

Religion and Capitalism from the Perspective of Marxism

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Abstract: The relationship between religion and capitalism has been the focus of attention of many philosophers. I will try to illustrate it through the theories of Benjamin, Agamben and others. Capitalism can not only be understood as a secularization of religion according to Weber's idea, but also has the attributes of a religion in itself at an essential level. It can be seen as a religion in itself. Therefore, we must reorganize the relationship between religion and capital, and in the framework of Marxist materialism, we can make a new interpretation of the relationship, the nature of religion and what kind of new relationship with the combination of modern capitalism, and from this relationship to further analyze the nature of the two, and from the framework of Marxism, it can be seen that the key to both religion and capitalism is to the human being. In the framework of Marxism, it can be seen that the key to both religion and capitalism is the domestication of human beings, so we must further understand and criticize them from a Marxist point of view.

1. The persistence of the religion of destruction -- capitalism

Since Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity*, the reflection on the relation between religion and modern society has become a topic repeatedly raised by modern thinkers. Whether it is Marx's criticism of alienation in *On the Jewish Question*, Weber's explanation of the Protestant ethic in the *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, or the so-called political theology of Benjamin, Taubers and others later, they can all be regarded as the exploration of the problem of religion-capitalism (modernity).

In these discussions, we can roughly tease out two different paths. One is the critical path of alienation represented by Feuerbach or Marx, according to which the existence of religion or other ideologies in modern society is regarded as the existence of alienation from the real society. Religion is an illusion -- a dream rooted in real existence but which in turn dominates the ideological existence of reality. In such a path, the realistic roots of religion or ideology are emphasized, and different ideologies involving religion are interpreted in the light of different social realities. And the ultimate goal of these interpretations is to free the social reality from the alienation shackles of these ideologies. In the other path, the opposition between religion or ideology and reality is no longer emphasized. In this line of thought, much more is discussed about the relationship between capitalism and religion. Both Weber's discussion on the nature of capitalism and Benjamin and other Jewish scholars' interpretation of Marx with deep Jewish color can be included in this train of thought. These thinkers generally emphasize the ambiguous relationship between religion and capitalism, and use this as a basis for different interpretations.

Of these two paths, the second is not content with a simple ideology. It does not open up a whole new theoretical space by suspending some Western intellectual tradition, but attempts to discuss the issues of modern capitalism within a deeper philosophical (theological) tradition, and attempts to mobilize the continental intellectual resources of the whole system for interpretation.

2. Marx - Fetishism as alienation

Marx's critique of capitalist fetishism is based on his critique of alienation. Such a line of thought is well represented in many of Marx's early works, such as the Economic Manuscripts of 1844 and On the Jewish Question. In both cases, Marx explored the subject. To a large extent, Marx's critique of religion was based on the earlier theoretical contributions of Feuerbach. In his critique of religion, Feuerbach demanded that the theological imaginary world of religion be reduced to the secular world. This is a humanistic position, which calls for the elimination of the divine illusion and the return of reality to the human world. Marx's criticism of alienation is not satisfied with this. Marx explains that although Feuerbach's humanistic position is justified, he should go further and point out that the source of this alienation lies in the "self-division and self-contradiction of the secular basis". In the case of fetishism, alienation comes from the capitalist order of production. Capitalism, like religion or Hegel's philosophy, is an alienated being that derives from reality and in turn dominates it.

Through this critique of alienation, Marx identified capitalism as fetishism. But in essence, this grasp of its religious character is based on the reduction of both capitalism and religion, and understanding them both as a form of alienation. In other words, Marx's critique of alienation does not establish a direct link between religion and capitalism. It does not deduce the operating logic of capitalism directly from theology, nor does it capture and identify religion directly from capitalism. In short, Marx's grasp of the connection between capitalism and religion is only an indirect grasp.

3. Weber - Capitalism as secularization of religion

In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber understood the creation and nature of capitalism as a secularization of the Protestant spirit. Weber viewed the different Protestant denominations as a whole and analyzed them with the English Puritans as a typical example. On the one hand, the Puritans upheld the virtue of simplicity and were content with the life of poverty and opposed extravagance and waste. On the other hand, both Calvin and Luther saw themselves as the heirs of St. Augustine, and one of the most important aspects of Augustine's theory was the unique interpretation of God's grace. In his refutation of Pelagianism, Augustine refined the theory of grace, which, in his view, was elusive and irrefutable. Man can neither be freed from original sin by his own free will (Pelagianism) nor can he rely on his own virtue and spirituality to achieve a "God-man cooperation" to obtain God's grace (semi-Pelagianism). God has chosen His people in advance and promised them grace, just as God chose Jacob before he was born. Such a radical theory of grace as St. Augustine's was not fully embraced by the Ecumenical Church after its introduction. After the Reformation, the Protestant conception of grace, represented by Calvin's predestinism, can be said to be the inheritance and revival of the Augustinian theory of grace to some extent. Under the influence of such a predestination view of grace, the Puritans worked hard to accumulate wealth. Their practice of good living and the accumulation of wealth was not seen as a way to glorify their souls, nor as a way to gain God's approval. In fact, the fruits of their earthly lives were themselves seen as evidence of God's grace. In the direction of this Protestant ethic, Protestants insisted on earning, working, and accumulating capital, but such accumulation was neither for luxury nor for a kind of spiritual improvement. The accumulation of worldly wealth here clothe itself with a religious veil, and excellence in wealth and fame indicates the glory of the soul. For Weber, capitalism was founded on such a religious ethic, and it was the Puritans' tireless work, with its religious devotion, that laid the

foundation for capitalism. It was in this kind of labor that capital was successfully transferred. Since the money earned should not be used for luxuries, the best thing to do with it is to let it be reinvested in order to make more money. One could even say that, in such an ideal scenario, the classic contradiction between capital accumulation and capital flow is to a large extent resolved. History seems to bear out Weber's theory to some extent. In the 15th and 16th centuries, when capitalism was in its infancy, devoutly Catholic Spain was subversive in every respect and prideful of the continent, only to decline rapidly as a "funnel of gold" in the following centuries. In contrast, Protestant Britain would later inherit Spain's "empire on which the sun never set."

4. Benjamin -- Capitalism as religion

Not content with a Weberian interpretation, Benjamin sees capitalism not merely as a secularized product premised on religion, but as a religion in itself. In his posthumous work, *Capitalism as Religion*, Benjamin outlines three aspects of this capitalist religious phenomenon: First, "Capitalism is a cultic religion, perhaps the most extreme one that has ever existed. In capitalism, things have meaning only in relation to worship." [1]

This definition is reminiscent of Guidpeau's discussion of landscape in *Landscape Society*. "All that has been directly experienced has left us and entered into a representation." [2] For such a representation, it is further noted that "the landscape is represented as an immense substantiality, both indisputable and unattainable. It says nothing more than 'what appears is good, and good will appear'." This is a clear deviation from the classic statement of Hegel's *Principles of the Philosophy of Right*: "Everything that is real is rational." Through this aberration, the nature of the expression of the landscape is beautifully revealed, that is, an overwhelming display of dictatorship. In the face of this oppression, human viewing ceases to be an active act. Man is no longer a subject, and what is seen is no longer an object. Man is in an absolutely passive position. He looks because he has to, because the presentation of the landscape itself has decisively rationalized itself, and the gaze of the landscape is reasonable and therefore necessarily realistic. Therefore, rather than watching the landscape, man is obsessed with it, intoxicated and unable to extricate himself from it. Finally, we should recall some of Hegel's almost theological philosophical context here. What is the difference between what is rational and what is divine?

We can now understand what Benjamin meant by worship in the context of the scene at Cuydbaud. In capitalist religion as religion, everything has meaning only if it is worshipped (because it is divine), just as in landscape society everything has meaning only if it is seen (because it is "good") and gazed at.

Second, such a cult is enduring. In the religion of capitalism there is no such thing as a working day, no such thing as certain holidays. This is because it has turned every day into a festival, in which capitalism constantly demands the worship of its people. We can see this very well in the various pretentious festivals. Many of these festivals may have once belonged to an old religion, or to a particular regional religion or local culture. Today, however, all of these festivals have gradually become a kind of universal modern carnival. As people forget their old significance, they binge and spend more and more. When the old objects of worship gradually fade away behind festivals, all festivals and celebrations have left empty shells and are gradually occupied by the new religion of capitalism. Moreover, these so-called festivals are even a pretext for doing nothing more than pushing People's Daily consumption into one orgy after another. They are nothing more than polarizations of daily worship, that is, they merely perpetuate and reinforce what is happening on each day, rather than standing out as a special time segment. Here, one might argue, at least, that the holidays that accompany the holidays do indeed bring a brief respite from everyday life. However, if one considers how capitalism, at the present time, has nakedly used the regulation of holidays to facilitate all sorts

of so-called supply and demand adjustment and stimulate consumption. We can see that holidays are still in fact a capitalist calculation, almost a form of advanced promotion. And leisure, as good and pure as Marx or some of the classical philosophers described it, has become almost impossible in the present age.

Thus, as never before, in a capitalist society, the holidays have become completely empty (as in everyday life), in which people try in vain to demand some kind of stimulus, but in the end all they get is consumption and more consumption. As never before, everyday life has become a never-ending festival in which people are forced to worship each day.

Finally, capitalism as a religion does not have a salvation or atonement orientation like Christianity and other traditional religions. It is oriented towards sin itself. What it tries to do is not to save the world from sin but to make sin completely universal. Benjamin describes it this way: "The very nature of this religious movement -- capitalism -- from beginning to end induces patience, to the point where God, in the end, also bears the full burden of sin, to the point where the whole world is taken over by despair, which is in fact its secret hope." [1] Such an awareness of sin can be found in Freud's theory. Freud's psychoanalytic discussion of various types of repression and primitive complexes can essentially be seen as a modern awakening to the concept of original sin. A similar interpretation of Freud can be found in Taubers. In his 1987 academic lecture on Paul's political theology in Heidelberg, Taubers analyzed Freud's late work, *Moses and Monotheism*. In it, Freud argued that Moses had founded a religion of fathers whose central consciousness "did not yet directly express the animosity of killing fathers." [3] Rather, it manifests itself as a vague sense of guilt. On the surface, Jewish guilt came from being God's chosen people and not obeying God, and therefore suffering various kinds of punishment from God. Freud, however, believed that the root of this guilt lay in the original consciousness of the sin of patricide. These superficial SINS cover up the essential SINS. Paul, on the other hand, declares very early in *Romans* that "Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, sent to preach the good news of God." This Gospel is the sacrifice and salvation of the Messiah. In Paul's view, Jesus' passion atoned for man's SINS and saved him from sin. Freud points to a crucial problem here, that is, man's sin is nothing but man's murder of the Father of God. Jesus, as the incarnate Christ, was a man but also the Son of God. Through the sacrifice of the Son, man atoned for his SINS against his father. In this way, the Son also became a revered God and eventually replaced the father. Further, through Paul, a son religion, Christianity, replaces the father religion of Moses. The decadent guilt that spread throughout the Mediterranean world was derived from this Jewish guilt over the killing of God. "This is the thesis -- that the feeling of sin acquires a universal, economically universal shape." [4]

Freud's ambition was by no means to undertake a new conceptual history of Christianity, but ultimately his discussion of sin was to show that, through the replacement of the religion of the son for the religion of the father, and with the universalization of this religion of the son, the idea of guilt was pinned to the foundation of modern Western civilization and with the universalization of Western civilization in modern times, a universal modern sin was formed. This is why, in Benjamin's view, Freud's theory "also belongs to the hegemony of the priests of this cult. The concept is capitalist through and through. By a profound analogy -- which remains to be explained -- the concept of sin, repressed, is capital itself, which pays its interest in an unconscious hell." [1]

Through the discussion of Taubers and Benjamin on Freud, we can see that Freud's reduction of the concept of guilt in Christianity through psychoanalysis is not only for the study of Christianity, but for the treatment of the present. Nor is this therapy intended to cure not just the individual, but the whole culpable capitalist civilization. The capitalist perpetuation of the Judeo-Christian concept of guilt is clearly exposed.

In short, Benjamin concludes, "In the West, capitalism has developed into a parasite on Christianity (and this must be explained not only in Calvinism, but also in other Orthodox Christian

churches) until it reaches a point where the history of Christianity is essentially the history of its parasite -- that is, capitalism." [1] Although many of the religious elements of capitalism can be found in the Christianity of the past, it is as if it were born of the Christianity of the past. But now, as capitalism grows and matures, it has itself evolved into a deformed and universal religion, which will turn back on all that was Christian civilization.

5. Agamben—Sacrifice and desecration

Agamben inherited much of Benjamin's thinking, but Agamben used his own concept to reinterpret the religious nature of capitalism, and tried to highlight that the most important feature of capitalism is that it is a religion that cannot be desecrated. (This argument can be seen in some ways as a continuation and extension of the enduring cult of capitalism in Benjamin's view.)

Agamben begins by emphasizing that the etymology of Religio is not somewhat from Religare, as some etymologies would suggest. The word refers to a union and unity of things belonging to God and man. The correct etymology, according to Agamben, is Religere, which refers to a person's wariness and caution in the face of the gods. Thus, Religare and Religere would form a set of opposing meanings, with the former emphasizing unity and harmony between God and man, and the latter demonstrating the essential separation and division between God and man.

In fact, the concepts of "demarcation" and "state of exception" play a very central role in Agamben's thinking. The use of this set of concepts is directly influenced by the twentieth-century German jurist Carl Schmidt. According to this set of concepts, religion operates according to a mechanism whereby a sovereign demarcates boundaries, distinguishes states of exception, and expels the exception from the domain of sovereignty, so that the exception is no longer directly governed by sovereignty and the norms within its boundaries. But a key element of this is that the exception, though outside the realm of sovereignty, is not directly governed by it. But this does not mean that sovereignty has nothing to do with it. On the contrary, it is by distinguishing the exception that sovereignty acquires a special power over the exception. It is a seemingly paradoxical operation in which the system, by excluding something, actually includes it. How does this work?

Comparing this model to religion, Agamben first proposed a set of concepts called "sacrifice" and "sanctification." According to Roman law, to sacrifice something or someone to the gods meant to classify the sacrificial thing into the ranks of the sacred, and with sanctification it was banished from the realm of earthly law. If someone was sacrificed to the gods, then this meant that no one who killed him could violate the law, not that he was tried for death, but that he was completely removed from the realm of the law. In this way, the exception excluded from sovereignty is affected by it in a new form. (In the late Republic of Rome, many dictators struck at their political opponents in this way. Cicero, the famous republican politician, was publicly declared beyond the protection of the law by Antony, and was murdered by a centurion.) More immediately, of course, because such an individual is excluded from the realm of the world, it becomes no longer freely available for human enjoyment. Man is not free to use it, for it belongs to the gods.

In contrast, since there is the consecration, the sacrifice of elimination, there is also the operation of bringing that sacred thing back to earth. Such an operation is sacrilege, which depriving the thing it desecrates of its independent divine character. So how can blasphemy be achieved? In effect, by bringing sacred objects that can no longer be freely used back into the realm of human use, the boundaries drawn by sacrifice are breached and blasphemy is accomplished. So here, the key focus is on "use," and the connection between religion and capitalism is drawn out.

In the history of economics, Adam Smith first proposed that the value of commodities can be divided into exchange value and use value. Such a theory has exerted great influence on many later thinkers, including Marx. In Marx's interpretation, the use-value of an object depends on its

fulfillment of human needs, while the exchange value can only be realized in the context of exchange relations. In other words, the exchange value of an object is premised on its commoditization. Such commodification is regarded by Marx as a kind of alienation. Through commodification, a simple natural being is given a new value by the market, and its original use-value can only be revealed through exchange value. Such a process is a typical sacrificial process in Agamben's theoretical perspective: Through commercialization, a living natural object becomes no longer freely usable by human beings. It is no longer a living natural object in the first place, but a sacred commodity.

However, if commodification is just such a sacrificial process, then the solution seems simple. We need only return it to use-value. However, things are not so simple and smooth, and the whole system of ownership based on commoditization is obviously not so easy to subvert. What Forrest is trying to point out is that commodities, landscapes and capitalism as a whole are unique in that they are a sacred religion that cannot be easily desecrated.

To illustrate the impossibility of such a desecration, Agamben discusses it in terms of "use" and "consumption" and traces the problem back to Christian theology. In the thirteenth-century Catholic Curia, a dispute arose between the monks of the Franciscan Order (whose founder, St. Francis, is known for his poverty), who followed the teachings of St. Francis and advocated the practice of a poor life. This pursuit of poverty, which they summed up as "supreme poverty," meant, they believed, the complete abandonment of possession of property. The renunciation of property is not merely the renunciation of wealth as a physical object, but, at its root, the Franciscan friars seek a relationship of pure use between man and thing. They call this "usus facti," or "use of fact," by which all legal dimensions of property or ownership are suspended. They claim that Jesus lived in such a way that he never possessed any property, but that this did not affect his pure enjoyment of food and clothing. On the other side of the debate was Pope John XXII. The Pope insisted that there is no such thing as a use that can be divorced from ownership. Especially with something like food, your use of it is your destruction. For the Pope, that use is consumption, and consumption is necessarily based on ownership. "Consumption, which must destroy the thing, is nothing but the impossibility of use, or the negation of use, [for] use presupposes that the substance of the thing is not touched." [5] Further, a use distinct from ownership does not exist qualitatively, since it is by no means something that one can 'have'. Thus, in the Pope's interpretation, the concept of consumption triumphs over the concept of use, and pure use, as the Franciscans insist, is no longer possible.

It is this debate that reveals the mystery of the commodity, which is that it is essentially something that can only be consumed and not used. Agamben puts it this way: "If the consumers of mass society are unhappy today, it is not only because the things they consume already contain in themselves their 'impossibility' of being used, but also because, and above all because they believe that they are exercising their right of ownership over them, because they are no longer able to desecrate them." [5] What a profound assessment this is. Under the domination of commodities and consumption, not only is the mere enjoyment of use-value no longer possible, but this use-value itself has been replaced by the consumption of commodities. In other words, all man can do is consume, and use is nothing but a non-existent dream.

Agamben uses a masterful metaphor to portray this strange religious landscape. Nowadays, the temple of capitalist religion is a museum, and every exhibition in it is a profound expression of the impossibility of use, in the face of which all one can do is to watch and consume. And, with modern tourism (what could be more consumpt-inducing than travel?) And museums are no longer confined to buildings. To the casual visitor, an entire living city is nothing more than a giant museum. More generally, everything in the world today has been musealized. As tourists move from city to city, from place to place to consume, they can't help but ooze approval and worship at everything they consume. Just think of how many young Bourgeois nowadays are obsessed with their own museums and exhibitions and travel around the world. Indeed, such a hobby is often a blatant expression of

religious devotion and fanaticism. In the process of worship, they will no doubt be accompanied by all kinds of landscape photography and souvenir consumption, of course, there is also endless social network display (and the content of their display is not only the landscape, but even the display itself). In the end, none of this is about pure enjoyment; it's about pure consumption and the display of consumption.

In the end, blasphemy is no longer possible. In the Museum of the world, the grand sacrifice of capitalism is carried out on the most extreme scale, so much so that it sanctifies the whole world. It enlists everyone as its adherents in an eternal cult, a dictatorial cult that has no room for blasphemy or resistance. It is in this madness, encompassing all its commodities and landscapes, that capitalism becomes the most fearsome religion ever invented.

6. Conclusion

Through the above analysis, capitalism is fully presented as a fearsome universal religion. Not only does it lead to great fanaticism, but it also enshrine former SINS, and the worst of all is that such a religion deprives us of our capacity for blasphemy. As adherents of such a religion, it is inevitable that modern man will never be truly happy. Under the frenzied operation of its sacrificial machine, he will only end up in an endless march toward nothingness and, in the end, destruction, under the shadow of irreparable sin. In order to be liberated from this capital sin, in order to completely renounce alienation in order to achieve our original freedom and happiness, we must regain our blasphemous power to shatter the sacred sacrifices of that terrible religion. No matter how hopeless the task may be. And so Agamben concludes "Sacrilege" with a decisive call to the future: "The desecration of the inviolable is the political task of a generation to come." [5]

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