

15

Capitalism as Religion

Walter Benjamin

Translated by Chad Kautzer

[Fragment 74]¹

One can behold in capitalism a religion, that is to say, capitalism essentially serves to satisfy the same worries, anguish, and disquiet formerly answered by so-called religion. The proof of capitalism's religious structure—as not only a religiously conditioned construction, as Weber thought, but as an essentially religious phenomenon—still today misleads one to a boundless, universal polemic. We cannot draw close the net in which we stand. A commanding view will, however, later become possible.

Three characteristics of the religious structure of capitalism are, however, recognizable at present. First, capitalism is a pure religious cult, perhaps the most extreme there ever was. Within it everything only has meaning in direct relation to the cult: it knows no special dogma, no theology. From this standpoint, utilitarianism gains its religious coloring. This concretization of the cult connects with a second characteristic of capitalism: the permanent duration of the cult. Capitalism is the celebration of the cult *sans rêve et sans merci*.² Here there is no “weekday,” no day that would not be a holiday in the awful sense of exhibiting all sacred pomp—the extreme exertion of worship. Third, this is a cult that engenders blame. Capitalism is presumably the first case of a blaming, rather than a repenting cult. Herein stands this religious system in the fall of a tremendous movement. An enormous feeling of guilt not itself knowing how to repent, grasps at the cult, not in order to repent for this guilt, but to make it universal, to hammer it into consciousness and finally and above all to include God himself in this guilt, in order to finally interest him in repentance. This

[repentance] is thus not to be expected in the cult itself, nor in the reformation of this religion—which must hold on to something certain within it—nor yet in the denial of it. In the essence of this religious movement that is capitalism lies—bearing until the end, until the finally complete infusion of blame into God—the attainment of a world of despair still only hoped for. Therein lies the historical enormity of capitalism: religion is no longer the reform of being, but rather its obliteration. From this expansion of despair in the religious state of the world, healing is expected. God's transcendence has fallen, but he is not dead. He is drawn into the fate of man. This passage of "planetary man" [*Planeten Mensch*] through the house of despair is, in the absolute loneliness of his path, the ethos Nietzsche describes. This man is the *Übermensch*, the first who knowingly begins to realize the capitalist religion. The fourth characteristic [of the religious structure of capitalism] is that its God must become concealed and may only be spoken of in the zenith of his culpability. The cult becomes celebrated before an immature deity, [while] every image, every idea of it injures the secret of its maturity.

Freudean theory also belongs to the priestly rule of this cult. It is thoroughly capitalistic in thought. The repressed, the sinful imagination, is, at bottom, still an illuminating analogy to capital—to which the hell of the unconscious pays interest.

This type of capitalist, religious thinking magnificently reconciles itself in Nietzsche's philosophy. The thought of the *Übermensch* loses the apocalyptic "leap" not by changing its ways, atonement, purification, [or] penitence, but in the apparently continuous, but in the end, rupturing, discontinuous intensification. That is why intensification and evolution are incompatible in the sense of "non facit saltum."³ The *Übermensch* is the one who without changing, arrived, who streaked through the heavens—historical man.

Nietzsche prejudged [preached] that [in] this breaking open of the heavens through increased humanization [Menschhaftigkeit], the religious (also for Nietzsche) blame is and remains. And similarly [with] Marx: the non-inverting [*nicht umkehrende*] capitalism becomes socialism with interest and compound interest, which [are the] functions of blame (note the demonic ambiguity of this concept).⁴

Capitalism is a purely cultic religion, without dogma. Capitalism itself developed parasitically on Christianity in the West—not in Calvinism alone, but also, as must be shown, in the remaining orthodox Christian movements—in such a way that, in the end, its history is essentially the history of its parasites, of capitalism. Compare the holy iconography [*Heiligenbildern*] of various religions on the one hand with the banknotes of various countries on the other: The spirit that speaks from the ornamentation of banknotes.

Capitalism and law [*Recht*]. Pagan character of law. Sorel *Réflexions sur la violence* p. 262.⁵

Overcoming of capitalism through journeying [Wanderung]. Unger *Politik und Metaphysic* S44⁶

Fuchs: *Struktur der kapitalistischen Gesellschaft* o.ä. [?]⁷

Max Weber: *Ges. Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie* 2 Bd 1919/20⁸

Ernst Troeltsch: *Die Soziallehren der chr. Kirchen und Gruppen* (Ges. W. I. 1912)⁹

See above all the Schönbergean bibliography under II.

Landauer: *Aufuf zum Sozialismus* p.144¹⁰

The worries: a mental illness, which suits the capitalist epoch. Spiritual (not material) hopelessness in poverty, vagabondism-begging-monasticism. A condition that is so hopeless it is culpable [*verschuldend*]. The "worries" are the index of this guilty conscience of hopelessness: "Worries" originating in the fear of hopelessness that is community-based, not individual-material.

Christianity in the time of the Reformation did not encourage the emergence of capitalism, but rather changed itself into capitalism.

Methodologically [it] would be [productive] to first examine what associations money has adopted with myth in the course of history—until it could draw from Christianity enough mythical elements in order to constitute its own myth.

Wergild¹¹/Thesaurus of good works/The salary that is owed to the priest. Pluto as God of the rich.

Adam Müller: *Reden übr die Beredsamkeit*¹² 1816 S56ff.

Connection of the dogma of the nature of knowledge—which, in its quality of resolving [*auflösenden*], is, to us, at the same time a liberating and killing—with capitalism. The end result is a liberating and ruining [*erledigende*] knowledge.

It contributes to the knowledge of capitalism as a religion to imagine that the original paganism certainly and most proximately grasped religion not as a "higher" "moral" interest, but as the most immediately practical—that it had with other words been aware of its "ideal" or "transcendent" nature, just as today's capitalism is, but saw in the irreligious or individual of different faith an infallible member of its community, in precisely the same sense the modern bourgeoisie [sees] its non-earning members [*nicht erwerbenden Angehörigen*].

Notes

1. "Capitalism as Religion" is a translation of Fragment 74, entitled "Kapitalismus als Religion," from Volume VI of Benjamin's *Gesammelte Schriften*, edited by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Suhrkamp), 100–03. In the notes of that volume (pp. 690–91), the editors have cited the texts Benjamin references in his manuscript in the editions that he would have read at the time. These are provided with slight emendations in the following footnotes, along with corresponding available English translations. Bracketed English words in the text are added merely to assist the reader in completing fragmentary sentences. All footnotes are those of the translator.

2. The literal translation of "sans rêve et sans merci" is "without dream and without mercy," but this is most likely the result of a typo or error in the transcription of Benjamin's manuscript. The phrase should probably read "sans trêve et sans merci," which is found in the sixth principle of the Medieval decalogue of chivalry, as catalogued by the influential 19th century French literary historian Leon Gautier. The sixth principle refers to the medieval knight's method of fighting the infidels, and is in concert with Benjamin's description of capitalism's development and Georges Sorel's treatment of Christianity and capitalism in his *Réflexions sur la violence*, which Benjamin later cites in this manuscript. See Leon Gautier, *Chivalry, The Everyday Life of the Medieval Knight* (New York: Crown Publishers 1989). I would like to thank Devah Pager and Paul Humphrey for their assistance in tracing this connection.
3. Benjamin's use of "non facit saltum" is a truncated version of the evolutionary adage, *Natura non facit saltum* or "Nature makes no leaps," which figured prominently in Leibniz's *Nouveaux essais sur l'entendement humain* of 1704 (translated as *New Essays on Human Understanding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996)), Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (London: John Murray 1859), and Alfred Marshall's *Principles of Economics* (London: Macmillan 1920).
4. Benjamin is noting the ambiguity of the German word *Schuld*, which can mean either blame, guilt, or debt.
5. Georges Sorel, *Réflexions sur la violence*, 5th edition (Paris: Marcel Rivière et Cie 1919). Translated as *Reflections on Violence* (New York: Peter Smith 1941).
6. Erich Unger, *Politik und Metaphysic. Die Theorie. Versuche zu philosophischer Politik*, I. (Berlin: Verlag David 1921).
7. Bruno Archibald Fuchs, *Der Geist der bürgerlich-kapitalischen Gesellschaft. Eine Untersuchung über seine Grundlage and Voraussetzungen* (Berlin, München 1914).
8. Max Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie* 2 Bd. (Tübingen: Mohr 1920).
9. Ernst Troeltsch, *Die Soziallehren der christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen. Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. I. (Tübingen: Scientia Aalen 1912). Translated as *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* (New York: The Macmillan Company 1931).
10. Gustav Landauer, *Aufruf zum Sozialismus* (Berlin: Verlegt bei Paul Cassirer 1920).
11. In Teutonic and Old English law, *wergild* (or *Wergeld*) is the value set for a human life and is paid to the family or lord of the dead.
12. Adam Müller, *Zwölf Reden über die Beredsamkeit und deren Verfall in Deutschland* (München: Drei Masken Verlag 1816).

16

Theologico-Political Fragment

Walter Benjamin
Translated by Edmund Jephcott

Only the Messiah himself consummates all history, in the sense that he alone redeems, completes, creates its relation to the Messianic. For this reason nothing historical can relate itself on its own account to anything Messianic. Therefore the Kingdom of God is not the *telos* of the historical dynamic; it cannot be set as a goal. From the standpoint of history it is not the goal, but the end. Therefore the order of the profane cannot be built up on the idea of the Divine Kingdom, and therefore theocracy has no political, but only a religious meaning. To have repudiated with utmost vehemence the political significance of theocracy is the cardinal merit of Bloch's *Spirit of Utopia*.

The order of the profane should be erected on the idea of happiness. The relation of this order to the Messianic is one of the essential teachings of the philosophy of history. It is the precondition of a mystical conception of history, containing a problem that can be represented figuratively. If one arrow points to the goal toward which the profane dynamic acts, and another marks the direction of Messianic intensity, then certainly the quest of free humanity for happiness runs counter to the Messianic direction; but just as a force can, through acting, increase another that is acting in the opposite direction, so the order of the profane assists, through being profane, the coming of the Messianic Kingdom. The profane, therefore, although not itself a category of this Kingdom, is a decisive category of its quietest approach. For in happiness all that is earthly seeks its downfall, and only in good fortune is its downfall destined to find it. Whereas, admittedly, the immediate Messianic intensity of the heart, of the