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CAPITALISM AND RELIGION

A review of Philip Goodchild, *Capitalism and Religion: The Price of Piety*. London: Routledge, 2002. xiv + 260pp. \$90.00 (cloth); \$27.95 (paper).

Alter the Currency

ONE CAN ONLY SPECULATE as to the series of experiences that led to this book, so unlike any other, whose arguments I will repeat here. Diogenes, to whom Goodchild refers, was cast out of his native Sinope because he was said to have defaced the coinage. Later, he will be told by the oracle that he should also deface current human values and customs, challenging and rejecting conventional pieties. It was said that he had himself sold as a slave, demanding that his purchaser pay him for his wisdom. So it is with this book: buy it and you will have to pay doubly if you are drawn to undergo the experience towards which its author would draw you. It was his exile, Diogenes thought, which made him a philosopher – it is not he who was exiled from Sinope, but Sinope itself that was exiled. He becomes thereby the first cosmopolitan, a citizen of the universe, altering every currency. If Goodchild writes that the conjunction of insights that led to this book “fractured my self consciousness, exposing an abyss beneath all my thoughts and relations to myself, to others and to the world;” that, through them “I became a stranger to those closest to me as well as to myself,” we know that it is the same experiences that brought him into an awareness of a universal problem. (xiv) This is a work of philosophy remarkable as it appears in the midst of textbooks and commentaries, introductory guides and scholarly monographs – it is vastly erudite, compellingly argued, striking in its analyses and impassioned in its approach. Like the Cynic, who is committed to speak the truth, to practice *parrhesia*, Goodchild writes of a truth which we are not ready to confront, but which grants, at the same time, the possibility of a new universality, a cosmopolitanism, a commonwealth.

Peter Sloterdijk: “they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are

doing it."¹ We know there must be an awakening to the consequences of globalization - to the endless overproduction which demands the spread of the market into new territories, the outsourcing of labor to countries where it is cheaper, and a general deregulation. The autonomous free market leads to the transformation of the world into a market for goods and services; formerly self-sufficient peoples, along with their customs and traditions, are homogenized; more fossil fuels are consumed and carbon dioxide emitted in the transportation of goods and services; fertilizers, pesticides and pollutants are used in order to extract the maximum possible yield, and agricultural land is taken from rural populations in order to provide irrigation for industry. Alongside the reality of ecological catastrophe, there is the threat of economic catastrophe: how might any government bail out an economic crisis when the national economy is vulnerable to the volatility of the international movement of finance? There is also the danger that national economies default on the loans. What happens if the cost of oil production rises too much? The apocalypse is approaching; we know but we carry on regardless.

The Price of Thought

Why hasn't the currency of thought altered? What can one expect when the price of thought is measured by strategic plans, quality assurance certificates, audits and appraisals? The professional thinker is a worker in a world where what is important is not performance but the appearance of performance, not efficiency but the simulacrum of efficiency. Who am I in this system? The functionary, the role, the stamp of a bureaucratic power. Which is to say, hardly anyone (who I am does not matter; I perform the acts that will keep me in my job, in the good esteem of my colleagues, in the good auspices of the university). The price is a waste of life: attention is benumbed through the simple, stupid horror at vast administrative and bureaucratic structures which cover of the world. It is as if, through a peculiar doubling, another world had been subtly, carefully, laid over this one – as if we live and think in a map of a territory and no longer upon the territory itself. In this way, attention is diverted and summoned away from what matters; philosophy does not rise to its own vocation.

And outside the academy? For a happy minority, credit is plentiful and goods are cheap. But for the majority, the future is grim. But all stand before the same horizon, the same looming catastrophe, whether we want to or not. Why do the terrifying claims of the report on the results of climate change commissioned by Pentagon defense adviser Andrew Marshall not grip us

¹ Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 29.

before any other problem?² Our attention is misdirected. Is this the effect of our governments, which no longer answer to international law, or to the wishes of its people?

Politics is possible only for as long as our attention is uncoupled from the magic of image, spectacle and glamor as they circulate in the mass media. It is possible only when we extend the scope of that which lays claim to our attention. Vaster than the number of countable voters is the polity of those who will have to live in a world which becomes progressively less inhabitable as well as those outside our country with whom we are bound in networks of interdependency. Then there is the land itself, the territory with which we must maintain an interrelation.

Our political system encourages short-termism and populism: the political candidate must be adept at handling the mass media; it is necessary to look and speak the part, which means wealth, appearance and debating skills supplant the ethical sensibility which would allow the politician to respond to what matters. A political response articulated out of a universal awareness is barely conceivable. But the catastrophe may still be preventable which means nothing is more pressing than developing this awareness.

Our attention has been captured. How to bind apathy in the face of politics into a universal politics which works on a local and a worldwide level that can struggle for the world? But there is no one to listen; the commonwealth has disappeared. There is no public when the European tradition of reason with its faith in a public standard of rationality has collapsed, and when there is only suspicion of the same values which once united us: truth, wisdom, the human being. Then to link religion *and* capitalism, as Philip Goodchild does, is anachronism itself: didn't the experience of God disappear from our lives long before the collapse of the very notion of public rationality?

The Murder of God

What matters most? This book presents us with four insights which have not, according to Goodchild, been thought in their interrelation. Firstly, there is the truth of suffering: human life is not sustainable, but the ecological catastrophe is preventable; secondly, the awareness that money has become the self-positing measure of all values; thought and values themselves must be understood in terms of their monetary value; thirdly, the awareness of what Goodchild calls the "experience" of God and fourthly, the awareness of the "murder of God" as this reveals the nihilism of the European tradition – the values which devalue themselves.

² See Mark Townsend and Paul Harris's "Now the Pentagon tells Bush: climate change will destroy us" at <http://observer.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,6903,1153513,00.html>

Traditional accounts of this murder will not suffice. It is not the development of nominalism, or the displacement of religious authority from ecclesiastical institutions to individual conscience in the Reformation, or the rise of the experimental method in the sciences which transformed the concretion of knowledge and prepared the way for secularism and atheism; none of these accounts for their condition, which is, Goodchild argues, *a shift in pieties* – a shift from God to Mammon, which is to say, the murder of God happens because of the emergence of the self-regulating market as the basis for the organization of the social order.

What brought about this emergence? In an impressive analysis, Goodchild explains that risks of inflation, until the eighteenth centuries, meant that total coinage could only be introduced with the conquest of new territories. With overseas investment, the asset-stripping of the conquered territories, the organization of the slave trade, such an increase in coinage could occur. But the greatest step came with the nationalization that created the Bank of England, which allowed a secure value to be attached to bank notes, enabling long term, low interest loans which could be secured against future taxation. Thus, the economy could function on the basis of an infinitely deferred redemption of a promise of value. Money is thus created as a loan on the basis of a debt. But this means production is always increased in order to obtain a profit on the loan. The value of assets is now determined through a speculative anticipation of its rate of return. But just as currency is circulated in the form of banknotes which never have to be cashed in, the value of assets is determined by a future which never arrives. Since the market will not crash (the government can always raise more taxes), there is now no limit to the amount of money that can be created. Our material and social reality is wagered on the basis of an ideal future; the national power which creates the Bank of England is seized by what it seized. The issuing of government bonds and, later, trading on financial futures and derivatives, exacerbates (what is?) already set in motion.

What follows? Prices are determined for commodities, excess production is encouraged and new needs are created with the consequences of ecological devastation and financial uncertainty. The operation of the free market sees labor subordinated by debt bondage, slavery, the threat of unemployment or the outsourcing of labor to countries where it can be bought more cheaply. Labor has no choice but to participate either because of debt or because it is enthralled by the idea of making money. Yet this is no only a lesson in economics. Goodchild insists in linking money to the murder of God. Contra economic theory, money is not the innocent medium which would permit commodities to be traded, but that which provides the access to all other values. And thus the highest values devalue themselves; Mammon usurps the place of God.

Piety

One might ask: why is this such a loss? Do we live in the most humane of human societies? But we are blinded by the self-evidence of economics as it serves to uphold the apparently benevolent despotism of liberal humanism. Economics cannot take account of the suffering which results when the social and material condition of the present is wagered on the basis of an ideal future. "Suffering exceeds in importance any meaning or any future which can be substituted for it;" "Suffering has an excess of meaning and significance which cannot be captured by substitution or superposition. Suffering is always singular; it marks itself out as a singular event." (213)

What is to be done? How might one alter the currency? Might one hold out for a redirection of attention – for a new piety, a new religion, a new conception of God and with it, a new understanding of truth and goodness? For Goodchild, to alter the currency is to redirect attention. It is to understand economics and economism as a kind of piety – as a way of directing attention away from what matters. But it is also to counterpose a religious piety to economic piety as it is founded upon excess and not conservation.

One might object that this talk of piety is nostalgic. Doesn't scientific progress already testify to the anachronism of the appeal to piety? But, for Goodchild, the currency of truth must be altered, since the apparent stability purchased through abstraction wagers the real. When truth is understood as immutable, incorporeal and identical over time, it threatens to pass over what is changeable, material and discontinuous. The objects of astronomy or mechanics are indeed regular and ordered in their behavior – but this is not the case with the ostensible object of economics. Abstractions like Gross Domestic Product, which purport to provide us with the value of an economy, cannot calculate the repercussions to the environment; a cost-benefit analysis does not permit the analyses of the threat of financial catastrophe. Goodchild suggests the "truth" of economics is itself pious, which is to say, it claims our attention in a particular sense. Piety should not be understood negatively. A revival of a certain religious piety may well permit us to attend to what is changeable and discontinuous, to the indeterminable matter of the world which disappears in economic piety.

Religious Piety

Pierre Bourdieu writes of the mason who forewent the ritual meal that was supposed to be eaten in the mason's honor after he had constructed a house. He asked for 200 francs in exchange for the meal in addition to the 1,000 francs for the construction itself. What is wrong with that? The event of the meal – the taste of the food, the animals killed to supply that food, the

friendships which are formed and reaffirmed over that meal, conversation and conviviality - is not substitutable. Trust is everything in the system Bourdieu describes; therefore, the temptation is to cheat by feigning trustworthiness.

One might understand the transition of ritual to historical piety to occur at this point, although Goodchild warns us against any simple understanding of this transition. The God of historical piety is understood as being able to bestow reparations for suffering in the present: He will punish deceit and wickedness; the righteous will prosper and the wicked will perish. Piety, here, is no longer directed towards the ritual repetition of a past event but to the future. Abraham, trusting the promise of God, leaves Ur because of a promise; he ventures his life on this uncertainty. Ritual piety is put to death when he is called to sacrifice his son; meaning and value spring out of this gesture. Hebrew monotheism depends upon a rejection of idolatry: one worships one God; the past, and the ritual piety in which one returns ceaseless to the past, is sacrificed in view of a universalism. Piety is now oriented towards the future – to the coming of the Messiah, or, with Christianity, to the return of Christ which will bring about the Kingdom of God.

But here, already, the divine economy allows God to resemble Mammon. The event of the murder of God has already been prepared; historical piety is perilously close to the economism that will allow commodification and reification. But religion does not collapse into capitalism. Broadly speaking, for Goodchild, religious piety is still able to embrace the singular and exceptional: it can attend to suffering because it is pluralistic in a way capital is not. Doesn't Marx show this when he allows that money "is the god among commodities"³ – that it is "the incarnation of exchange value?"⁴ The monism of capitalism allows it as it were to worship itself; piety synthesizes time such that the future becomes, for the financier, the object of speculation even as, for the householder, the future harbors catastrophe: the threat that he or she will be unable to subsist.

It is perhaps because only the philosopher of religion can understand the stakes of what Goodchild calls apocalyptic piety – an experience which directs itself towards the singularity of suffering in a way outside the consensus. Apocalyptic piety opens what Goodchild calls the "chaotic interval" which other forms of piety conceal (indeed, other forms of piety, whether economic or religious, are precisely an attempt to shield themselves from chaos). One cannot bring oneself into such piety through an act of will. Rather, it reveals itself only in an experience of excess which overwhelms the consensual determination of what is real. Philosophy of religion,

³ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin Books, 1973), 22.

⁴ Marx, *Grundrisse*, 163.

understanding apocalyptic piety in its philosophical and political stakes, which is to say, as a way of revealing a future no longer bound by chains of necessity to the present, rises to its vocation to alter the currency. Such a philosophy must be a critical theory of religion because otherwise the experience of God which gives itself in apocalyptic piety will be misunderstood. Only thus might the thinker plunge into the reality of change and discontinuity – to the becoming and affect of the world as it exceeds economic determination and is bound, in that opening, to what Goodchild calls absolute faith.

Reading these pages, I am reminded of Tarkovsky's film *Nostalghia*. We first meet Domenico as he is prevented from his attempt to cross the hot pool dedicated to Saint Catherine of Siena in the Tuscan village Bagno Vignoni, where the protagonist of the film, the Russian poet Gorchakov is staying. Domenico, we learn, locked himself in the house for seven years with his family, waiting for the end of the world. Gorchakov is taken by this stranger. When he is told Domenico is mad, he replies: "We don't know what so-called insanity, or madness, is. First, they are inconvenient; they get in everyone's way. Their behavior, their wishes lie outside the generally accepted rules. And then, we simply don't wish to understand them. They are terribly lonely, but I'm sure they are closer to the truth than we are." Later, Domenico immolates himself after preaching to the army of solitaries he has gathered about him for three days and nights. Before he sets himself on fire, he cries: "What is this world worth, what is the value of its truth if some unhappy mental patient, as you call us, tells you: 'You should be ashamed of yourselves!' While there's still time!"

Tarkovsky shows us Domenico's death is not beautiful. He falls and crawls along the ground, crying out. In the interval between the immolation and his death, he is just a man who has set himself alight. His is the mad attempt draw the whole world into the fire of sacrifice and bring it shuddering back into birth. But it is, perhaps, the act of madness which reveals the madness of the world and thus the chaotic interval between one future and another.

Meanwhile, far away, Gorchakov has heard of Domenico's death. He takes the stub of a candle and begins to walk across the drained pool. This is not an act of ritual piety (the repetition of an eternal past), nor even an act of historical piety. It is not performed in the service of righteousness. Dazzled by the chaotic interval, it honors an apocalyptic piety.

I wonder whether Goodchild's philosopher of religion must embody both Domenico and Gorchakov, answering to the opening of the chaotic interval and then, afterwards, patiently transmitting that experience, along with the singularity of suffering to which it is linked. The first apocalyptic experience, the experience of the interval, leads to death, or at least a kind of dying

(Domenico's self-sacrifice; the shattering of self-consciousness which Goodchild himself describes). It gives way to a second – the affirmation of difference as a potency of which nothing can be known. Such difference is wondrous – to think, henceforward, is to answer what is unthinkable; it is to direct attention to an experience whose source one cannot render explicit. But Goodchild maintains a *third* apocalyptic experience is necessary through which one comes to understand the experience in question, the affirmation of difference, as an experience of God. I will close with a quotation from the last chapter of *Religion and Capitalism*, which, if I do not yet understand, is a sign, for me of the necessity of rereading this book:

Apocalyptic piety has no name for the God it experiences, no identity on which to cling. It is merely an experience after the death of God, the subject and the world. It follows the dissolution of reality and the dissolution of the will. If it awakens to God as Truth, Goodness and Awareness, this is not a God it can condition, possess or will. It is merely an experience. Apocalyptic piety stands outside itself: it is a capacity to laugh at, relinquish and forgive oneself; it is a capacity to attend to suffering; it is a capacity to bear within oneself little fragments of heaven and hell. It is compassion. (243)

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