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Christianity Incorporated: How Big Business Is Buying the Church

Michael L. Budde and Robert W. Brimlow

Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2002 (191 pages)

Max Weber once observed that the chasm that separates the mundane exigencies of economic life from Christian ideals has tended to push Christians attitudes about business in two very different directions. On the one hand, "inner-worldly ascetic" Christianity has tended to prescribe the "rationalization" of economic activity so as to satisfy the requirements of Scripture (particularly the Decalogue) and for the sake of the common good. "Mystical" Christianity, by contrast, has tended to eschew economic rationality and to avoid business dealings as much as possible for the sake of the simple acts of obedience and self-surrender to Christ. *Christianity Incorporated* would appear to stand squarely in this latter tradition.

The authors, both Roman Catholic laymen and academics, lament that American churches—Protestant and Roman Catholic—have, in effect, been taken captive within the capitalistic world order, and that the churches have thereby surrendered the autonomy and distinctiveness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. "What aspects of contemporary capitalism," they write, "encourage for-profit corporations to exploit Christian and religious cultural resources? What sorts of ecclesiology impel the churches to imitate the tools and values of for-profit firms? What does all of this portend for the mission and message of the church conceived of as a movement serving the promised kingdom of God?" These are the sorts of questions that Budde and Brimlow seek to answer in *Christianity Incorporated*.

Budde and Brimlow begin their provocative study by casting suspicion on the contemporary revival of interest in "spirituality" in the workplace. All such interest, they feel, is manipulative; it encourages an instrumentalist orientation to faith, and it trivializes and domesticates the "radical gospel of Jesus." Using the traditional language of "Christian formation," the authors go on to observe that capitalism also seeks to shape the habits, affections, and dispositions of believers but in a manner that is absolutely antithetical to biblical religion. Capitalist practice, the authors believe, simply cannot be reformed or redeemed, and biblical Christianity must, therefore, stand entirely over and against it.

Not surprisingly, Budde and Brimlow are harshly critical of John Paul II's *Centesimus Annus* (1991). "Wittingly or not," the authors write, "what John Paul advances and develops is a vision of the church reacting to the world's impact on it rather than outlining the church's proactive impact on the world." "What disturbs us most," they continue, "is that John Paul accepts this diagnosis [that human self-interest cannot be eliminated from society by force without serious consequences for societal life] as an irremediable feature of human nature and does not echo the gospel by calling the people of God to transcend their self-interest and pursue the life of poverty (which means no private ownership) to which we are called."

Protestants, the authors continue, have little better to offer. They have also "sold out the gospel" by throwing in their lot with the "secular powers." "The churches," they write, "give us no reason to challenge the economic system that exploits the poor and dominates all of us, nor do they give us sufficient reason even to modify the 'natural' play of market forces that reduce us to data points, units of productivity, and indexes of consumer activity. On the contrary, the churches sanctify capitalism and encourage its growth and domination through their urging of equal opportunity for all nations. In their view, the only thing wrong with capitalism is that is has not been embraced quickly enough to enable all people to satisfy their appetites."

What the gospel thus calls for, Budde and Brimlow believe, is for the church to take itself more seriously as a polity in its own right and to model an entirely different way of being in the world. "The point," they write, "is not to design a more 'moral' polity and economy for everyone else—another version of the Constantinian temptation, a false obligation laid upon the Church—but to demonstrate to everyone else what lives dedicated to the kingdom of God might look like in our world." How, surrendering "everyone else" to a presumably immoral polity and economy is to be squared with the love of one's neighbor, is not made clear.

Budde and Brimlow draw their inspiration for their proposed "alternative polity" from the Sermon on the Mount. Curiously, they suggest that the "economic vision" entailed in the Sermon is well-exemplified in the traditional charitable soup kitchen. "Soup line economics," the authors contend, refuses to endorse a hierarchy of status or privilege, does not encourage specialization, requires no-means testing or co-payment requirements, and entails no planning or calculation. "So long as there are people wait-

ing to eat," Budde and Brimlow write, "and so long as there is food to provide them, the soup kitchen serves without cold calculations about tomorrow."

A concern that the authors have about extant soup-kitchen-style ministries, however, is that these ministries are often vitiated by their reliance upon charity and upon "the system." What the churches that sponsor such ministries need to do now is to remove themselves more completely from the influence of capitalism by growing their own food. This, Budde and Brimlow believe, would restore the skills lost from the "deskilling" of labor by certain forms of technical organization; it would provide employment for those unemployed or underemployed, and it would reduce the church's reliance on "commodified" sources of food.

Along similar lines, the authors propose church-based credit unions, new experiments in labor-sharing, and church-based consumer cooperatives. It is difficult, they write, "to determine in advance what programs of a particular church are or are not consistent with an economics of discipleship…." The key, however, is that they must "provide resources and alternatives to capitalism and its effects broadly construed." Just who would be responsible for determining "consistency" with respect to "economics of discipleship" and what would count as an " alternative" to "capitalism and its effects broadly construed," the authors do not say.

Budde and Brimlow conclude by contending that if their proposals seem unrealistic and irresponsible, this is simply because our ecclesial imaginations have been so dulled by centuries of captivity to secular norms and practices. "Because we have not trusted in God's abundance," the authors write, "and because we have not risked our security by trusting new brothers and sisters given to us by God, the outrageous promises of God are choked off and, in fact, burn like cruel, impossible dreams—when we have frustrated the preconditions for their fulfillment from the outset."

Needless to say, *Christianity Incorporated* is not the sort of book that readers of the *Journal of Markets & Morality* are likely to find particularly helpful. Indeed, the book is very largely antithetical to the theological and economic positions for which the *Journal* most often provides a forum. At best, Budde and Brimlow's anti-business animus—as well as their contention that obedience and self-surrender to the gospel must trump all worldly concerns for effectiveness—can be said to stand in the tradition of the Radical Reformation, a tradition that has a certain theological coherence. Yet the authors' invective against business seems based not in theological reasoning *per se* but, rather, in a school of economic analysis that has long asserted that there is virtually nothing good that can be said about democratic capitalism.

Those convinced by such analysis have often been moved to search for a theological position that would seem to correspond to it and have not uncommonly found it in the Sermon on the Mount. Unfortunately, the certainty with which such folk hold to their beliefs about modern capitalism does not encourage them to examine capitalist practice very carefully, and it does not tend to foster theological depth and nuance.

The contention that God's purposes in the world have hitherto been thwarted by our failure to "enact" the Sermon on the Mount as a political-economic experiment, for example, would seem to be simply another "health and wealth gospel," though admittedly in a Left-liberal form. And so, although we should certainly be suspicious of economic motives and interests, particularly when it comes to ecclesial practice, *Christianity Incorporated* is not a particularly good example of how this suspicion can be made to bear real fruit.

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Liberty, Wisdom, and Grace: Thomism and Democratic Political Theory

John P. Hittinger

Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2002 (314 pages)

This book is the seventeenth volume in the publisher's distinguished series, Applications of Political Theory. It is a topical rather than a systematic collection of essays spanning twenty years of writing and teaching. Its purpose is to bring philosophy and religion, broadly understood, to bear upon contemporary issues in American public life, principally the meaning and experience of freedom. The author, a professor of philosophy at Sacred Heart Seminary in Detroit, is establishing a scholarly reputation as a critic of contemporary liberal thought.

Considered as a whole, these essays provide a comprehensive survey of the political thought of recent Thomistic philosophers, Jacques Maritain—the book's central figure—and his colleague, Yves Simon, principally their understanding of the theory and practice of modern democracy. Secondarily, Hittinger considers other thinkers in the classical tradition (Leo Strauss and John Paul II). The author also uses the occasion to treat some philosophical critics of the classical tradition (principally Aurel Kolnai) and the opposing Lockean tradition as represented by several constitutional scholars.

An autobiographical preface sketches the heritage that informs the author's thought and sets forth his personal, political, academic, and religious credentials for undertaking these studies. He does not mention a noble feature, which this reviewer counts among Hittinger's principal distinctions—the gifts of common sense, intellectual simplicity, and plain speaking, which manifest his Hoosier origins and his upbringing in the Virginia Tidewater.

The book's sixteen essays are presented under three broad headings: (1) The response of Maritain and Simon to the political crisis of the twentieth century; (2) the contrasting views of liberty and democracy in the Aristotelian-Thomistic and Lockean traditions; and (3) the treasure of wisdom and grace that the author has found in his mentors, which include—along with Maritain, Simon, Strauss, and John Paul II—John Henry Newman, Flannery O'Connor, Marion Montgomery, and James Schall. Mont-