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Special Book Review Essay

The Economy of Desire: Christianity and Capitalism in a Postmodern World

Daniel M. Bell, Jr.
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Liturgy as a Way of Life: Embodying the Arts in Christian Worship

Bruce Ellis Benson
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The Church and Postmodern Culture has recently released two more additions to its growing series. There are possibly three more contributions to the series before it can be addressed as a whole. However, its two newest additions deserve attention on their own.

Economy of Desire

Daniel M. Bell Jr.'s contribution, *The Economy of Desire: Christianity and Capitalism in a Postmodern World*, carries on the series' tradition of connecting postmodern philosophy to contemporary theological issues facing the church. Specifically, Bell wants to contribute to the conversation between Christianity and capitalism. Bell's diverse range of mastered fields, including theology, ethics, and economics, and his commitment to the movement of radical orthodoxy, puts him in a unique position for this contribution. This potential is only advanced with his ordination in the United Methodist Church and subsequent optimism for the transforming grace of God in this broken world through the transformed and transforming people of God.

Bell's readers are immediately struck by the cover of the book: fitting that a book about money is green. Or is it green because of the potential for change—like the budding of spring? Cleverly, the cover specifically links *Economy of Desire* with two others works in the series, *Politics of Discipleship* by Graham Ward and *GloboChrist* by Carl Raschke, which ask deeply related questions. If Raschke sees globalism as shaping a unique opportunity (along with challenges) for the Christian movement, Bell sees globalism, specifically

the politico-economic philosophy of neoliberal capitalism, as shaping a world set against the Christian way of life. Ward's own question of discipleship is easily seen in Bell's consideration of Christianity shaping the nature of desire toward God. The cover is already a key piece of intertext within the series.

Bell's argument follows a simple and natural progression. First, Bell describes the world using the category of the multitude, originally developed by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. The multitude is a group of irreducibly different individuals whose differences remain all the while participating in a common project (35). The image that Bell vividly describes for his readers is of a throng, a mob, protesting a World Trade Organization event in Seattle. The protest is an exercise in democracy—diverse, collaborative, and communicative. There is no rhyme or reason to the multitude. Perhaps it is best described as a paradoxical *simple chaos*.

What joins the throng together in its reaction against the all-in-all state is the phenomenon of desire. Bell develops the category of desire from both Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze. Desire is the driving, creative force, the power that resides at the bottom of everything and of which everything is only a form. The differences that exist—even in the multitude (and this is why the multitude may be thought of as simple chaos)—are only differences of degrees (43). Thus, to achieve true change is not merely to change the subject (i.e., government) that the multitude rages against, but to question and transform the provisional, temporal structure that desire has formed.

From here, Bell proceeds by developing the disciplined desire of capitalism and places the state in this same story. Capitalism has taken the drive, the creative power that is desire, and has created an insatiable thirst for more, bigger, and better. The insatiability of this desire is reflected in the decentralized product: something comes from anywhere in the world to replace something that came from somewhere radically different but that looks radically similar. In this story, the state moves from containing desire, to “regulating” its flows (61), to serving the interests of capitalism's formed desire. This leads to a culture unable to resist the rampant materialism and commodification of, well, everything. The result is a throng with everything they could ever want but who have themselves been taken (in the form of debt), mistaking this slavery for freedom. Perhaps Jesus' words take a clarifying, sinister twist of desire: For what good is it if a person should keep their soul, but fail to gain the world?

This turn opens space for Bell's thorough theological critique of capitalism. Since capitalism shapes the drive and creative energy that is desire, it shapes the deepest aspect of people, including the ends of human beings. Rather than seeking the Triune God and the community found within the Trinity, people are shaped by the capitalist system to assert themselves, develop their own interests, use and exploit, and so on. Obviously, the vision of capitalism

is no less than totalitarian in formation. In other words, capitalism does not just *have* a theology, it *is* a theology, proclaiming a God who did not create enough, is not active in redemption, and has given the corporation for salvation (112-117).

Finally, in light of this picture, Bell offers an alternative. Bell offers the church as an economy, the community of people created by the desire of God to have transformed desire. Bell argues against the notion that Christianity enforces repression of desire, but instead affirms that only Christianity understands desire in that it directs desire toward God whose desire for us comes first. This picture is rooted in an Anselmian theology. Rather than painting Anselm's satisfaction theory of atonement as God paying homage to a rule or law beyond himself, Bell suggests that God's satisfaction comes in seeing his project for humanity's transformation being accomplished (152). Bell then fleshes out a theology of Christian economics that recognizes that God has supplied enough, that purpose is found in the common good in the life of God, and that salvation is a gift. Finally, Bell suggests sacrificial living and charity as practices that seek the kingdom in the here and now.

Economy of Desire has a number of strengths. First, its ability to summarize and apply Deleuze and Foucault is remarkable. The reader is clearly presented with the cultural hermeneutical category of desire, and is subsequently able to use it as a lens to see certain appetites created by an economy founded on capitalism. Second, Bell's language is vivid and many of its images are memorable. For example, Bell contrasts two images in one photograph (123-24). In the photograph, two Down Syndrome friends share a beautiful picture of friendship while behind them is an advertisement featuring a model. The juxtaposition is clear: friendship and commodification of the body. The contrast of desire is stunning. While hearts may yearn for friendship, commodification of the body negates the possibility of what we deeply desire by presenting a false picture of desire. Third, Bell's sensitive treatment of stewardship reflects a deep commitment to the local church. Clearly Bell cares for the local church and the discipleship that happens in the teaching and practicing of tithing. Fourth, Bell takes holiness seriously. "[T]he church proclaims...that we are *not* stuck in our sin; we are not only forgiven (justified) but also healed (sanctified)" (178, emphasis in the original). Bell's point is that economics must not only be shaped hamartologically as with capitalism, but *soteriologically*. Those in the Wesleyan tradition especially will find Bell's optimism for grace and passion for holy living refreshing.

Economy of Desire welcomes several lines of critique, as well. This stems from its notion of capitalism as linked to a political ideology. For Bell, capitalism is not simply about private ownership or the exchange and production of goods through individuals and corporations by markets. Rather, Bell is critiquing "neoliberal capitalism," which is the "complete marketization of life" (24) that is facilitated by a strong, lean government that facilitates the

optimal range for the market and secures its function. This is not necessarily incorrect, especially as Bell's voice is prophetic, but it does invite specific critiques.

One wonders whether Bell may have served his entire argument by shifting its focus. Bell aims to provide a piece of work that contributes to the conversation of the relationship of capitalism to Christianity not as potential allies, but as conflicting visions. Capitalism is the foil to Christianity rather than as the foil to socialism (20). Frankly, this is not much of a fair fight and, in so doing, much of Bell's argument is lost of its power because one expects that many of his interlocutors trained in theology would agree with the contrast between Christianity and capitalism, but argue they are presently for different social spaces.

For example, Bell asserts, critically, that capitalist freedom is negative freedom. That is, it is a "freedom from" instead of "freedom for" (98). This freedom emphasizes individual freedom from the constraint of outside authority—including the authority of the other. Yet is this not precisely the kind of chastened freedom that secular (temporal) authorities have been given and Christians should expect of secular authority? Secular authorities may establish freedom for people to speak, shop, and travel in relative safety, but they cannot establish relationships of love, gift, and sharing. This is to say, Christians should be more concerned with an economic system developed for the human city that purports to provide a "freedom for." A "freedom from" is necessary for a social space shared by atheists, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, and any other who is part of the multitude.

Another example is Bell's notion of capitalism as affirming that God did not provide enough in the world; that there is a scarcity in the creation. This creates an "agony of relations" (115) where "God is cast as a kind of sadistic cosmic Easter bunny" (116) who has hidden goods from humanity knowing that some will succeed and others will fail in their search and exploitation of these goods. Yet is this necessarily what is meant by scarcity? Consider Bell's own book. Presumably Professor Bell was approached to write this book because a book of its kind was *scarce*. After all, if another book of its kind existed, why *produce* another one? Yet the scarcity of such a book has not created an agony of relations. Indeed, it is *sold* precisely as a *good* that has proper aims. (I know Professor Bell in a way that I did not before precisely because a book of this kind was scarce!) Further, one believes that the publisher has *invested* in the book for a financial return to continue publishing resources that are *scarce* but that will foster relationships. Scarcity does not necessarily mean a fight for the final raw material, but also the unique *opportunity* to provide for an "unmet need."¹

Bell's arrangement of capitalism as the foil to Christianity effectively insulates capitalism from *theological reform*. No economic system stands against the purposes of God. Bell is right to say that capitalism shapes sinners uniquely

and he is also right to say that sinners shape uniquely sinful economic systems (180). The volume by which he says the former drowns his own voice in the latter and leaves capitalism, in the mind of this reader, as a hopeless endeavor.² Bell may well respond that he does *not want* to critique capitalism. Instead, he wants to condemn it—and all the ways it is a vision that keeps people from the Triune God. To use Foucauldian language, Bell wants to behead the capitalist king *precisely because it is not the kingdom of God*.³ This is, in part, because the nature of charitable economic provision—“the logic of needs”—is itself subject to the insatiable capitalist desire rather than the divine economy (208). Christian economics is not simply making sure that basic needs are met given that what is basic shifts with what is expected. (Bell’s gives the example of indoor plumbing: what was once a luxury is now a need.) Instead, the Christian’s economic labor is a labor of communion. Christian work is not simply about the “provision of more” but of friendship (209). Indeed. What Christian would disagree? Where there is disagreement is whether there is *another* economic system for any and all regardless of religious commitments that may be instituted that does facilitate the meetings of (even expanding) needs, and whether this is *Christian* work. Ironically, the urging for a different economics without radical concern for basic need is more easily said by those with a bank account, winter boots, and daily bread than by those without. Bell’s arrangement to paint capitalism opposed to Christianity seemingly removes the possibility that capitalism may become more adept at serving those without. As a result, the reader may feel that Bell’s devastating condemnation of capitalism in favor of God means that one is left with the options of being either escapist or theocratic.

None of this should be taken to critique Bell’s radical systemic questions. For example, in the news as of the writing of this review is the story of police officer Larry DePrimo who provided a pair of winter boots for Jeffery Hillman in Times Square.⁴ It later emerged that Mr. Hillman would not wear the boots, opting to hide them for his own safety, and that Mr. Hillman, in fact, was supplied an apartment paid for him by government programs and veteran benefits that he did not use. The complexity of the story reveals the necessity of Bell’s advocacy for charity as more than basic provision.

Economy of Desire fits nicely with the other works of this series. It occupies a middle ground between the density of *Politics of Discipleship* and wonderful accessibility of *Whose Afraid of Postmodernism*. It has two potential uses in the church, both dependent on a skilled leader-teacher. First, with a leader able to challenge and defend Bell for the sake of formation, interested classes or small groups will find the work stimulating and engaging. Second, the preacher may find Bell’s explanation of desire helpful in understanding his or her congregation and the role of the church in shaping desire. Further, the preacher is given several helpful illustrations because of the vividness of Bell’s language.

Liturgy as a Way of Life

The other recent contribution is Bruce Ellis Benson's *Liturgy as a Way of Life: Embodying the Arts in Christian Worship*. Benson explores liturgy and the arts both *as* worship and *in* worship. This connection is important to his argument, as he wants the reader to have a broadened view of what it means to be an artist and the setting in which art is performed.

For Benson, all humans are artists as humans are created by the *Creator*. All humans are caught up in the flow of call and response: the world comes into existence from the call of God (19, 34); redemption begins with the call of God to Adam and Eve; Israel begins with the call of God to Abraham; and the exodus is prompted by a call from a burning bush. As such, humans are recipients of the call of God and respond in a creative way.

Human creation is not the creation *ex nihilo* of God, but a creation with what is already present—an improvisation. Benson's metaphor for this improvisatory creating is jazz. Benson also argues that human creation is not the art of a limited few destined to be creative geniuses, but the unique and lasting art of the masses. Human art is a liturgy: Art that is the work of the people for God, from God, and to God. Art also comes through the call of other people that is itself a response to a preceding (divine?) call.

In all of this artistic advocacy, Benson walks the tightrope that being an artist is neither an individual endeavor, nor is it whoring after a ghettoized world—even the world of the church. To accommodate this tension, Benson offers two works of the people: intensive liturgy and extensive liturgy. Intensive liturgy is that work that happens in the sacred places of worship, from cathedrals to sprawling megachurch auditoriums. Every church has a liturgy, those forms of work that shape the worship of the people in their *kairos* times. Beyond this, Benson urges the reader to heed the modified words of St. Paul: offer your bodies as living works of art (128). All of life is the offering of one to God, an artistic, improvisatory response to the creative call of God.

This contribution is reminiscent of other shorter volumes in the series, like Smith's *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism* and Westphal's, *Whose Community? Which Interpretation?* Benson has introduced the reader to a key postmodern thinker, Jean-Louis Chrétien, and taken the reader on a tour with Chrétien to show how his work is important for the church. Specifically, Benson uses Chrétien's work on the call and *beauty*. This is ultimately to bring truth, beauty, and goodness together. There is no sharp distinction between truth, beauty, and goodness such that if something is beautiful it must not be true. This is not to say that Benson does not believe that art may not be horrific. The world is not always "pretty." Yet, in the structure of call and response, the response is always emanating back to an original call of creation that is good.

Benson has perhaps exemplified this tension in the book: An artistic creation covers an accessible book that has an optimistic call that emerges from the work of God. Is the book always “pretty”? No, at times it is jarring. Benson wants the reader to be aware of the dangers of being an “artistic whore.” But in so doing, it is calling to something larger and deeper. Benson’s warnings against artistic unfaithfulness and the ubiquity of art and improvisatory living open the reader’s eyes to various forms of chasing the wrong kind of lovers. Not only with art is whoring a possibility, but the reader will sense this is a possibility as one gives oneself to technology, pop culture, work, and media. Even more subtly, though, the reader may sense it is possible with family and church. Whenever the artist sees their artwork removed from the call of God and instead something of their own creation or part of a narrative of their own choosing, Benson’s work strikes a discordant note. No, all of art of for God. *Life* is a liturgy!

Liturgy as a Way of Life exemplifies the heart of the Church and Postmodern Culture series. As a non-musical worship leader, I am forced to think about the liturgies of the tradition in which I serve, which tends to be pietistic and low church. Yet Benson has caused me to do so without a sense of elitism of any tradition. Instead, there is advocacy for artistic expressions in various intensive and extensive liturgies. Benson is able to open the reader’s mind to the deep connections that exist between a variety of liturgies through Scripture, preaching, Creed, and, most deeply, the Eucharist. Very simply, Benson writes, “Certainly, the Eucharist—also known as the Lord’s Supper, Communion, or Mass—is a time of celebration” (153). This is not meant to denigrate the differences between these words or expressions, but to focus on activity itself: the sharing of the very basic elements of life provided by God. When one lives in the call and response structure, then every person is “gifted” (154), both in the bread and wine and even in the offering. Artistic, indeed, is the writer who provides the pastor with an expression of the offering as a work of art! As a pastoral colleague, *Liturgy as a Way of Life*, is a resource for me to pass on to a musical worship leader. Benson is an academic, but his appreciation for the variety of worship settings builds bridges to the church. Finally, the accessibility of *Liturgy as a Way of Life* allows me to pass it on to the professional artist in our church who leads a ministry of artists for the church to spur our conversations and provide categories for mutual edification and discipleship.

Whether intentional or not, these books have a subtle connection. Naturally, both books tackle their individual subjects, economics and art, in light of the contemporary work of God. However, what underlies both works is the presence of *beauty*. For Bell, redeemed economics must begin with the work of God and the transformed desire of the person because of the work of God. Thus, he is beginning with beauty, with the call of God that draws us

to himself, even in our economics. Far from being an endless dissatisfaction of consumerism rampant in capitalism, Bell believes that desire oriented vertically will change our economics. The call is to Christians to aim to exhibit true desire, having heard the call of God rightly in Jesus Christ. Is there an economist, or community of economists, aiming to create, out of the creation of God, a liturgical economy? That is, as a public work by the public for the glory of God?

For Benson, art is about the response of the artist to the call of God. Christians must aim at creating art, having heard the call of God rightly in Jesus Christ. Is there an artist, or community of artists, aiming to create, out of the creation of God, an economical liturgy? Could an economical liturgy set aside aspects of the incessant danger of copyrights and emphasize less ownership and more sharing as expressions of worship? Could such expressions from artists for the sake of the community provide a living for the artist? Could I, as a preacher, do my liturgical art of preaching for the sake of the community and be sustained by the community? (I ask this intentionally because while I believe preaching is an art form for the sake of the church community, I sense *something* strange about getting a paycheck for this art, even though I have not yet given up receiving a salary!)

These are practical questions because beauty is part of our everyday experience (*Liturgy as a Way of Life*, 28) and God's current activity is the grounding question for Bell's economics. Or, we could say, godly desire can be part of our everyday experience. And when beauty, as the call of God, awakens our desire for God, *liturgy* becomes not just *part* but, in faith, the *totality* of our everyday experience. Thus, our economic living—a reflection of the call to that which we find beautiful—is nothing less than living liturgically.

End Notes

¹ Seth Godin, "Industrialists vs. the Rest of Us," http://sethgodin.typepad.com/seths_blog/2012/12/industrialists-vs-the-rest-of-us.html. Accessed December 5, 2012.

² Although Bell does insist otherwise in a personal email from December 7, 2012.

³ This is a reference to Bell's exegesis of Michel Foucault. See *Economy of Desire*, Chapter 1.

⁴ <http://www.thestar.com/news/world/article/1298379—the-homeless-man-the-boots-and-the-complex-story-behind-the-viral-photo>. Accessed December 7, 2012.