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“The Market as God”

The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg

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Almost a decade ago, the Harvard theologian Harvey Cox published an article titled “The Market as God.” I was interested to learn that he recently expanded his idea into a book of the same name because I’ve read a lot of articles over the years, but this one stuck with me much longer than most because I have found the central insight helpful in understanding certain aspects of our contemporary world. The basic idea is that “free market economics” has come to function in many ways like the idea of God used to function in our society: **a perfect, all-knowing, all-powerful deity that will bestow its blessings upon us if we but put our unqualified faith in it.**

Cox first became aware of this perspective when a friend suggested that he was spending too much time reading the front section (“National news”) section of the *New York Times*—and that, **“if he wanted to know what was going on in the real world,” he should, “turn immediately to the business section.”** As Cox began paying more attention to the world of finance, he assumed, as a professional theologian, that he would encounter a lot of unfamiliar territory. Instead, he says, it was like *déjà vu*.

He began to see many parallels between the contemporary business world and the history of religions:

Behind the descriptions of acquisitions and mergers, monetary policy, and the convolutions of the Dow and the NASDAQ, I gradually made out the pieces of a grand narrative about the inner meaning of human history, why things go wrong,

and how to put them right. **Theologians call these myths of origin, legends of the fall, and doctrines of sin and redemption. Here they were again, and in only thin disguise: chronicles about the creation of wealth, the seductive temptations of over-regulation...**and, ultimately, salvation through the advent of free markets, with a small dose of ascetic belt-tightening along the way for those economies that fall into the sin of arrears. I realized then that my many years of studying religion and theology had prepared me to approach this mysterious thing called the economy more knowingly than I could have guessed. (Cox 4-5)

But here's the open secret: it turns out that with orthodox economic models—just like with orthodox understandings of God—when you pull back the curtain of how these ideas emerged in history, you do not find the “Great and powerful Wizard of Oz.” Instead, behind all the smoke and mirrors, you usually find that the source is someone (or someones) who are far from perfect and all too human (Cox 7-8).

Now, I'll come back to that idea later. For now, I invite you to consider a few of the other ways economics has come to function like a religion for increasing numbers of people in our society. To quote another excellent book on this subject, *At the Altar of Wall Street: The Rituals, Myths, Theologies, Sacraments, and Mission of the Religion Known as the Modern Global Economy* (Eerdmans, 2015) by the theologian Scott W. Gustafson:

Each day on Wall Street begins with a simple liturgy. A presider...stands at a podium and rings a bell. For the next eight hours exchanges occur that determine the well-being of the market for that day that bring either hope or despair to the participants in the ritual. **This experience of a bull-market “heaven” or a bear-market “hell” is indistinguishable in effect from revivalist experiences of being “saved” or “damned.”**... The day ends, of course, exactly as it began: with a ritual ringing of a bell. (Gustafson 10)

And just as religion has its sacraments (ways of experiencing the sacred), **the economy also has a sacrament (an outward sign of whether one is blessed or cursed): money** (Gustafson 109-110). The economy also has its priests, who interpret its mysterious ways—from the everyday economic priests of cable television stock advisors, to the inner circle of the president's

Council of Economic Advisers, to high priests like the chair of the Federal Reserve, whose every word is parsed as closely as the oracles of old to divine our fate (Gustafson 12). Indeed, Fed chair Janet Yellen descended from on high on Friday to give signs that the interest rates will likely be raised soon.

If you will indulge me in a few more parallels, **just as ancient religions had sacrificial festivals to curry favor with the gods and help ensure a favorable harvest season, so too we have the annual Holiday Shopping Season in which we seek to revive our god, the economy** (Gustafson 15). Another High Holy Day of economic religion is Super Bowl Sunday—when advertisers try to convince us that commercials on this one occasion are a positive good that we should actively seek out (Gustafson 19). The truth, of course, is that all commercials—whether Super or mundane—are designed to create dissatisfaction and convince us to believe that we will be happier if we buy something (Cox 200). Such happiness is almost always elusively fleeting. “The economy giveth and the economy taketh away. Blessed be the name of the economy!”

Whenever we take even a half-step backward to witness the ways that advertisers are trying to manipulate us, we can quickly see the absurdity of their claims. For instance, could anything be *less* of the “real thing” than Coca-Cola? **If a manufactured concoction of water, sugar, carbonation, high-fructose corn syrup, caffeine, artificial caramel color, and various other ingredients is the real thing, then what would a “fake thing” be?** I’m not trying to unduly hate on Coke, but from a philosophical and theological view, their tagline feels like an absurd caricature of historic debates from Plato to Kant about “the thing in itself” —and all the Eucharistic debates of the “Real Presence” (Cox 18).

There are many other parallels, such as the way we take **family pilgrimages to Disney World with the same dedication, sacrifice, and rapture that people used to experience only on pilgrimages to religious holy sites** (Gustafson 28).

But to cut to the more important parallel, there are so many ways in which the Market has come to function in our society as a god. If you take nothing else away from this sermon, I hope some of you will increasingly notice the ways that the Market is often described in terms akin to *omnipotent* (the Market is an “all powerful” force), *omniscient* (the Market is “all knowing” of how to be perfectly efficient in distributing wealth), *omnipresent* (the free Market needs to be

completely free “everywhere”), and *omni-beneficent* (the way the Market distributes wealth is “all good” for everyone). We are told: if we will but put our faith in the market, “all manners of things will be well!” It is only our lack of faith which tempts us to regulate the Market, which prevents the Market from bestowing the fullness of its blessings upon us (Cox 8). We just need to be unquestioningly faithful to the Market.

From a historical perspective, the late eighteenth-century philosopher Adam Smith could be considered the patron saint of free market religion. Cox jokes that perhaps we should call him “**St. Adam of Glasgow**” (145). Smith taught that the best way to create a good society is for every person to act *selfishly* to advance their self-interest (Cox 145). Counter-intuitively, Smith tell us, if we are all individually selfish, more *good* will be created overall for everyone because, looking back, it will seem to us as if that self-interested individual were “led by an invisible hand.” (Does an “invisible hand” sound a lot like a theological claim about God to anyone else?) Moreover, Smith assures his adherents that, “**By pursuing [one’s] own interest [one] frequently promotes that of the society more efficiently than when [one] really intends to promote it**” (Gustafson 40).

Here is the point where being a Unitarian Universalist can be helpful. Our UU forebears helped paved in the way in saying that it was *insufficient* to say that orthodox religious claims must be believed because of hierarchy or tradition. Instead, **reason and experience are equally (or more) legitimate criteria of authority**. We can apply those same approaches to faith claims made about the Market as God.

The truth is, we have tried faith in an unregulated free market, and we have seen repeated evidence of the devastation it can wreak:

The Mortgage and Housing Bubble and Crash 2004-2009

The U.S. Bubble in Over-the-Counter Stocks 1995-2000

The Asian Stock and Real Estate Bubble 1992-1997

The U.S. Savings and Loan Crisis of the Late 1980s

The Stock Market Crash of 1929

The Mississippi Bubble of 1720

The South Sea Bubble of 1720

The Dutch Tulip Bulb Debacle of 1636 (Gustafson 42)

Now, I don't have time to go into the history of all of those financial crises, or even to try to explain credit default swaps and the collateralized debt obligation bubble behind our most recent crisis (Gustafson 45-46). However, **the best, clearest, and most interesting explanation I have seen is the excellent 2015 film *The Big Short***. If you haven't seen it, I highly recommend it.

I should also be clear that I am not advocating that we should shift from one extreme to the other, dissolve private property, and have state ownership of everything. **Profit-motive is a powerful, productive force that we should continue to harness, but we need to do so responsibly**. We need a balance somewhere between “Conscious Capitalism” (that is more aware of its shadow side and capacity to harm) and “Democratic Socialism” (which empowers people—not a totalitarian, fascistic socialism). But our world is currently in thrall to the extremes of a barely-regulated capitalism that profits through the exploitation of people and planet. And neither the 99% nor the climate can withstand much more abuse.

Here in the early twenty-first century, **too much irrational faith in the “invisible hand” of the free market has created an unhealthy wealth gap in our world: “the richest tenth of a percent of American households now control as much wealth as the bottom 90 percent combined—and the chasm widens every year”** (Cox 103). There are, of course, people who have worked incredibly hard to move from “rags to riches” in our society, but an orthodox free market faith would have you believe that the “invisible hand” of the market has ensured that the only reason anyone is rich is that they worked hard—and the only reason someone is poor is that they are lazy. The opposite can just as often be true, especially in the case of inherited wealth—people who are “born on third base and think they hit a triple.”

By inviting you to see the ways that economics has co-opted the language of religion, my point has been that we need to pull back the curtain and reveal that far from being “God,” the engines of the economy are all-too-human, which means we can change them. In Cox's words:

The Market system is not a part of nature. We as human beings constructed it and we can renovate, dismantle, or transform it if we want to. Laying hands on it might not make one widely popular but, unlike the Ark of the Covenant, it will not be punished by instant death. [Of course, it turns out that story isn't true

either!] **The Market must be deprived of its sacred aura so we can think about it clearly. We do not need to take off our shoes or our hats when we enter its sanctuary.** (Cox 256-257)

Our invitation is make our religion and our economics align with our deepest values and our true ultimate concerns—not false, idolatrous ones.

We must demand more than a single “bottom line” of profit, which exploits labor and disregards environmental costs as “externalities,” side effects which are not paid for. To use a traditional theological formulation, we need the Market to confess that it “has done things it ought not to have done” and “left undone things it ought to have done” (Cox 261). Instead of profit alone, **we need a “triple bottom line” that accounts for people, planet, and profit.** Profit is still a major part of the equation, but it must be balanced against the needs of people (human rights) and the longterm sustainability of life on this planet.

Currently, **instead of a triple-bottom line, we have abominations—desolating sacrileges!—like the claim that, “Corporations are people”** (Gustafson 89). And there is no guarantee that we will successfully transition to a more humane and green economy. However, the study of history tells us that predicting the future is a difficult game that is rarely successful. For example, if I were a contemporary of Thomas Malthus (1766 – 1834), I might well have agreed with the rational argument of his 1798 book *An Essay on the Principle of Population* that the demands of a growing human population would inevitably overcome the limited supply of Earth’s resources. But **the Industrial Revolution proved Malthus’s “Iron Law of Population” to be wrong—at least in the short term.** Previously unforeseen innovations created sufficient food to feed the growing number of our species, allowing our species to septuple to more than 7 billion people today. Of course, now the side effects of carbon dioxide emissions from that same Industrial Revolution and population explosion are causing global climate change on an unprecedented scale.

A techno-utopian today might tell us that, looking at the history of the economy, **in 1860 it was impossible to predict the sort of economic growth that would occur in the next century and a half.** No one predicted electricity becoming as ubiquitous as it is. Air travel and space travel were imagined by very few.

Automobiles, roads, television, radio, the discovery of microbes, recombinant DNA technologies, air conditioning, central heating, and a host of other inventions we now consider essential to life were not even imagined. The next 150 years could easily contain innovation of even greater magnitude. For example, **what would happen if we could mimic photosynthesis or harness the energy of the sun in efficient ways?** The implications to food production and energy...are quite staggering and could lead to Economic expansion of exponential proportions! (Gustafson 144)

That being said, **even if economic expansion continues in unpredictable ways (of which there is no guarantee), there is also no guarantee that it will be fairly distributed.** But the more *conscious* we are of the dynamics swirling around us—and the more equipped we are to debunk false claims—the more hope there is that we can do our part to build a world in which people, planet, and profit are kept in greater balance. Together, may we continue to seek “The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice” not merely for some or only a few, but “for *all.*”