

Desire, Market and Religion. By Jung Mo Sung. SCM Press, 2007. X + 159 pp. pb. \$32.99. ISBN 978-0-334-04141-2.

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Interdisciplinary inquiries by nature are difficult because inquirers must acquire some degree of proficiency in the subjects they intend to bring together in conversation in order to do justice to those subjects. Bringing theology into conversation with economics is not an exception. Few theologians and economists, however, have managed such conversations. Many theologians, for instance, approach a theological analysis of economics by way of a theology of work.¹ Without downplaying its importance in church and society, it must be mentioned that such an approach does not critique or address the field of economics, which concerns how individuals make decisions given the dual assumptions of the scarcity of resources and the desire to maximize one's own utility.² Why would an individual choose to employ one form of work over another? What were the constraints or the scarce resources that may make individuals make the decisions they do?

To conduct a lively and useful dialogue between theology and economics is not impossible, but requires a commitment by both theologians and economists to understand each other before critiquing the other's fields of specialty. As I've noted previously, few theologians and economists have managed such conversations successfully. Economist Robert Nelson, for instance, has rightly traced the ideology behind capitalism and argued that it takes on religious characteristics.³ Another economist, Deirdre N. McCloskey argued in favor of capitalism on the basis that it promotes virtue, drawing on Thomist virtue

1 See, for instance, Miroslav Volf's, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001).

2 A very common misconception of economics is that it is a discourse concerning the interplay of "supply" and "demand." Microeconomics is a study of social interactions at the individual level where individual consumers are assumed to always maximize their utility for all decisions they make. Why, in other words, might a consumer choose Course of Action A over Course of Action B? Basic microeconomic theory, as argued by economist Paul Samuelson (see *The Foundations of Modern Economics*, 1971), asserts that individuals make choices from a set of possible courses of action by maximizing their utility subject to various constraints (income, time, obligations, etc.).

3 See *Economics As Religion: From Samuelson to Chicago*, (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2005).

ethics.⁴ Japanese Brazilian theologian Jung Mo Sung can be considered a member of the aforementioned few, and what is perhaps quite unique about his work, *Desire, Market and Religion*, is that it critiques capitalism on its terms from a liberationist approach.

Desire, Market and Religion is divided into six chapters. The first chapter opens the discussion with a theological interpretation of capitalism, resulting in two effects. First, it opens capitalism from being a mechanical system – thereby rendering it impervious to critique – to being understood as ideology. Having reconstructed capitalism as ideology, Sung can trace the “genealogy of capitalism,” identifying a triumphalism – on that possesses an eschatological ring to it – inherent in Francis Fukuyama’s famous claim that capitalism has irretrievably triumphed over socialism. Chapter 2 moves to explicate what Sung calls “mimetic desire,” which he argues is the vein of thought underlying capitalism. Mimetic desire is perhaps best manifested in the behavior known colloquially as “keeping up with the Joneses,” a desire to own what the Other possesses. This is in contrast to what Sung argues should be a Christian response, which he calls “mimetic representation,” where the individual desires to emulate the Other – in the case of Christianity, Jesus Christ.

Chapters 3 and 4 deepen the argument in the first two chapters by uncovering further the theological language inherent within capitalism. In the former, Sung begins to show how capitalist rhetoric is connected with biblical perceptions regarding idolatry. Capitalism has achieved the status of an idol in that it has been sacralized to the point where it has been elevated to unquestionable truth, rendering it impervious to critique. Thus, in Chapter 4, Sung brings the discussion to bear with the life of the church.

Having critiqued capitalism, Sung now turns his attention to how theology can serve as an intervening influence in pushing back the sacralization of capitalism. Chapters 5 and 6 present Liberation theology as that theological intervention. He does not, however, advocate for Liberation theology in the original form (a la Gustavo Gutiérrez). Indeed, as he notes, some of its foundations may have calcified because the socio-economic contexts applicable to Gutiérrez no longer apply today. Instead of being absolutely resistant to the positive aspects of capitalism, Sung muses on the possibility of maintaining the

4 See *The Bourgeois Virtues: Ethics in an Age of Capitalism*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

solidarity with the poor while critiquing the failures of capitalism, such as free trade (which in practice is rarely free and always benefits the more powerful trading partner). Liberation theology, far from being dead, still lives in spirit and can still present a powerful theological critique of capitalism.

Desire, Market and Religion presents astutely an analysis of capitalism from a theological angle without writing it off as completely problematic. Indeed, one could easily criticize capitalism's theological critiques simply by noting that the same critics benefit from the free exchange of goods and services in their daily lives. As he asserts continually, his critique is directed at how capitalism has been reconstructed as a normative model for social organization, having triumphed ultimately over socialism as evidenced by the Fall of the Iron Curtain. That Sung critiqued capitalism from this perspective is not new; Jacques Derrida made similar arguments against Fukuyama's triumphalist claims in his lectures at the University of California, Riverside (these lectures were published as *Specters of Marx*, 1993.)

Where Sung is quite original is his incorporation of desire into his critique of capitalism. Economic theory, indeed, makes no judgments on such matters because it assumes consumers know what they want, leaving the legitimacy of those wants unquestioned. By re-establishing capitalism as an ideology that can be subject to theological critique, he effectively liberates those wants from their unquestioned status, making it possible to inquire as to the legitimacy of certain desires. Is, for instance, the consumption of a \$400,000 imported sports car, or the consumption of pornography valid? One might counter, of course, that instead of critiquing capitalism, one may instead critique society for making possible the consumption of such goods and services. But this argument essentially defends capitalism at the expense of Christianity by reconstructing the latter into an object of desire instead of an identity to be lived into (an identity, it must be clarified, that is motivated by the desire of the *Subject* of Jesus Christ). To put it in economic language, by "consuming" Christianity the consumption of pornography should be rendered impossible. In doing so, Christianity becomes just an item on a set of possible options for consumption. In the meantime, capitalism remains uncriticized. This is what Sung has in mind when he describes the sacralization of capitalism.

In line with the introduction of desire into a theological analysis of economics, Sung traces quite successfully the effect of such desire on individual

behavior. This is why I find his theory of mimetic desire compelling, as well as his theological intervention: mimetic representation. In fact, one significant advantage to his theory of mimetic representation is that it easily invites conversation on the role of discipleship in an age of capitalism. How can pastors and church leaders, for instance, exemplify mimetic representation for church members? It also leads to necessary but difficult discussions on personal wealth, faith, and social responsibility. Here, Sung could have engaged Scripture more by including Jesus' indirect critique of the *prosboul* (a Jewish legal loophole designed to circumvent the required but economically-inconvenient Jubilee laws) and make his case even stronger.

Three problems, however, undermine the overall effectiveness of the argument in Sung's book, all of them on the "theology" side of the interdisciplinary discourse. First, although Ivan Petrella lauds the book's interdisciplinary analysis as novel, such interchange between theology and economics was not new. In fact, economist Robert Nelson introduced the possibility of such dialogue in his 1993 classic, *Reaching for Heaven on Earth: The Theological Meaning of Economics*. Another economist, Deirdre N. McCloskey drew richly from the Thomist ethical tradition in arguing in favor of an "ethical free market" in her 2006 book, *The Bourgeois Virtues*. Her arguments, however, were first articulated in an earlier book, *The Rhetoric of Economics* (1998). Both authors, it should be said, did not endorse capitalism uncritically; indeed, some of their critiques of the free market parallel those of Sung. Yet, despite their criticism, they would still argue in favor of the free markets as a good means to organizing the political economy. Leeway can certainly be made by the fact that geography precludes the possibility of Sung engaging with Nelson or McCloskey. Nonetheless, that Sung did not engage these authors – both of them eminent Christian economists who are partial to Hayek's economic vision – diminishes the force of his theological methodology. The second weakness is the book does not present an alternative Christian vision of an "ideal economy" in the Liberation-theological construct. As I have mentioned earlier, while presciently critique mimetic desire, Sung has also created an opening for further biblical engagement with economic structures today (such as the drawing of parallels between the *prosboul* and the mortgage industry, for instance), an opening he did not enter. Furthermore, he misses an opportunity to bring mimetic

representation to bear upon ministry and the Christian life today. What is the “shape,” for example, of Christian spirituality if it were to take mimetic representation seriously? What does such a representation have to do with discipleship and habituating Christians to biblical consumption practices, for example. How might Christian witness, to utilize a different issue he raises in his book, serve as an authentic way to combat the sacralization of capitalism? Sung’s argument could have been made even more persuasive and more concrete in Christian living had engaged economics even more so.

This leads to my third point. By forging closer links between the theology-economics discussion and Christian living, he would also be engaging in the process of subject formation for the economically oppressed. His lack of doing so, however, withholds this. And he is not alone – the lack of attention to subject formation has been an Achilles’ heel to Liberation theology. For that reason, according to Richard Shaull and Waldo Cesar, Pentecostal and prosperity-gospel churches are growing at the expense of institutional churches, despite the prevalence of Liberation theology.⁵ The economically oppressed were seen as a category (i.e. “the poor”) instead of consisting of named individuals. As Christians, engaging the problem of poverty is a critical part of Christian witness, but such engagement cannot be done without putting faces to poverty. This was argued by renowned literary critic and cultural theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” where she argues that however good the laws British colonial rulers passed against the practice of suttee (self-immolation of widows on their husband’s funerary pyres), they ultimately failed to address the subject formation of the supposed beneficiaries of the laws.⁶ Thus, after writing her essay she sought to put faces to the subaltern by training teachers in rural West Bengal. Liberation theologians would do well to follow in Spivak’s example.

These weaknesses preclude a ringing endorsement of the book except in, perhaps, a course on Liberation theology. In such a course, Sung’s book would be invaluable in presenting Liberation theology as not “anti-capitalist” but critiquing capitalism. Individuals seeking resources on the intersections between theology and economics, however, would be better served with

5 See Richard Shaull and Waldo Cesar, *Pentecostalism and the Future of the Christian Churches: Promises, Limitations, Challenges* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

6 See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Situating Feminism” (Speech, University of California, Berkeley, CA, February 26, 2010). Available at <http://youtu.be/garPdV7U3fQ>

McCloskey's and Nelson's work on the subject, or with works by notable social ethicists and theologians such as Gary Dorrien's *Economy, Difference, and Empire* or D. Stephen Long's *Divine Economy*.⁷ Nonetheless, it should be noted that this is one of Sung's first books translated into English from Portuguese; it may be the case that his other works in Portuguese address the in greater detail the issues I have mentioned above. For that reason I should caution the reader that my reservations for *Desire, Market and Religion* should not be reason to avoid or dismiss the author's other works.

7 See Footnote 3 and 4 above.