Mammon's Deadly Grin:

The New Gospel of Wealth and the Old Gospel of Life

by

Eugene McCarraher

Villanova University

Presented at the Culture of Life Conference

Notre Dame Center for Ethics and Culture

November 30, 2001

"Is this a great time, or what?" That festive and rhetorical question was a Microsoft slogan in those giddy days of yore called the 90's. The evidence appeared incontrovertible: the escalating stock and bond markets; the profusion of goods, services, and all things dot com; the sport utility galleons, fuelled to ferry their citizen-shoppers through the fleshpots of suburbia; the amen chorus of advertisers, pundits, and politicians, whose seraphic voices bid us ascend to a higher corporate sublime. Presiding over what Francis Fukuyama dubbed "the end of history" -- the consummation of human desire in the malls of democratic capitalism -- the United States extended its global hegemony, not only with a low-intensity war, a discreet starvation, and an occasional massacre, but with the soft artillery of trade agreements, television shows, and computer screens. For the Empire of Customer Service, the trajectories of abundance and power had never seemed so righteous and unalterable. Only a few months ago, we were told by no less exalted an authority than Ari Fleishcer that this rapturous landscape was "our blessed way of life."

Well, it's becoming obvious that the great time is coming to an end, and it's clear that our blessed way of life has been forcefully if murderously indicted as a cursed way of death. History, we are now discovering, has not ended in the inalienable right to a double latte. Even before the events of September, the glittering imperium of American capitalism was losing its luster and vitality. The business cycle, it now appears, has not been repealed, and the sense of entitlement so bone-deep in the American middle class will now face its most withering insult. And we've

now been served notice that a felony charge on the bill of radical Islamic indictment is our complicity in oppression, degeneracy, and death. Having laced our Nikes and harvested our beans, the wretched of the earth will no longer abide our cheery condescension and indifference.

Despite our collective conscription into Caesar's legions, never has battle service been so pleasant and bereft of sacrifice. ("What did you do in the war, Daddy?" "I bought a DVD!") Still, the clarion calls for no-interest normalcy are the nervous signs of a shaken faith. Therefore, living in the midst of turbulence and celebration, we Christians need to dampen the gargantuan euphoria of our economy and culture, and counter the protestations of our democratic freedom. And what we most need to say is that American capitalism cheapens life, denatures liberty, and perverts our happiness. Capitalism, I submit to you, is the political economy of the culture of death, and the business corporation is its bogus ecclesial vehicle. Mammon's smile, beaming with the glint of silver and gold, is the deadly grin of a killer. If this is so, then a vital task of any genuinely "pro-life" gospel and politics should be the demolition of the corporation's material and cultural power. To that end, the Catholic social tradition affords the imaginative and conceptual resources we need to supplant the corporation and envision a new array of possibilities for our time.

Long respected as capitalism's greatest nursery of organizational and technical prowess, the corporation was also feared and ridiculed as a graveyard of joy, uniqueness, and spirituality. The gray-flannel suit, the organization man, the

air-conditioned nightmare: for a generation or so after the Second World War, these images were the staples of American cultural criticism. Staid liberals like David Riesman, William H. Whyte, and Vance Packard, New Left radicals in SDS, and the denizens of the counterculture, all told a generally similar story with a variety of conclusions. The corporation, so the story went, provided an abundance of material goods at the price of mandating conformity to the dictates of a soulless machine driven by avarice. In the liberal denouement of the story, we could try to mitigate the corporation's power through strategies of regulation and evasion: the welfare state, the cultivation of private life, the pursuit of a leisure unsullied by the commodity form. In the New Left denouement, we could deconcentrate or commandeer the corporation through strategies of "participatory democracy." In the countercultural denouement, we could avoid the corporation altogether by tuning in, dropping out, and pursuing the good life of sensual and spiritual delight.

But in one of the most perverse feats of cultural alchemy ever performed, American business transformed the gold of these lines of criticism into the dross of a new corporate culture. The liberal critique atrophied, as Americans both worked longer hours and saw leisure itself ever more commodified. Uncoupled from radical politics, the left critique supplied keywords for a new managerial lexicon of "empowerment," "participation," and "flexibility." And the countercultural critique provided high-octane fuel for the symbolic juggernaut of contemporary advertising. In the moral and imaginative universe conjured by advertising, managerial

literature, business journalism, and mainstream punditry, the workplace is a site of dressed-down, "empowered" democracy. Freedom is equated with "choice," the unhindered and ever-expanding selection from a surfeit of commodities and lifestyles, the pursuit of a life with "no interest," "no fear," and "no boundaries," to use some mites from recent advertising. And the corporation is the grand historical vehicle of liberty, creativity, prosperity, and even spiritual fulfillment. If we harken to the evangel of Bill Gates, Thomas Friedman, Michael Lewis, Virginia Postrel -- not to mention Michael Novak and Fr. Richard Neuhaus -- it would seem that the corporation is the indisputable vessel for the "culture of life."

Now I know that most Christians don't immediately fear the corporation as a bearer of that "culture of death" excoriated by the Holy Father. To be sure, Evangelium Vitae spends a considerable amount of time on "life issues" such as abortion, euthanasia, and genetic engineering, in which the biological integrity of human selfhood is most clearly at issue. But if we look carefully at other passages in the encyclical, we can both enlarge the scope of its concerns and reinterpret other papal documents -- especially Centesimus annus and Laborem exercens -- in the light of a "gospel of life." EV commits Catholics to opposing "whatever insults human dignity" and to dissenting "whenever people are treated as mere instruments of gain." The scourges of indignity and instrumentalization are embodied, not only in abortion and euthanasia, but also in an obsession with "efficiency" that points (as I'd gloss the encyclical with

a bow to John Milbank) to the ontology of scarcity that undergirds capitalist economics. The culture of death subsists as well on a notion of freedom as autonomous will, the clashes of which in the forum of the marketplace put a premium on what His Holiness calls a "completely individualistic conception of freedom." And because it understands freedom in this way, the culture of death idealizes democracy either as a "substitute for morality" or as "a panacea for immorality."

On each of these counts the economy and culture of corporate capitalism merits a verdict of "guilty." Take "efficiency." It's considered one of the impregnable argumentative defenses of capitalism to laud its "efficiency," and yet few people pose what should be the first and obvious question: efficient in terms of what? Making more stuff at a cheaper cost, is the usual uncomprehending response. But what about the stuff? Does it, from the standpoint of the gospel, foster a community of life, love, and worship? It's worth noting, especially in the light of recent news, that part of that stuff is the commodification of biological processes which, conducted under corporate auspices, looks to be one of captialism's most lucrative and sinister areas of expansion. And what about the cost? Does cheapness justify unemployment, de-skilling, sweatshop misery, and other assaults on the livelihood, talent, and freedom of workers? If we're serious about a culture of life, we should repudiate in the strongest terms all the cruel and tiresome rejoinders made in response to these moral challenges. You know, all that dim-witted and callous talk about tight belts and "tragic necessity" that rolls so easily off the tongues of the

nouveau bourgeoisie. We also need to recall the central but forgotten truth that the spur of production under capitalism is not moral or spiritual but accumulative. The level of this forgetfulness is a sign that the conflation of reason and morality with accumulation has already poisoned the American moral imagination.

One would have thought that such a merger would have been contested in a democracy, and yet the Pope is at least half right, I fear, in his assertions that democracy has become a substitute and a panacea. Still, I think his fears about democracy need to be reformulated. The Pope rightly observes that democratic theory and practice rests much too often on liberal individualist understandings of will and selfhood, and that this reliance precludes the identification and pursuit of common goods. But I think that this conception conflates democracy and the marketplace -- a conflation all too happily endorsed by the corporate control of our culture. Democracy more easily degenerates into a "substitute for morality" or a "panacea for immorality" when the pursuit of common goods becomes identified with market relations and market values. Those neo-conservatives who wail and lament the "new class" of intellectuals need a simple lesson in political economy: the symbolic universe of our culture of death is generated in cultural institutions that are owned and operated as corporate, accumulative enterprises. From this standpoint, it's rather uninteresting that a majority of the "new class" is pro-choice. It's more telling that this position illuminates their deeper commitment to market values they share with alleged

conservatives. This also explains, I'd add, why all the campaign finance reform in the world will not matter a bit if our culture remains under corporate ownership, for corporate control of our cultural economy enables the fusion of democracy with consumer culture. Our national-security state -- more adept and more culpable in the production of death than any groups tendentiously labelled "terrorist" -- is also a national entertainment state, the most exemplary merger of Mars and Saturn since the earthly city described by Augustine in Book II chapter 20 of the City of God.

The conflation of democracy and consumer culture is aided and abetted by the lissome corporate lingo of "empowerment," "flexibility," and "liberation." A lot of the rhetorical helium that inflates "the new economy" also elevates the power structures of post-Fordist capitalism to new heights of inscrutability. In the pseudo-egalitarian and therapeutic jargon of the post-industrial workplace, workers become "associates" while bosses become "facilitators," "team leaders," and "non-directive managers." The attrition of stable employment, the erosion of wages and benefits, the enforcement of longer hours and more harried schedules, and the corporate onslaught against unions all become "flexibility." It's a fair bet that as the "new economy" contracts and begins to look very much like the old one, this aromatic flatulence will quickly turn rancid. But it will stand revealed as the perfume on a culture of powerlust, manipulation, and violence -- in other words, a culture of death.

I think that management writing and business apologetic in general deserves special odium in the light of a gospel of life

because it legitimates the corporation as a false parody of the church, in William Cavanaugh's terms. We should start taking seriously Alasdair MacIntyre's observation that the manager, along with the therapist and the artist, is a key moral figure in the world "after virtue." If we do, we will find that business and management writers have created a very diverse ideological portfolio, serving up a heady brew of quasi-Nietzscheanism, post-Newtonian physics, chaos theory, pseudo-Machiavellian politics, and New Age spirituality. To cite a few examples: Ayn Rand's popular novels and treatises that constitute a crypto-theology of market individualism; W. E. Deming's "total quality management," wherein the corporation is likened to the mystical body of Christ; Michael Novak's "theology of the corporation," wherein the corporation becomes the Suffering Servant of Isaiah. (That latter will go down in history, I think, as a baptismal font in which a lot of dirty money was laundered.) I suggest that we borrow Cavanaugh's insight into the phony and death-dealing soteriology of the modern state and extend it to the corporation. The corporation, we might say, is a false copy of the body of Christ. Its economic theory, management literature, and popular apologetic comprise the doctrine, ethics, and doxology of capitalism. Its mass commodified culture is a facsimile of eucharistic communion. Its <u>religio</u>, its binding discipline, is the accumulation of capital. And its peculiar violence, when not directly implicated in the imperialist ventures of the nation-state, consists in the scarcity it presumes, the competitiveness it mandates as a feature of selfhood, and the war it decrees as the condition of creativity and flourishing.

At the same time, the political economy of death is the precondition for the emergence of "choice" as the holy grail of our moral culture. It's neither coincidental nor unironical that the word so decisive in the legitimation of corporate hegemony is also pivotal to the defense of abortion. First, both abortion and corporate capitalism are justified in the liberal individualist language of self-ownership and autonomous will. Second, the language of choice obscures and even nullifies the moral substance of the choices made. And third, the alacrity with which "choice" is now invoked is, I suspect, an indication of how meaningless -- and therefore how few -- our choices have really become. Abortion becomes more conceivable as a practice, not only when sex is utterly divorced from pregnancy, but when the organization of work hampers or precludes the reproductive practices of sex, birth, and child-rearing. If we are going to combat abortion, then I would suggest that we appropriate and transform the language of choice, and argue that abortion is the hallmark of a culture that forces everything to pivot around the accumulation of capital. We must tie abortion to a political economy that controls our work, warps our practices of love, and compensates with the perverse but beguiling enchantments of commodified freedom.

But our indictment won't and even shouldn't be perused unless we can offer some alternative to the political economy of violence and death. Christians need reminding that they have a long, rich, and incessantly replenished reservoir of social thought, both in the papal encyclicals and in a broader lay body of reflection. Since I can't swallow the lightweight but toxic confection of

"democratic capitalism," I'd advise Christians to consider "radical orthodoxy," and especially its reclamation of what Milbank has called "Christian socialism," as the wellspring of moral imagination for a political economy of life. Composed of a motley crew of radicals that includes Pierre Buchez, John Ruskin, Simone Weil, Eric Gill, and the Catholic Workers, this pedigree affirmed what I, with apologies to Catherine Pickstock, would dub the liturgical consummation of labor. Work was, to Christian socialists, a form of worship, a sacramental portal onto the divine, a participation in God's own inexhaustible creativity. To this end, they elevated as their standard of labor, not the ultimately pecuniary criterion of "efficiency," but the artisanal and theological practice of poesis. They denounced the proletarianization of labor -- something even Marxists consider a tragic necessity -- as an affront to poetic, liturgical vocation. And they defined freedom, not as consumer sovereignty or unhindered accumulative prowess, but as "free association," membership in a complex and overlapping network of social groups that included craft guilds. Guilds -- that is, associations of workers who fully controlled their technology, workplaces, and vocational skills, and who understood their labor as liturgical practice -- guilds were an essential feature of the Catholic social imagination from the 1910's to the 1940's, and I think we must reclaim and renovate that broad and generous vision. Thus, the revival and evangelization of the labor movement is indispensable to a political economy of life.

Most important, Christian socialists and the radical orthodox have rooted their vision in an ontology of abundance that must

provide the metaphysical foundation for a political economy of life. In their view, the capitalist claim to realism about scarcity and will -- the twin pillars of modern economic culture -- is a foolish and lethal delusion. However upbeat and cheerful the pecuniary imagination may appear, its latent nightmare is dispelled by Christian socialism with an account of creation as plenitude, fertility, and gifted exchange. I think it was something like this faith in abundance -- a conviction expressed, for Jews and Christians, in the very first sentence of Genesis -- that underlay Ruskin's wonderful maxim that there is no wealth but life. Thus, a Christian resistance to capitalism must rest, not on "idealism" or on a stoic wisdom of "regulation," but on a claim to realism that Christians have become all too faithless, modest, or intimidated to avow.

I'd wager that, at this gathering, Paul Tillich's is not a name with which one could easily conjure, but I'd like to use one of his favorite terms to suggest the unlikely promise of our time. Tillich was fond of using kairos, a Greek word that connotes a decisive moment for God's people, a call to read the signs of the times and to act accordingly. With the prospects of self-doubt, recession, and interminable war ahead of us, we rightly fear the worst of times, but we should also embrace the moment as the best of times, if we know how to read them and what to do with them. In these times, when death is so often the solution offered to inconvenience, loss, injustice, or death, the affirmation of life is our most urgent, difficult, and emancipating duty. In the faces of that deadly trinity of Mammon, Saturn, and Mars, we've been

offered a kairos to identify and heal some of the deepest and ugliest corruptions of our culture. So I'm not at all flippant when I say, sisters and brothers, that on this side of paradise, I can't think of a greater time to be alive.