

# **Temples of Debt: Capitalism As a Sacred/Sacrificial System by**

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## **Introduction: The Religion of Economics?**

The work of Rene Girard has revealed the violence at the foundation of human religion and culture. We now know that the purpose of religion [\(1\)](#) is to control violence by offering it in highly circumscribed and intense rituals which discharge the violent potential in the community. We can see now more clearly than ever how the biblical revelation is a call to cease using violence to control our violence, to overcome violence through faith and love. Girard's work has enriched our understanding of the Bible immeasurably. It is a powerful new paradigm for understanding our own psychology and sociology. Thanks to Girard, we understand religion, the "sacred," and human violence much more profoundly than before. His work holds out the promise that with this new understanding of violence, humanity may be guided to a more just and peaceful era.

But if there's any chance of that happening, the mimetic theory will have to begin to account more fully than it has so far, for the varieties of human violence. I refer specifically to economic violence. So far, the mimetic theory has dealt with religious and cultural violence in the Bible and in history. But the Bible is concerned at least as much with economics as with religion; is it possible that the Bible sees the two as related? And in the history of the modern world, much of the mass violence we see is motivated or caused by economic conditions; can the mimetic theory help us to understand these forms of violence? It's important for us to explore this question, because unless the mimetic theory can account for economic violence as effectively as it does for religious violence, it will offer little hope for us to understand the roots of violence in our experience today. The apparent promise of the Girardian paradigm will turn out to be just that - only apparent.

I begin with a basic syllogism: a) human violence is both controlled and perpetuated by sacrificial religious systems; b) modern forms of violence, which are highly organized, tend to be

driven by economics; therefore c) economic systems are rooted in sacrificial religion. If economic systems are not rooted in sacrificial religion, then Girard has failed to account fully for human violence. I leave the support for the major premise to the abundant literature by Girard and Girardians; I should take a moment to illustrate the minor premise, however.

### **The Violence of Modern Economic Systems**

By "modern economic systems," I refer to modern capitalism, which took root in the western world about the time of the crusades:

The first big growth phase [of capitalism] was in the twelfth century. Then the popes appealed for sacrifices for the *crusades* against Islam, and gigantic sums of money flowed into Italy, and thus into the banking houses of Venice, Florence, Genoa and Milan. They lent the money for armies which had to be supplied with the equipment they needed before sailing from Venice....(2)

This system of debt was the central actor in the conquest of the Americas after 1492. The kings of Europe were captive to a fever for gold because they were heavily indebted to the international bankers: Written with particular clarity and detail is Fernando Mires's book *In the Name of the Cross. Genocide against the Indians during the Spanish Conquest: Theological and Political Discussions*. We have always assumed that the main actors were the kingdoms of Spain and Portugal. But Mires shows that they were only "junior partners", even instruments of the capital-owning families of, above all, Upper Italy and Upper Germany which with their help concentrated on money-making (accumulation of capital) through universal expansion. The riches stolen from Latin America ended up mainly in their treasuries....(3)

The genocides of the Americas were driven by debt and enabled by the power of firearms. Peoples who did not participate in the system were conquered and exploited to service the debt system; peoples who resisted were destroyed. The insatiable demands of debt will not allow non-cooperation:

- . ...the Paraguayan [Jesuit] missions..., in little more than a century and a half (1603 - 1768)..., fully justified the aims of their founders. The Jesuits used music to draw in Guaraní Indians who had sought shelter in the forest, and who had stayed there

rather than join in the "civilizing process" of the *encomenderos* and landlords. Thus 150,000 Guaranís were able to move back into their primitive community organization and revive their traditional arts and crafts. The *latifundio* system was unknown in the missions; the soil was cultivated partly to satisfy individual needs and partly to develop projects of common concern and to acquire the necessary work tools, which were common property. The Indians' life was intelligently organized; musicians and artisans, farmers, weavers, actors, painters, and builders gathered in workshops and schools. Money was unknown; traders were barred from entering and had to transact any business from hotels at an appropriate distance.

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0. The Crown finally succumbed to the *criollo encomenderos'* [financiers] pressure and the Jesuits were expelled from Latin America. Landlords and slave traders went in pursuit of the Indians. Corpses hung from trees in the missions; whole communities were sold in Brazilian slave markets. Many Indians took to the forest again. The Jesuits' libraries were used to fuel ovens or to make gunpowder cartridges.

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0. From the 1890's to the 1920's, King Leopold of Belgium enriched himself from Congo rubber production. The Congolese people, the workers for this industry, were brutally sacrificed to enrich the king. A common punishment was to chop off the hands of unproductive workers. Ten million people were murdered, worked to death, starved to death or mutilated in the process. (4)

- In 2000, the AIDS epidemic in certain regions of Africa threatens to wipe out over 10% of the population. Drugs which prevent AIDS deaths are manufactured cheaply in Africa to save these millions of lives. U.S. pharmaceutical firms, demanding their patent rights for these drugs (many of which were developed with public money and handed over to the corporations for distribution and profit), pressure the Clinton administration to stop the cheap production and sale of these drugs, which the pharmaceutical firms have been able to sell for ten times the cost of production. Thousands - perhaps millions - die so that these companies may retain their profit margins. (5)

It is always assumed that the violence of these economic enterprises an unfortunate side effect which some day will be avoided

as the economic system matures. It is a central thesis of this paper that the violence of this system is not in fact incidental, but fundamental, to it. I believe it can be shown that economic structures are rooted in the primitive sacred (the violence of which was also once assumed -- before Girard's work - to be incidental rather than fundamental). Toward this end, in this essay, I introduce three central images as organizing images for the analysis. The images are *commodities*, *currency*, and *the heap (of debt)*.

### **Commodities**

What exactly *is* a commodity? Karl Marx puzzled over the meaning of commodities in *Capital*. He was right to term our attitude toward commodities a form of "fetishism," but rather than clearly define the phenomenon, he remarks on the magical quality of our thinking about commodities, and then moves on.

A commodity is...a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour, because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour....In order, therefore, to find an analogy, we must have recourse to the mist-enveloped regions of the religious world. In that world the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life and entering into relation both with one another and the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands. This I call the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour, so soon as they are products of labour, so soon as they are produced as commodities, and which is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities. [\(6\)](#)

Virtually by definition, the value of a commodity is mimetic. If you seek aspirin in a drugstore, for example, you will find that the price of the brand name aspirin is always higher than the generic store brand, and you will find that the brand name usually sells better, in spite of the higher price. This is due largely to the power of advertising, which gives the brand a higher value. This higher value is purely the product of mimesis, and not due to any inherent quality of the aspirin, which is identical in both brands.

The market value of commodities has only partially to do with the

cost of producing and distributing them. There must be a market value which exceeds these costs, at least slightly, which will provide the motivation to supply them. But what creates this market, or *mimetic* value?

Presumably, every commodity will have some sort of use value. Aspirin helps to cure headaches. Yet, the uses which create these values are usually mimetic themselves. Most headaches are mild and can be endured without medication, yet many of us will take an aspirin at the first sign of a headache because we are imitating a culture which models taking aspirin for headaches. On the other hand, food is truly essential and has a non-mimetic use value. Yet much of the market value of food is based on the fact that we are willing to pay more for food that other people desire, often irrespective of its nutritional value. The commodity has use-value which is economically significant, but serves primarily as a baseline or substrate for the economic dynamics of mimetic, or market value.

Surely, the value of commodities arises out of mimetic desire. We prefer Bayer aspirin because other people prefer it. We want bleached flour rather than unbleached for mimetic, rather than nutritional reasons. But where did it begin? Presumably, somebody wanted bleached flour first, and then everybody else imitated him. But whom was that first person imitating? Where did he learn to want bleached flour?

At this point, the mimetic theory can succeed where Marx fails. What Marx almost saw, but couldn't quite understand, is that the source of our desire for commodities is the sacred. To seek the sacred origin of the value of commodities, we turn to three primitive phenomena: fetishism, the potlatch, and the origin of agriculture.

***The Fetish:*** A fetish is a sacred object. It is often believed to contain the spirit of a human being, usually a dead one. The katsina dolls given to Hopi children in the American Southwest are said to contain the spirits of dead ancestors. The children are told to behave themselves because the spirit of the ancestor is there watching them. (7) It is a token of sacrificial death. Here we have the essence of the commodity: a manufactured item which contains a sacred spirit.

***The Potlatch:*** Marcel Mauss' book *The Gift* examines in some detail the potlatch of the Northwest Coast American Indians. He makes two central observations: first, that when a commodity is given away

at a potlatch, it is not to be considered a free gift. Rather, it constitutes an obligation to the recipient, because the giver is now justified in resenting the recipient if the gift is not eventually reciprocated with another gift of equal or greater value. The giving of gifts (commodities) is really a drawn-out exchange, with the religious function of controlling violence. Mauss' second observation is that the gift is understood to carry with it the *spirit* of the giver. (8) In other words, the gift is a fetish.

The potlatch is a peculiar ceremony where the religious and the economic merge. It's a puzzle to us moderns because we understand religion and economics to be radically separate and we can't understand when they become indistinguishable as in a potlatch. (Our puzzlement of course arises out of our mythology, by which we hide from ourselves the sacred violence of our economic system.) In the potlatch, obligations are established (as in a banking enterprise), and sacrifices are made (as in a temple).

The Tlingits and other Northwest tribes invested immense effort in the production of commodities - carved bent wood boxes, decorative blankets, baskets, copper shields, etc. - but none of these commodities was strictly utilitarian; they were traded (as far away as the northern coast of California), they were given away, and they were destroyed. What these items must have represented was the human labor used to create them. The many hours of labor used to produce the commodity becomes the "spirit" that inhabits the commodity as a fetish. Often the commodities of the potlatch are not given away, but simply destroyed. This is a form of sacrifice, where that which "contains" human spirits (in the form of human labor or as the "spirit" of the giver) is "killed." It should be noted in this regard that in the potlatch before western influence changed the tradition, it was common for one or more slaves to be killed as a part of the festival, in tandem with the destruction of commodities. Destruction of the commodity becomes a substitute for human sacrifice.

**Agriculture:** No examination of commodities can be complete without a consideration of that greatest of all sources of commodities - agriculture.

Agriculture developed independently at four or five different locations around the world. The Near East, China, the Eastern

United States, Central Mexico, the South Central Andes, and the Southern Sahara region each gave rise to agriculture independently. (9) What these regions had in common were domesticable species of plants, usually grasses (wheat, maize, rice); reliable water; good soil; plenty of game and food plants, and a relatively dense and isolated, and well-fed population. (10) A great deal is known about the material realities that underlay the emergence of agriculture, but archeologists concede that they have devised no adequate theory as to why agriculture emerged.

Purely material reasons aren't adequate to explain the evidence. It takes many years for the first practices of agriculture to reach a level of proficiency where the calories of work invested in production are finally matched by the calories of food value produced in the harvest. (11) Many anthropologists argue that the quality and variety of food eaten by hunter gatherers is superior to the diet of early farming cultures. Hunter-gatherers usually average many fewer hours of work per week to produce the food they need to survive than do agricultural peoples. (12) If these people had plenty (and they seemed to), why would they invest the effort to produce more? But if they had little, why would they sacrifice what little spare energy they had to create a food-producing system that would not yield material benefits for perhaps a hundred years? We know how agriculture emerged, but we can't imagine why. All materialist explanations fail. The archeologists are stumped. (13)

In another conundrum that has vexed the anthropologists, the association between death and fertility is ubiquitous in early agricultural societies. (14) The most significant fertility cult of the Ancient Near East was the cult of Baal, the god of storm, and of the fertility of the earth brought by rain. Baal was also the god to whom the ancient Israelites were tempted to sacrifice their children (2 Chronicles 28:1-4, Jeremiah 19:1-6). The Greeks worshiped the fertility goddess Cybele, whose female worshippers tore their male victims apart in a religious frenzy to renew the fertility of the land. The Celts sacrificed condemned criminals every fifth year, believing that the more victims were sacrificed, the more the fertility of the land would be renewed. The Aztecs practiced fertility rituals involving human sacrifice, including the lifting of the heart of the victim to the heavens which aided the new corn to grow ever higher. The Aztecs

also had a fertility ritual in which they sacrificed a beautiful maiden to the fertility goddess Chicomecohuatl. After the girl's blood had soaked an altar piled with maize, vegetables, and seeds, her body was flayed and her skin worn like a garment by a dancing priest. [\(15\)](#)

The problem that anthropology has had to explain the emergence of agriculture arises because these modernists assume that there must be a strictly material explanation for its emergence. I propose a religious explanation, that agriculture originally emerges approximately like this:

An isolated population struggles to maintain peace among themselves through sacrificial religion; but being a small and isolated group, they find that the supply of sacrificial victims is insufficient for their needs. They must find a way to extend the effectiveness of their altar or they will perish. They create rituals to enrich the sacrifice, particularly burial rites where they bury gifts with the corpse: fetishes, riches, and food. They place food on top of the grave as an offering to the spirit of the victim. On the disturbed soil of the grave, they scatter seeds which they are accustomed to gathering for food. The following autumn, they discover that the seeds have given rise to a harvest of food right over the place where the victim was buried. They are certain that this is a gift from the god, and they know that eating this sacred grain, they will partake again in the sacrifice. [\(16\)](#) The next sacrifice, they scatter more grain, perhaps disturbing the soil widely around the grave to give a greater opportunity for the spirit to flourish. Eventually they are turning whole fields of soil, and planting as a part of the sacrificial ritual. When they harvest the sacred grain, it is proof that the god is blessing them and that they will have peace. As they partake of the grain, they are experiencing again the death of the victim and the peace and life which the sacrifice affords. After several generations of this religious practice, it is discovered that a great surplus of food can be generated by means of it. The surplus makes possible the elaboration of culture. Civilization emerges.

When modern archeologists see the shrines to the fertility gods, they assume that the sacrifice is a superstition to extend the harvest. The reality is the opposite: *the harvest existed (originally) to extend the sacrifice.*

To reiterate: commodities have use value and they have mimetic value; but they also have sacred/sacrificial value in most cultures. It is

the presence of the sacrificial value that puzzled Marx, and which drives our violent addiction to consumer goods today.

It must be noted that commodities are not necessarily sacrificial. When people contribute their labor to produce commodities which are life-giving, they are practicing a loving form of self-donation. The products of human labor are purely life-giving if they meet three criteria: one, they must not be ritually destroyed (in religion or war); two, they must not be traded for debt; and three, they must not be produced in conditions that destroy human life. The biblical Sabbath, and the debt-forgiving sabbatical year, are means to prevent the ordinary life-giving activity of work from becoming a death-centered sacrificial system.

### Currency

Currency, money, is a special sort of commodity. Currency is a commodity that has no use value, in the sense that it cannot be consumed. It has sacred value, and it obviously has mimetic value, but it has no value as a consumable. *The use-value of a commodity precedes its mimetic value* - the mimetic value builds on the use value, the consumable value, of the commodity. *The mimetic value of currency, on the other hand, precedes its use-value.* Its great mimetic value makes it useful for trade. It has no value whatever as a consumable; but it has tremendous value as a gift, a "medium of exchange." The use value of currency is not in its consumption, but in its circulation. This is why it is called "currency." *A commodity is desired because it is useful; currency is useful because it is desired.*

One can think of a unit of money as a unit of mimetic desire. The market value of something is the number of dollars (e.g.), someone is willing to pay for it. The *price* of a commodity is the measure of *how much it is desired*. The value of money itself can fluctuate, of course, reflecting the extent to which mimetic desire sustains its value. I accept dollars in payment for my services only to the extent that I trust that the next person will accept my dollars in payment for his services. But if the next person doesn't value dollars, then I am less likely to value dollars. The challenge of the central bank is to manage this mimetic desire so that the value of the dollar is stable. But if the value of the dollar is falling, how is the mimetic desire regenerated to restore it? The same way mimetic desire is commonly regenerated - through sacrifice.

The mimetic value of money derives from sacrifice. The earliest forms of currency are actual sacrificial victims - cattle or slaves. Later, (in the eastern Mediterranean) ox hides substitute for the oxen themselves, and after that, we find metal sculptures of hides (some of them quite large, weighing several pounds). The sculptures evolve into x-shaped coins which resemble the four legs of the ox hide. [\(17\)](#) Ancient Greek and Roman money is directly associated with the temples. Early Greek money was in the form of gold or silver bars stored in the temple. [\(18\)](#) As they began to circulate as money, they represented the sacrificial cult by their association with the temple. The Roman fertility goddess Moneta, an aspect of the goddess Juno, was responsible for the production of grain and money. Roman coins were minted in her temple; she brought forth coins as well as the fruit of the earth. We have the words "money," "mint" and "mind" from the goddess' name "Moneta." [\(19\)](#)

Money in its earliest uses seems to function primarily as ransom. It is used as a substitute for blood vengeance; a wrongdoer avoids retribution by paying money to the family of the one he has wronged. The money in effect represents the blood which must be spilled to even the score. Money reduces the violence in the community by interrupting the cycle of vengeance. [\(20\)](#) As an "intermediary" between the avenger and the wrongdoer, money functions as a form of differentiation between them, delaying mimetic violence. This is perhaps the reason it is etymologically associated with "mind."

Primitive money is often associated with the sacrificial fertility cult or with agriculture. The most popular early form of Chinese money was in the form of a ceremonial (sacrificial?) knife, with a ring in the handle for stringing on a rope. Gradually, the knife-shaped coins evolved into round coins with a hole in the middle. Other Chinese money was shaped like agricultural implements - shovels or hoes. [\(21\)](#)

It is common for primitive money to be associated with the ocean. Some of the earliest Mediterranean coins featured fish or dolphins in their designs. [\(22\)](#) It was common among ancient and primal cultures to use seashells as currency. The most widespread shell money was the shell of the "money cowrie," *Cyprae monetas*. The rounded top

of this shell reminded Europeans of swine, so they were known as "porceae." "Porcelain" gets its name from its resemblance to these shells.

Why have seashells been important forms of currency? Because they represent sacrifice. For example, the Indians of the Northwest coast of North America had a form of money that was widely popular in their region of the world: they used the shells of *Dentalium*, a mollusc whose shell, about three inches long, resembles a large canine tooth. These molluscs would be gathered with traps lowered into the sea, baited with meat. Commonly, this bait would be the flesh of a freshly-killed slave! [\(23\)](#) It is possible, although there is no direct evidence of it, that the money cowrie had a similar sacrificial role.

But even if there were no such direct sacrifice in the use of the money cowrie, it could be that seashells were attractive as money because they are drawn from the sea, a universal symbol of the mimetic crisis (Genesis 1:1-10, Mark 4:35-41). Symbolically, they correlate directly with sacrifice: as sacrifice is a token dose of violence to keep violence under control, a seashell is a token bit of the sea to keep the mimetic crisis symbolized by the sea within bounds.

Money originated as a means to extend or to "leverage" the sacred benefits of the sacrificial system. It represents blood, and it flows and circulates like blood, giving life to the culture. Yet it is not "produced" without sacrifice. Any attempt to produce money without the sacrifice to "back it up" will cause inflation. The "gold standard" is a euphemism for the true standard of value for money - the blood standard. The money cowrie as a currency fell victim to inflation so that it is hardly used at all any more. I believe that the reason it lost its value was that its sacrificial origins were forgotten.

### **The Heap of Debt**

In the seventeenth century, the Dutch were among the most successful bankers in the world. One of the devices that made them so effective was the bank note. The bankers kept a heap of silver in their vaults, and issued paper notes which *represented* shares in the

silver; the note could be exchanged at the bank for the amount of silver represented on the note. These notes, once issued, were traded as currency and generated a powerful economic dynamo. But the bankers had a secret: the total of the notes issued was far in excess of the amount of silver they actually possessed. But it didn't matter; as long as people believed that the notes represented an actual amount of silver, the bankers were able to generate an immense amount of wealth for themselves. [\(24\)](#)

The mechanism they used was essentially the same one which produced agriculture: "leverage" the effect of the sacrifice by producing tokens which represent it. A sacrifice produces a sacred desire, which is then manipulated and multiplied through mimesis, using tokens of the sacrifice to focus the mimesis.

Every culture (short of the Kingdom of God) has its sacred Center, its temple, its High Altar. This spiritual center is the gathering point for the culture, with every mind fixed upon it. The capitalist economy as a sacred system also has this sacred center, but it is not located geographically. I call it "the heap." I get the term from Elias Canetti, who uses "the heap" in his book *Crowds and Power* as a metaphor for the crowd. I use it similarly here, but rather than representing the crowd itself, I would say that the "Heap" represents the sacred center of the crowd, the Presence that has the crowd under its spell.

Heaps are ancient means of gathering people to the sacred center. From the heaps of skulls around the Druid shrines of Old Europe to the heaps of stones piled above the victim of a stoning, to the elaborate heaps of stones forming the pyramids directly over the bodies of the Pharaohs, to the elaborate temples built of stones throughout the ancient world, to the heap of silver in the vault of the Bank of Amsterdam, heaps which mark the place of the sacrifice are a universal feature of sacred civilization. In the modern West, where the biblical revelation has made sacrifice particularly difficult, the heap at the center of the culture is somewhat disguised; it is a Heap of Capital (the words "capital" meaning "head" and "capitol" from the same root, referring to the high temple of Jupiter in Rome, themselves suggest a sacrificial origin to capitalism).

Exactly where this heap is located it is difficult to say. We know of

its existence primarily from the tokens (currency) that represent it. It is true that there are vaults containing precious metals, but these are only a tiny portion of the total Heap. There is some indication where the heap is located if we look at the most impressive monumental architecture of our culture, the urban skyscrapers; but they do not contain the heap. In capitalist society, the Heap is an extended and tightly interwoven network of *debt*. It is a massive and complex structure of resentment and desire.

It is no mere coincidence that the Bible, which struggles so mightily against the gods of sacrificial religion, also struggles with the issue of debt. Debt is a sacrificial device. We say we "sign our life away" when we sign a mortgage for very real and very ancient reasons. To receive a loan is to give the lender the right to make one a victim of vengeance. It is to agree not to retaliate or to allow one's family to retaliate if the lender enslaves us for nonpayment. The borrower takes a curse upon himself. He "sells his soul." The heap of capital at the core of the culture is a heap of debt, a heap of curses, a heap of representations of potential victims.

Everyone in the culture is transfixed by this heap of capital. Those who do not participate in it tend to be deprived of the means to live; those who resist it are often murdered. [\(25\)](#) Most of us place our hopes for living on having a share in the heap, and we raise our children and train them so that their place in relation to the heap is assured. It is "the real world"; to participate in it is to "have a life."

This "heap" cannot be said to have a "substance." It is a heap of debt, of contracts and obligations to buy and sell commodities. These debts are promises to supply human life-force to the system. The life force is in the form of commodities which workers produce by injecting the life force into them. The heap is a kind of black hole, a Great Negation, which must be satisfied by the absorption of human life. Capital is made up of the same stuff as fetishes; it is the abstract sacred "attractor" of human life force, represented in the form of numbers and commodities. [\(26\)](#)

There are many rules and taboos in relation to the heap of capital, having to do with how to carry out a trade, the limits to lying, etc., but the rule above all others is this: *all participants must put more*

*onto the heap than they remove.*

Sacred value may be drawn from the heap in the exchange process, but the end result of the exchange must be that there is a net gain to the size of the heap. Thus an investment may be made in a production line in Haiti, but ultimately the production line must pay more into the heap than it drew out. A worker may receive wages for work performed, but the commodity value of the product of labor must exceed the wages paid.

***The Rich:*** An individual is capable of contributing only a very limited amount of life force to the heap. Therefore, if one is to extract a large amount of this sacred substance from the heap, he must be a broker who takes a share of what a large number of other people contribute from their labor.

***The Poor:*** The farther one is from the Center, the greater is the net loss of life force. The poor are those participants in the system who gain less life force from the system than they contribute. They are one category of sacrificial victims of the sacred capitalistic system, because they are the most likely to experience their labor to be a form of "self-sacrifice" rather than a form of "self-donation."

***Nonparticipants*** are also sacrificial victims of the system. Because they are nonparticipants, they are not capable of retaliating in the only way the system allows - through claims on debt. Therefore they are very attractive to participants in the system who are always looking for ways to contribute more to the system in order to extract more from it. Colonized peoples, dissident groups who try to resist the system, and the environment, as nonparticipants, are forced into the system - or annihilated.

### **The Sacrificial Religion of Capitalism**

Compare the Aztec empire with modern global capitalism. The Aztec empire was gathered around the sacrifice of victims on a high pyramid altar. The victims were shared through the public ritual of the sacrifice, the distribution of the victims' bodies as food for the populace, and artistic representation. Victims were largely drawn from neighboring kingdoms, either captured warriors or ordinary citizens taken for the purpose. Any who resisted the military taking of sacrificial victims were killed, in effect becoming additional sacrifices for the system to feed upon. A priestly class benefitted from

managing such a prestigious enterprise.

In global capitalism, the altar is the factory (means of production), in which materials and human labor are converted through a kind of alchemy (27) into commodities, which are representations of human life-force in the form of labor. Sacrificial victims are drawn from the working classes or the colonial countries, where they are given the choice of contributing their labor to the system or going hungry. Those nations which resist the system are brought into line through military force. Instead of a pyramid at the center of the culture, there are high rise buildings where the heap of wealth is stored and managed. The heap is not in the form of commodities, but in the form of debt - contracts to produce and sell commodities. There is a high priesthood in these high rise buildings which draw a disproportionate share of the sacred substance for themselves, because of their proximity to it; like the Aztec priestly class, they benefit from the prestige of the sacrificial enterprise. The "corpse" is represented and distributed in the form of currency and commodities, to which the entire population is addicted. The culture gathers in awe around the great heap of wealth formed by the system, but the only means of gaining a share of the heap is by contributing a larger amount to it than one draws from it. Thus the heap continues alchemically to grow, increasing the religious awe of it, and the people become even more addicted to it.

The parallel between global capitalism and a pagan sacrificial empire is quite precise, with the exception that in global capitalism the *spectacle* of the blood sacrifice is lacking. Through heavy reliance on representation, the sacrifice is made to take place offstage, out of sight, but its benefits are made available through the commodities and currency that represent it. Commodities and currency take the place of myth in the ancient pagan systems - simultaneously concealing and revealing the murder upon which the culture is founded.

The additional advantage that global capitalism has over primal religion is that even if it is revealed, the murder is not obvious; rarely can the prophet point to a particular victim of a specific sacrificial event to unveil the violence of the system. The violence is spread out over time and among a large distant population, so that only abstract

statistics about infant mortality, nutrition and life expectancy can function to reveal the violence. Such abstractions are easily ignored by a system determined to walk in darkness. What makes capitalism resist the corrosive effect of the biblical revelation are its mythic functions of indirection and dilution.

Global capitalism has been one of the most murderous religious systems in the history of the world. Yet we blithely accept it as if it were a force of nature. The church has offered only feeble resistance to it, (28) and now global capitalism has displaced the church as the primary religious force of our culture. Global capitalism is a global religion, yet we don't recognize it as such. While the "great religions" argue over which has the deepest claim to religious truth, they have all bowed down before this rough beast.

### **Postscript: The Eucharist**

*Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"*  
(Matthew 4:1-4)

In a parody of the Exodus, the devil tempts Jesus to turn stones into bread. If "stones" is understood to represent the bodies of sacrificial victims, then it should be clear to mimetic theorists that this is a temptation to which the whole world, except for Jesus and the prophets, has surrendered. It is the economic temptation.

Jesus resists the devil, insisting that the only way bread should be made is according to God's word. Later, he shows us how this is done. At the Last Supper, he shows us how his crucified body becomes bread; at Emmaus, he shows us how bread awakens us to his risen body; and at the feeding of the 5,000, he shows us how to make bread not from stones, but from bread - by leading the people to imitate his generosity. (29)

The Eucharist is not strictly concerned with "religion." It is also economic. The original table of the Lord was a table of shared wealth, freely given to those who came to share. (30) The Eucharist anticipates a system of economic production which is based on

generosity rather than debt. This is potentially an extraordinarily productive system, which would be more sensitive than any debt-based system, to the environment and to the nonparticipant.

"Everyone was fed and was filled." (Mark 6:42) It is an economic vision of the Kingdom of God.

The transformation of the world begins with liturgy. Just as liturgy put an end to sacrificial religion, so also (we may hope) the death-dealing aspects of our economic system will be gradually displaced, through the power of the Eucharist, with a worldwide heavenly banquet.

### **End Notes**

1. By "religion" here I mean of course religion in the primal sense addressed in Girard's writings. The biblical principle of "faith" stands in contrast to the "religions" of the idolaters. Modern religions, especially the biblical ones, are a blend of faith and primal religion, a blend of the nonviolent and the sacrificial.

2. Duchrow, Ulrich. 1992. *Europe in the World System 1492-1992: Is Justice Possible?* Geneva. WCC Publications. P. 5.

3. *Ibid.* Pp. 4-5.

4. Hoschild, Adam. 1998. *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa.* Mariner Books. New York.

5. In this particular case, the purely economic forces were mitigated by political forces and the pharmaceutical companies were forced to negotiate a compromise in which they will retain control over production of these drugs, but offer them at a more reasonable price. If African nations were allowed to continue producing the drugs on their own, however, they would still save money, even over the newly reduced prices.

6. Marx, Karl. From "The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof" in *Das Kapital*. Ch. I, Section 4.

7. Heard Museum, Phoenix, Arizona. *Native Peoples of the Southwest: The Permanent Collection of the Heard Museum.*

8. Mauss, Marcel. 1990. *The Gift*. Tr. W.D. Halls. Norton. New York. Pp. 44-46.

9. Smith, Bruce D. 1994. *The Emergence of Agriculture*. Scientific American Library. New York. P.13.

10. Smith, Bruce D. 1994. *The Emergence of Agriculture*. Scientific American Library. New York. Pp.211-214.

11. Hayden, Brian. 1995. "A New Overview of Domestication." In *Last Hunters-First Farmers*. School of American Research. P. 276.

12. Hayden,, *op. cit.* Pp. 276, 282. "...hunter-gatherer such as the Hadza...envy their agricultural neighbors with their tasty domesticated foods but do not consider such foods worth all the effort necessary to produce them..."

13. Goldberg, Jake. 1999. *Food: The Struggle to Sustain Human Community*. Grolier. New York. Pp. 39-40. Also see Bar-Yosef, Ofer & Richard H. Meadow. 1995. "The Origins of Agriculture in the Near East" in *Last Hunters-First Farmers*, P. 67. "We are now able to address the issues of when and where intentional, systematic cultivation originated. What continues to elude us are the reasons underlying this critical transition. No simple model seems to deal adequately with the *why* question."

14. Goldberg. 1999. P. 40.

15. Crawford. 1994. Pp. 49-53.

16. "...in the nineteenth century each clan on the East Indian island of Buru concluded the rice harvest with a feast. All of the members of the clan had to contribute a small amount of their rice to this shared meal, and a portion of the rice was offered to the spirits. Called '*eating the soul of the rice*,' this meal nurtured the clan with the vitality of nature." - Crawford, Tad. 1994. *The Secret Life of Money: Teaching Tales of Spending, Receiving, Saving, and Owing*. Putnam. New York. P.26. (Emphasis added).

17. Quiggin, A. Hingston. 1949. *A Survey of Primitive Money, The*

*Beginning of Currency.* Barnes & Noble. New York. P.189.

18. Angell, Norman. 1929. *The Story of Money.* Frederick A. Stokes. New York. Pp. 93-94

19. Crawford, Tad. 1994. *The Secret Life of Money: Teaching Tales of Spending, Receiving, Saving, and Owing.* G.P. Putnam's Sons. New York. Pp. 15-16, 47-54.

20. Quiggen, *op. cit.* Pp. 8-9. "'Bride-price' and 'blood-price' have much in common-the payment represents an indemnity."

21. Angell. P. 80.

22. Angell. *Op. cit.* P.77.

23. Angell P. 75.

24. Buchan, James. 1997. *Frozen Desire: The Meaning of Money.* Farrar, Straus, Giroux. P. 80.

25. The literature on this is too immense to cite. Historical examples of this phenomenon are the murder of Allende and his followers in Chile after Chile nationalized North-American owned industry; the murder of Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala after he did the same thing; the murders of Nicaraguans by U.S.-backed "contra" mercenaries after the Nicaraguan revolution. Other examples are easy to think of: Viet Nam; the workers' movements in Indonesia in the 1960's; assassinations of labor leaders in Honduras in the 1980's, etc. It would be monotonous if it weren't so monstrous.

26. Mauss nicely illustrates how the fetishism of commodities tends to increase the "heap": "Each important piece of copper in the families of the clan chiefs has its name, its own individuality, its own value, in the full sense of the word - magical, economic, permanent, and perpetual....Moreover, they have a power of attraction that is felt by other copper objects, just as wealth attracts wealth, or dignities bring honours in their train....One of them is called among the Kwakiutl 'the attracter of copper objects', and the story depicts how the copper objects group around it." (P.45)

27. Duchrow, Ulrich. 1992. *Europe in the World System 1492-1992: Is Justice Possible?* WCC Publications. Geneva. Pp. 17-23.

"Binswanger interpretes this as alchemy - changing based elements into gold - continued by other means, just as Mephistopheles proposes in Goethe's *Faust*." It is perhaps no coincidence that the tool sought by the medieval alchemists, by which they would perform the equivalent of turning stones into bread, was called the "philosopher's stone." If philosophy, as Girard's critique of Heraclitus suggests, is rooted in sacrifice; and if a "stone" is an archetype for the presence of the dead, then medieval alchemy can be seen as a predecessor to capitalism.

28. However feebly, the church has been the original center of resistance to global capitalism, opposing usury, establishing welfare laws, and protesting injustices as for example Bartolomé de las Casas did in seventeenth century Latin America, and as the Jesuits did in Paraguay.

29. Bailie, Gil. 1995. *Violence Unveiled*. pages 212-215. New York: Crossroad. "...By now the reader will have guessed what I think the miracle was. Jesus opened their hearts, and they, in turn, opened their satchels, and the greatest miracle of all occurred. Following a pattern that is still today embedded in the Catholic Mass, Jesus preached of a God of love and forgiveness and then invited those who heard his message to sit down together and live for a moment in the "kingdom" about which he was preaching. Changing the human heart and liberating those trapped in religious superstition is simply a greater miracle than pulling loaves and dried fish out of a basket. The feeding of the multitude was a real miracle. The miracle was a new kind of community, one generated by prayer and inclusion, a "new generation." Transitory as it may have been, it remains a model for a new community, one on which all human culture will one day have to be based. The social bond that gave the community that Jesus inspired its coherence had one conspicuous feature: the breaking down of religious prejudice."

30. Crossan, John Dominic. 1998. *The Birth of Christianity: Discovering What Happened in the Years Immediately After the Execution of Jesus*. Harper. San Francisco. Pp. 423-480. Crossan presents a marvelous picture of the early eucharist as the practice of

an alternative economics, based on forgiveness and open sharing. See also Meeks, M. Douglas. 1989. *God the Economist: The Doctrine of God and Political Economy*. Augsburg Fortress. Minneapolis. Meeks analyzes the idolatry of modern economics as being based on an assumption of scarcity, in contrast to God's promise of abundance. Also see Walter Brueggemann's important article, "The Liturgy of Abundance, the Myth of Scarcity" in *Christian Century*, March 24-31, 1999, or URL <http://www.religion-online.org/cgi-bin/researchd.dll?action=showitem&id=540>