleep patterns — sleep hours are declining — on stress and obesity, and on inequality — a range of social disorders is alleged to be associated with present high levels of inequality.⁴² What are the “new” perspectives the postmodernists enable us to see?

³⁵Robert Frank, *Richistan* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2007)

³⁶Bell, *The Economy*, 10.

³⁷John Taylor, *Enough is Enough* (London: SCM, 1975); Ian Harper and Eric Jones, “Treating ‘Affluenza:’ The Moral Challenge Of Affluence,” in *Christian Theology And Market Economics* eds. I. Harper & S. Gregg, S. eds. (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2008), 146-163.

³⁸Oliver James, *The Selfish Capitalist: Origins of Affluenza* (London: Vermillion, 2008).

³⁹Bell, *The Economy*, 118.

⁴⁰Bell, *The Economy*, 10.

⁴¹Gar Alperovitz, *America beyond Capitalism* (Hokoben, NJ: John Wiley, 2003); Alvin Offer, *The Challenge of Affluence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

⁴²Simon Williams, *The Politics of Sleep* (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Alvin Offer, Rachel Pechey, and Stanley Ulijaszek eds., *Insecurity, Inequality and Obesity In Affluent Societies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level* pb (London: Allen Lane, 2009).

These new perspectives cannot be said to be reflected in challenges that have been made to economics, such as that it is not “a ‘neutral’ matter of distribution and exchange.”⁴³ Economists, theologians, and schools of economics, past and present, Christian and non-Christian, do not think of economics in this way. Heterodox economics, such as American Institutionalism, is but one example, and occasionally more mainstream economists express similar views. Neither is there evidence that postmodernists, such as Deleuze and Foucault, have contributed to this discussion, as far as economics is concerned.

Nor are new perspectives reflected in how Jesus’ incoming reign is viewed. It is not a new claim that Jesus calls His followers to an “economics that orders the world otherwise, bearing witness to the strange upside-down economy of a crucified-now-risen King.”⁴⁴ Donald Kraybill’s, *The Upside Down Kingdom*⁴⁵ is but one example of this type of thinking, containing no mention of postmodernism. As with distribution and exchange, postmodernists have contributed little to this discussion. Indeed, how could they, being atheists in the main, as per Deleuze and Foucault?

DESIRE AND POWER AS POSTMODERNIST CONSTRUCTIONS

The new economics of postmodernist theology is termed “the economy of desire.” This is because desire is taken to be “the fundamental human power,”⁴⁶ the key to formulating a Christian economics relevant to late capitalism. Reality is postulated “in terms of a dynamic power, movement, or energy,” called desire.⁴⁷ To call desire the fundamental human power is putting the cart before the horse. Loving God and Christ who require believers to follow their commands come before desire. This is meant to be the desire of all Christians. It is a desire not “shorn of any teleology,”⁴⁸ unlike Deleuze’s assertion. The “economy of desire” might more accurately be called the economy of love, the economy of God, or the divine economy. Even Bell observes that in much Christian tradition, “desire is synonymous with love.”⁴⁹ The desires that God has of us and that we have of God can only be found in the Bible, by prayer, and via Christian tradition, of which Radical Orthodoxy emphasizes only the latter. Loving God and practicing his commandments are keys to discovering and evaluating the nature of “beliefs and convictions but also [by] practices and institutions.” To say that “the world... is constituted by flows of intensities of desire”⁵⁰ overlooks everything else comprising the

⁴³Bell, *The Economy*, 11.

⁴⁴Bell, *The Economy*, 11.

⁴⁵Donald Kraybill, *The Upside-Down Kingdom* rev. ed. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1990).

⁴⁶Bell, *The Economy*, 22.

⁴⁷Bell, *The Economy*, 42.

⁴⁸Bell, *The Economy*, 45.

⁴⁹Bell, *The Economy*, 131.

⁵⁰Bell, *The Economy*, 22, 45.

world. The world is constituted by God's special and general revelation, by the characteristics of the natural world, by the social structures that people construct. The list is endless.

Desire is not defined more precisely by Bell, but is taken to apply to everything. Thus, "every society is an assemblage of desire," and "the human person is an assemblage of desire."⁵¹ This is as unrevealing as to say that every society is an assemblage of resources, capital, people etc. Little is put forward to explain what causes desire. The word, "desire" is thrown up as a catch-all, some type of unclarified quality taken to summarize the world. Used in this sense, it does not explain what is going on the world. In the conventional use of words, desire is taken to mean want, longing, craving, yearning, wish, entreaty, appeal, request, plea, aspiration, need, petition, demand. How all these qualities represent "the fundamental human power" constituting the world defies imagination.

Bell claims that desire is being healed by God "of its capitalist distortions."⁵² Surely, human sin is what God is healing. As sin is healed, an increasingly healed capitalism might be able to continue to function, witnessed by the operational examples of the alternative economy working on a capitalist base and within a capitalist framework, discussed in section five. Undoubtedly, human love has been corrupted by sin so that "desire no longer conforms to God but rather conforms to the world."⁵³ Medieval monasticism is postulated as an economy of desire, but is not "helpful as an example of resistance to contemporary capitalism"⁵⁴ as the failed case of LaserMonks shows — once a multi-million dollar ink toner and cartridge business. The Cistercians' model might not even have been helpful as manifesting an economy of desire in its time for its mainly aristocratic recruits brought their wealth to the order that was used partly to underpin its economic activities (mainly farming) that did involve participating in market exchange.

Using the gambit term, "desire" as Bell does, serves only to obfuscate the processes confronting human life. This is typical of postmodern philosophy that takes words, the meaning of which most people understand, and deploys them in an arcane and impenetrable manner, giving them a totally different meaning from that contained in conventional conversation. This is supposed to be the high theoretical achievement of postmodernism, but has been described as "fashionable nonsense."⁵⁵ If our economic lives and desire are constituted by certain "practices and institutions" as well as by "beliefs and convictions,"⁵⁶ it is these that need to be studied. They can be given concrete meaning, rather than trying to isolate some ephemeral quality called "desire." Countless Christian and non-Christians through the ages have

⁵¹Bell, *The Economy*, 45.

⁵²Bell, *The Economy*, 127.

⁵³Bell, *The Economy*, 131.

⁵⁴Bell, *The Economy*, 134.

⁵⁵Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, *Fashionable Nonsense* (New York: Picador, 1998).

⁵⁶Bell, *The Economy*, 22.

attempted to analyze practices, institutions, beliefs, and convictions manifest in social life.

Bell is very warm to Foucault's analysis of power. Foucault's insight is supposed to be that "in the 1970s resistance to an oppressive order was hindered by an obsession with the state and a vision of power to effect social change that was concentrated on the state, in its laws and prohibitions."⁵⁷ Foucault holds that what revolutionaries need is to see and analyze power as a more diffuse phenomenon, existing in and between diverse elements of society, such as in the family. Power is ubiquitous. There are three objections to this depiction. First, Bell provides no definition of power, nor is one cited from Foucault at the beginning of Bell's discussion.⁵⁸ The impression is given that power is a uni-definitional term, exhibiting the same qualities in relations between corporate owners and workers, as between members of a family. Power may have multiple dimensions — "the multiplicity of power," as Bell puts it⁵⁹ — but its different qualities in different situations require clarification. That Foucault regards power relations as the "strategies by which individuals try to direct and control the conduct of others" still leaves hanging in the air how these power relations operate within society. To say that power should be exercised "with as little domination as possible"⁶⁰ does not make clear how power, control and domination are to be separated. If domination indicates the power that one individual/group has over another, it is unclear how power can be exercised without domination, given that power can be defined as domination.⁶¹

Second, the idea in Foucault's claim above — that power is omnipresent and pervasive— is not a new observation having been made by countless social scientists before Foucault. Examples are Dahl, Lukes, the Silks, Putnam, Debnam, Galbraith, and Keller. As is the usual wont of postmodernists, none of these authors is cited. Foucault's opinion is taken as though it were some grand new discovery. Third, that an obsession with the state dominated "1970s resistance to an oppressive order," as claimed above, is dubious, given that no evidence is cited. As will be argued in section five, bodies that were, even in the 70s, and are attempting to formulate alternatives to the *status quo* do not appear to be obsessed with the state. They invariably grow out of local initiative, without being too concerned with what the state is doing.

⁵⁷Bell, *The Economy*, 46.

⁵⁸Bell, *The Economy*, 46.

⁵⁹Bell, *The Economy*, 50.

⁶⁰Bell, *The Economy*, 50.

⁶¹Nicholas Abercrombie, Stephen Hill, and Bryan Turner, *The Penguin Dictionary Of Sociology* 5th ed. (London: Penguin, 2006), 304-306.

BELL'S CONCEPTION OF CAPITALISM

Bell raises the idea that his book “is a contribution to the conversation about the relationship of Christianity to capitalism with a postmodern twist.”⁶² What is the nature of capitalism, according to Bell? It is regarded as a social system in which market exchange predominates, a criterion so elastic that it could apply even to some facets of former state socialism (communism). Markets have always existed, but nowadays Bell believes they dominate everything; “everything is also subject to the rule of the market.”⁶³ This is the nature of late capitalism. The idea is hardly tenable because all manner of Christian dispositions (or “desires” if you like) are not subject to the market. Love of God and each other is not under market rule. Jesus promoted a range of behaviors that need not be affected by the market. For instance, he promulgated the necessity for peacefulness and composure in interpersonal relations, that whatever wrong another does is to be forgiven (Mt 6:14), or “do good to those who hate you,” as Lk 6:27 puts it. Both Mt 7:12, and Lk 6:31 express this idea of “do to others as would have them do to you.” Markets are not the means by which these qualities can be obtained. Paul develops these notions in Gal 5:22, that “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control,” admonishing believers to clothe themselves “with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience” (Col 3: 12). None of these have to be subject to the market, “the complete marketization of life”⁶⁴ (p. 24) has not been attained. Total marketization has not been achieved within the family, in school, amateur sport and many individual recreations, like fishing, or in welfare provision. While all these activities use products of the market, the interpersonal relations that exist within them are not subject to market control.

Bell does not attempt to show how society would function without markets. If markets have taken the direction they do, over-emphasizing trivial consumption, it can be argued that the key lies in the extent to which decision makers in firms and consumers are not influenced by loving God triune, and by not following normative biblical precepts. Suppose decision makers and consumers *were* influenced in these ways. Currently legalized industries, like pornography, prostitution, gambling, production of luxury items, some films and music promoting nefarious values, and some of the advertising industry are likely to be diminished. A greater number of people would be involved in economic decision making, facilitating the greater influence of Christian values. Of course, what the sinful activity/product is would be a matter of debate among Christians.

⁶²Bell, *The Economy*, 19-20.

⁶³Bell, *The Economy*, 23.

⁶⁴Bell, *The Economy*, 24.

How capitalism encourages desire is analyzed by Bell via the case of the New Orleans' Mardi Gras.⁶⁵ As Bell describes it, the Mardi Gras is a thoroughly perverted dimension of capitalism, that could not function without exploited labor in China. To say that the Mardi Gras is "the product of a particular formation of desire"⁶⁶ is unremarkable, and adds nothing new to its conceptualization. Capitalism has always taken to itself and seized processes that originally lay outside its gambit. An example in our lifetime is the capture of amateur sport by professional sport. Nor is a new perception to see that people come to accept their capture as normal and acceptable. Thus, while self-employed manufacturing labor was the typical case before the advent of the joint-stock company, in the latter, workers are dominated and controlled by those overseeing them, regarding this as a perfectly normal state of affairs.

The history of capitalism is explained by Bell in terms of changing flows of desires through time. The history goes as far back as the "archaic imperial state [that] appeared against the backdrop of primitive agricultural communities."⁶⁷ The role of filiation and kinship changed to fracture a given social structure. Yet, postulating these changes in terms of desire (not yet defined), does not take us very far. What caused the changes in desire? Probably, they can be explained by people ignoring God's requirements for human beings, greed, the need for capital accumulation by a centralized state, changing social structures, and technological change. All these conspired to change desires. Just focusing on desire as the motivating force does not expose the causal mechanisms underlying desire. Capitalism is supposed to have captured desire. This is described by the supersession of primitive agricultural society by the archaic imperial state, this by its fracture into "diverse states."⁶⁸ But no causal mechanisms are posed to explain this transition. It just happened because desire changed. The observation that nowadays "capitalism... is not territorial," that it "is a matter of the abstract, generalized flow of labor and capital"⁶⁹ has been made repeatedly since globalization took off in the 1970s, by such as Harvey and Castells. Why "desire" assumed the configuration it did to achieve this end, is not made clear.

WHAT IS WRONG WITH CAPITALISM?

Bell's opposition to capitalism is pervasive. His book aims to present "capitalism versus the divine economy made present by Christ and witnessed to by the church." This thesis is approached by pointing out that the end purpose of human life is to rest in God.⁷⁰ This requirement can be developed, as we put it earlier, that the aim of human life is to love God and Christ who

⁶⁵Bell, *The Economy*, 53-59.

⁶⁶Bell, *The Economy*, 59.

⁶⁷Bell, *The Economy*, 60.

⁶⁸Bell, *The Economy*, 61.

⁶⁹Bell, *The Economy*, 63, 64.

⁷⁰Bell, *The Economy*, 20, 85.

require believers to follow their commands (Jn 14: 15, 21, 24). The love obligation cannot be separated from the doing one. Sin is a corruption of both of these. If this is the case, the modern economy could be powered more by these demands. Individual Christians can provide exemplars of how this might work. Capitalism does not have to be a society where humans try to satisfy their needs separately from God, although God has given people freewill to do this. Bell castigates capitalism as “a manifestation of sin because it both corrupts desire and obstructs communion. Capitalism is wrong because its discipline distorts human desire.”⁷¹ Surely sin is the more fundamental influence that distorts human desire. Desire was debased long before capitalism made its presence felt, characterizing slave and feudal societies. Capitalism is just another system in the history of humankind where friendship with God is impaired. To say that desire “no longer flows according to its proper, created end”⁷² implies that desire did function more to its proper end before capitalism. No evidence is provided that primitive society or feudalism supports this assertion.

Certainly, the New Orleans Mardi Gras and the Chinese bead factory are examples of the debasement of desire. How does distortion apply to less threatening examples of capitalism? Food shopping in a supermarket might seem like a benign manifestation of the operation of markets, as might be car manufacture and sale. Of course, these activities could be modified to accord more with biblical precept, such as by giving workers more say in their operation, and having firms in the supply chain cooperate more rather than compete. Farmers are probably the last occupational group who cooperate more than compete in their production, purchasing and selling activities, with government extension services assisting this preservation. Even reformed, it is hard to envisage how these activities could work without market exchange. Bell does not show how the economy could work without it.

The redemption of the person is still something to be pursued. While capitalism, and every social system known to humankind, does impair our relationship with God, God has always been available and willing to redeem the person who seeks Him. It is the activities of this person who can help change capitalism from what it is now. In the exercise of formulating alternatives to, or reforms of, capitalism, how these might draw people closer to God is the crucial issue. This enterprise has been explored for decades without drawing postmodernist concepts into the discussion. Deleuze and Foucault have not formulated “a new way of morally evaluating capitalism,”⁷³ a task in which Christian ethicists and economists have long been engaged.

Bell recognizes that Christian defenders of capitalism believe that it encourages “creativity, independence, cooperation, and the self-interested pursuit of personal happiness devoid of envy and greed.” Yet, it is going too

⁷¹Bell, *The Economy*, 88.

⁷²Bell, *The Economy*, 88.

⁷³Bell, *The Economy*, 91.

far to suggest that under capitalism “the individual has no innate or involuntary ties to community,” that capitalism has an “aversion to traditional, communitarian forms of social organization.”⁷⁴ Bell does not explain the characteristics of this communitarian social organization, except as we go back to primitive agricultural communities he had raised earlier. Surely, Bell is not suggesting that production be reconstituted into this type of organization or “the realm of the household.”⁷⁵

Many people have ties to family that are both involuntary and voluntary, to employment that is mainly involuntary (except that workers can voluntarily quit their jobs), to the legal system (such as being called up for jury service), and to various levels of government, such as paying taxes. In people’s thinking, these involuntary obligations can be just as important as voluntary responsibilities, such as to family, church, recreation/sporting club, neighborhood, voluntary work, and friendship. Indeed, some people obtain meaning for their lives from participating in voluntary activity. From these examples, it is incorrect to claim that the individual stands “apart from and against every collectivity.” Nor is it tenable to suggest that “capitalism encourages us to view others in terms of how they can serve our self-interested projects.”⁷⁶ This motivation applies little within the family, in vast swathes of paid employment, especially in the not-for-profit sector, in voluntary work and recreation. School joins us to a collectivity in which our schoolfellows both exercise self-interest and altruism. Our relationships in school are both voluntary and involuntary, and the market need not dominate schooling. For Christians, there are other important activities outside the control of the market, such as church participation, individual prayer, and Scripture study.

Although there may be a myth that “the capitalist individual is essentially self-made,” no individual, in fact, *is* self-made. To have reached where we are has required involuntary and voluntary assistance from others who have cooperated with us to produce where we are in our lives. Only in some senses have people become “small business owners.”⁷⁷ In most of our work lives, for example, this does not apply. Most people work for somebody else, perhaps an entity like a corporation, where they take direction and are subject to the power of others to control their work. Bell’s depiction of self-made and self-entrepreneurship hardly describes how many poor people construct their lives.

The assertion is put that “marriages are viewed as (short-term) contracts subject to a cost/benefit analysis, children become consumer goods or accessories, family bonds are weakened.”⁷⁸ If these qualities do characterize late capitalism (postmodernism) compared with early capitalism, these phenomena would be expected to have grown. No evidence is provided

⁷⁴Bell, *The Economy*, 94, 95, 106.

⁷⁵Bell, *The Economy*, 60, 108.

⁷⁶Bell, *The Economy*, 96, 105.

⁷⁷Bell, *The Economy*, 96.

⁷⁸Bell, *The Economy*, 106.

that this is the case. For example, US divorce rates grew steadily from the turn of the 1900s before the advent of postmodernism, hiked from the 60s, and declined from the 90s. If family bonds were weakening under postmodernism, divorce rates should more likely be rising.

Bell draws a distinction between the true God and “the capitalist God [who] is not active now in redeeming humanity from sin.”⁷⁹ This seems to imply that every activity within capitalism is not subject to God’s grace and guidance, nor do people seek it. This is not the case, as the preceding argument has contended. Nor is it true of the examples given below of Christians engaging in the capitalist market. They are endeavoring to run their lives and affect others as they see God redeeming sin within the activity in which they are involved. The underlying distortion needing God’s healing is human sinfulness, not human freedom, self-interest, insatiable desire, scarcity or competition.

THE ALTERNATIVE OR DIVINE ECONOMY

A common criticism of Radical Orthodoxy is that it is not specific about how alternatives to capitalism would work. For example, Lunn holds that “Long does not offer much in the way of specifics,” that “Milbank also is not specific as to how such an economy would work” (and McMullen).⁸⁰ Lunn concludes his overview that Radical Orthodoxy fails “to offer any specifics about how Christian socialism or a particular third way would actually work in a modern, or even postmodern, pluralistic society.” Vantassel makes the same comment specifically about Bell, 2012.⁸¹

Some Christian agreement that our economic lives need to be reordered to move us into closer communion with God may exist, although the specifics of how this might be done may reveal no unanimity. Bell holds that “it is entirely appropriate to ask how our economic lives ought to be ordered in response to the gift and call of the One who does save, Jesus Christ.”⁸² As noted earlier, Christian economists have engaged in this activity over the last forty years. Some have explored whether there is a Christian-based alternative to the entropy that characterizes contemporary capitalism. Instances are given below showing how this is being done, and could be extended.

Bell promotes the idea that the church should become the alternative economy. As he puts it, “discipleship is about the Christian community living now in accord with God’s economy in the midst of the worldly economies.” This proposal envisages a church or Christian community dissimilar from that existing. As things stand now, most Christian communities do not engage in “labor and produce, acquire and distribute, buy and sell, trade and invest, lend

⁷⁹Bell, *The Economy*, 112.

⁸⁰Lunn, “Capitalism,” 6; McMullen, “Radical,” 355-358.

⁸¹Lunn, “Capitalism,” 19; Stephen Vantassel, Book Review: D. Bell, *The Economy of Desire*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, *Journal of Markets and Morality*, 16, 1 (2013), 286-287.

⁸²Bell, *The Economy*, 89.

and borrow” as part of their church activities.⁸³ Indeed, it is questionable how far Bell’s proposal is realistic. More reasonable to suggest is that individual Christians in their everyday work engage in “labor and produce” etc. In these activities they can show how to perform them “in a manner that is different from others.” They are still part of the body of Christ. Just as the church should witness to the new economy, so should all Christians. The work of individual Christians can be guided by communion with other Christians, by prayer, and normative biblical principle. “Charity, justice, and generosity”⁸⁴ are part of these, but can be given more operational content than this.

Consider a series of examples following that give practical substance to these suggestions. One concerns firm organization. Bell had previously given cooperatives as an element of the divine economy, but with no operational examples. Yet, instances of such cooperative exist. The non-church based but Christian-run UK Daily Bread Cooperatives are instances of how the biblical principles can work in practice, as are the Economy of Communion firms (Focolare). These are revolutionary and micropolitical instances demonstrating Christian difference in the economic sphere. When they were operating under the influence of Catholic Social Thought in their early days, the Mondragon cooperatives instantiated Christians as individuals practicing Christian values, influenced also by the Christian distributism of Chesterton and Belloc. There was no notion that the local Catholic churches become the cooperatives. All these cooperatives and firms produce goods for “the market.” They are enmeshed in part in the capitalist economy, but, in part they manifest organizational differences from typical firms in the capitalist economy. Unless Bell can show how production and exchange can work without “the market,” the coops and Focolare can be regarded as challenging the conventional capitalist system but still practicing market exchange. They do not “undercut capitalism’s celebrated productivity and efficiency,” being themselves exemplars of productivity and efficiency. These firms work within the market, but provide an alternative model to standard capitalist operation. These exercises can be regarded as part of a “diaspora or pilgrim economics.”⁸⁵

Also working within the market system are numerous Christian efforts to help the poor in the developing and developed world, but that provide alternative models to the pre-existing options presented by market capitalism. Examples are the Catholic Worker Movement, the New Monasticism⁸⁶ (such as Rutba House), L’Abri Fellowship, Intentional Christian Communities (such as Reba Place Fellowship), Christian Community Development Association and its members, Word Made Flesh, Caritas, World Vision, Tear Fund, Opportunity International, Mennonite Economic Development Associates,

⁸³Bell, *The Economy*, 28.

⁸⁴Bell, *The Economy*, 162, 207, 29.

⁸⁵Bell, *The Economy*, 125, 188.

⁸⁶Graham Cray, Ian Mobsy, and Aaron Kennedy, eds. *New Monasticism as Fresh Expression of Church* (London: Canterbury Press, 2010).

Habitat for Humanity, Christian Aid, Seeds of Hope, Ten Thousand Villages, and Church Supported Agriculture. A further 70 plus Christian international aid organizations can be found on the web. None of these is perfect, but they have all developed to counter what they see as deficiencies in capitalism as it existed in their aid-giving locale. Add on the many efforts by religious orders to assist the poor by subverting the outcomes of capitalism as it would manifest without their efforts. An example is the San Lucas Toliman Mission in Guatemala, buying land in the market, and distributing it free of charge to aspiring peasant farmers. All these enterprises aim to present an alternative community and model of production from that generated by the capitalism in the countries in which they operate. They are all attempting more than just correcting market failure, but they still work within the framework of capitalism. The cases reflect the presupposition that “in Christ the kingdom has come near, which means that God’s economy is a real, genuine possibility here and now.”⁸⁷ God is doing these things now, and he enlists humans in the process.

Now add on non-Christian organizations in which Christian influence occurs, endeavouring to change the capitalism of their country toward a more humane orientation. An enormous list exists. Consider just two cases from Latin America where the influence of the Catholic Church has been important. An example is the worker-recovered factory movement in Argentina, where 300 former-bankrupt factories are run by 15, 000 cooperators, each receiving the same wage. Another is the Landless Workers Movement (MST) in Brazil, obtaining underutilized land for landless peasants, assisted by progressive sections of the Catholic Church. This has a loose membership of one and a half million, replicated in other developing countries. For the developing world, La Via Campesina acts as clearing house and advocate for the rights of peasants, helping formulate non-standard projects to assist peasant farming, representing 150 organizations and 200 million members in 70 countries. Foucault’s allegation earlier that an obsession with the state dominated the 1970s to an oppressive order does and did not apply to any of these organizations. For example, while the MST has been instrumental in getting laws changed to allow peasants to seize and farm under-utilized land, it did not start on this basis. In its antecedents, under-utilized farmland was appropriated against the law, and the power of its success forced regional and national governments to alter their stance.

In the developed world, New York’s Cooperative Home Care Associates, the largest worker cooperative in the US, is also an example of employment generation for low-income people, assisted in its start-up by Christian funds. The over 8,000 cooperative, not-for-profit credit unions, like the Center for Community Self-Help, fit into a similar category, assisting the provision of jobs and accommodation for low-income earners more so than would be provided by the conventional capitalist market. All these are

⁸⁷Bell, *The Economy*, 126.

operational examples of presenting alternatives to typical market outcomes. In diverse ways, they represent “revolutionary resistance to the advancing global economic order,” but they have not needed continental philosophy to undergird their efforts. The alternative economies exist within capitalism and use capitalism. They resist “desire deformed into self-interest,” but it is a moot point how far they could be called non-capitalist. None of the alternative exercises seek to constantly create “new objects/idols for its fascination,”⁸⁸ even those of a non-Christian nature. All the examples above can be regarded as the new conspirators within capitalism, “creating the future one mustard seed at a time.”⁸⁹

It is feasible too that God is establishing the alternative capitalist economy through the hundreds of thousands of ostensibly secular enterprises presenting different characteristics from those prevailing in the capitalism where they exist. Just in the US alone, Alperovitz gives example after example of this process. The Green Bay Packers football team is owned by a non-profit corporation rather than the typical mode of private ownership, but is able to perform just as well. Community Land Trusts make land and housing available to low income people. Christians play an important role in some of these, such as the Nehemiah Corporation. Another model is the Community Development Corporation oriented to encouraging a range of economic and social capital in a city. A Christian-instigated example is the Abyssinian Development Corporation, from the local Baptist church in Harlem. Non-profit models also exist encouraging low income workers into jobs, like Esperanza Unida, Pioneer Human Services, and the Roberts Enterprise Development Fund that aim to become self-financing organizations.⁹⁰

All the examples above depend on market exchange. If this is Bell’s main criterion for defining capitalism, the examples do not shy away from it. Bell cites L’Arche as an example of God renewing “human desire and human relations according to a logic other than the agony of the capitalist market.” Like all the cases above, L’Arche is a community “in the midst of the capitalist economy of desire.”⁹¹ This is valid as far as it describes L’Arche, but L’Arche are not communities of production, they depend on the capitalist state to provide incomes for their residents, they buy goods and services in the capitalist market, without which they could not survive. Undoubtedly, their model is preferable to existing ways of caring for the disabled, but they do not eschew the market.

When people ponder the “big problems,” Bell suggests they turn inevitably to the state. As the examples above suggest, this need not be the case. Christians, for example, can provide the guidance to operationalize alternative firm organization, without relying on the state. “Social change,” as

⁸⁸Bell, *The Economy*, 46, 168.

⁸⁹Tom Sine, *The New Conspirators: Creating the Future One Mustard Seed at a Time* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP, 2008).

⁹⁰Alperovitz, *America*, 92-93, 93-95, 99-106, 106-107.

⁹¹Bell, *The Economy*, 124.

the above examples are, can proceed by individual Christians coming together to formulate innovation based on biblical principle. The examples above require “enabling and preserving the market.” Although Bell holds that markets control everything — something he dislikes, and that is untrue — he makes no argument that firms could function without them. The Christian instigators of the cases mentioned above, and of countless other Christian-assisted examples to uplift the poor in the developing world are “revolutionaries,” but they did or do not think of their enterprises in terms of “statecraft.” They are practicing a “micropolitics of desire,”⁹² without needing a Deleuze or Foucault to point them in this direction. It was the praxis of their own situations that lead them along this route.

Bell Jr posits the Seattle demonstrations of 1999 as a good example of the necessity of micropolitics. One might be sympathetic to the aims of the demonstrators, diffuse as they were, without posing what happened as a model to be emulated. The difference between the cases cited above and Seattle is that the former are producing something enduring, mostly not reliant on the state, aiming to provide secure, adequately-paid, self-managed forms of work, and affordable accommodation for low income people. Seattle was a spontaneous conflagration from which no durable organizational forms challenging capitalist modes of production emerged. The cases above are all concerned with “ordering of life in community,” they had to “be organized into a politics.”⁹³

Bell accepts certain structures of capitalism. For example, he agrees that the corporation does “have a role.”⁹⁴ This is in the face of arguments that the corporation does not accord with Christian values.⁹⁵ The hierarchical nature of control in corporations, the separation of duties of operation from ownership, and the historical effect of corporations in accentuating inequalities in the distribution of wealth and income render it a vehicle unsuited to the divine economy. Bell seems to accept at least some of this criticism, holding that “shareholder wealth maximization” does not agree with “the common good of nurturing communion,” and its “institutional culture militates against virtue.”⁹⁶ Alternatives to the corporation exist even now in employee share-owned companies, worker cooperatives, partnerships, and self-employment. For example, the Christian owner of the UK Scott-Bader chemical corporation gifted his company to its 450 employees in 1951, operating profitably since — again, within the capitalist market.

How far is the alternative economy described above non-capitalist? Bell seems to think that it is, for his book is about “capitalism versus the

⁹²Bell, *The Economy*, 39, 40, 41.

⁹³Bell, *The Economy*, 31-33, 41.

⁹⁴Bell, *The Economy*, 181.

⁹⁵Donald Hay, *The Joint-Stock Company: Blessing Or Curse? Working Paper Association Of Christian Economists (US)*, 1991; Clive Beed and Cara Beed, “A Christian Perspective on the Joint Stock Company,” *Journal of Markets and Morality* 13, 1 (2010): 101-122.

⁹⁶Bell, *The Economy*, 182.

divine economy made present by Christ and witnessed to by the church.”⁹⁷ Yet, he seems comfortable in allowing certain features of capitalism to persist in the divine economy. For example, “the divine economy does not condemn production, consumption, private property, profit taking, contracts, the division of labor or markets in themselves.” A redeemed market is also seen to have a role to play in the economy of desire. He puts it that “the market and the state, no less than civil society, should nurture virtuous desire and be ordered toward the common good.”⁹⁸ There is no doubt that the divine economy “depends on the nature of those practices in a given economy.”⁹⁹ Bell’s basic argument seems to be that existing capitalist economies are distorted by sin, but this is not a new observation. Writers on the theology of work, such as Volf, Jensen, Cosden, and the Theology of Work Project,¹⁰⁰ have long made the same reflection. What Bell seems to be advocating is a sinless capitalism. Yet, he accepts that the divine economy will not be “manifest *in its fullness* until Christ returns in final victory.”¹⁰¹

That capitalism “is quite adept at absorbing critique” does not mean that all critique can be absorbed without change. Suppose the church became convinced of the necessity to promulgate the development of alternative work structures more in line with what it saw as biblical principles. A few examples of operational Christian-based firms working along alternative lines exist, discussed above. There is no evidence and little likelihood that these firms are being or could be “thoroughly incorporated into the capitalist market.” Yet contrary to Bell, the way these firms operate does not indicate a “disconnect between belief and practice.” Their workers are believers who aim to practice what they see as Jesus’ commands in the world. There is no need for a discontinuity between Christian belief and practice that works against Jesus’ explicit teaching. The only way a disconformity can be overcome is by Christians deriving normative principles or themes from the Bible, and ascertaining how they might be applied. Individual Christians can do this in the context of their own lives, without waiting for their church to do so. Capitalism may encourage “a shallow, decontextualized engagement with religious beliefs,” but it is something that can be resisted by the individual Christian armed with the Gospel message. If we face “stresses of my middle-class life,”¹⁰² what Gospel values are available to help me mitigate these?

CONCLUSION

⁹⁷Bell, *The Economy*, 20.

⁹⁸Bell, *The Economy*, 207.

⁹⁹Bell, *The Economy*, 172.

¹⁰⁰Miroslav Volf, *Work In The Spirit* (Eugene, OR: Wipf And Stock, 2001); Darrell Cosden, *A Theology of Work: Work and the New Creation* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2004); *The Heavenly Good of Earthly Work* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2006); David Jensen, *Responsive Labor* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006); *Theology of Work Project* (Boston, 2015).

¹⁰¹Bell, *The Economy*, 188; original emphasis.

¹⁰²Bell, *The Economy*, 20, 21.

Radical Orthodoxy has a useful role to play in theological analysis, but it does not need self-professed postmodernist, non-Christian theoreticians to underpin its case. Because some Radical Orthodoxy relies on these analysts, it is taking attempts to construct a counter or radical Christian economics into areas that provide little new insight into how the capitalist economy might be reformed or replaced to generate an economy more in line with Christian socio-economic principles. Helpful non-Radically Orthodox theologians' contributions to this enterprise are Witherington III, Blomberg, and Grudem and Asmus, assisted by the field of biblical ethics. In these exercises, the input of biblical exegetes is crucial, such as Longenecker who examines how Paul regarded the issue of poverty in his own time.¹⁰³

Radical Orthodoxy is formulating Christian principles that are valid practice for the individual believer in all aspects of her life, such as that people exist in communion with each other, that they are free to act in Christ, that the common good should be sought and esteemed, that people's desire rests in God, that justice should be practiced, and that God triune is the giver of perfect gifts. Few of these are given empirical substance in Radical Orthodoxy in how they should be practiced by those who participate in economic affairs. Neither is it shown how any derive from biblical analysis. The concepts, valid as they are, have been discussed and promoted throughout Christian thought for aeons, and are not new insights. Neither do they emerge from (secular) postmodern thought. Just in this century, Catholic social thought (CST), and liberation theology have kept up running analysis of these issues, without needing postmodernist theoreticians to assist them.

It need not be denied that capitalism contains the evils Bell describes. They all emanate from human sin that is the underlying dislocation God is in the process of healing. The numerous examples cited above, showing that another world is possible compared to savage and fast capitalism, need market exchange. They have affinities to the currently in-vogue, "inclusive capitalism." As the influence of these examples grows, capitalism will operate differently from the present, but there seems no reason why the alternative could not be called a reformed capitalism. Within this structure, the alternative Christian-lead and -influenced projects aim to order their work/lives in Christ economically with "ceaseless generosity, of unending charity" (p. 160). In this way, the divine economy "is taking shape and already active all around us" (p. 146). The cases examined here of these processes do not regard capitalism as it operates as exhibiting "veritable laws of nature."¹⁰⁴ (p. 145). To call for the overthrow of capitalism is throwing out the baby with the bathwater. The usefulness of market exchange would be destroyed, without showing what is

¹⁰³ Ben Witherington III, *Jesus and Money* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2010); Wayne Grudem and Barry Asmus, *The Poverty of Nations* (Wheaton, ILL: Crossway, 2013); Craig Blomberg, *Christians in an Age of Wealth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013); Bruce Longenecker, *Remember the Poor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010).

¹⁰⁴ Bell, *The Economy*, 160, 146, 145.

to replace it. Christians and non-Christians are more likely to be persuaded of the need to reform capitalism along the lines of the cases discussed here — an exploration in which left- to right-leaning Christians have long been involved, from Ronald Sider to Michael Novak.