

## Review article

Gordon Matties

*Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire*, by William T. Cavanaugh. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008.

*The Economy of Desire: Christianity and Capitalism in a Post-Modern World*, by Daniel M. Bell Jr. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012.

**T**here is no more urgent matter in our time than the economy. At least that's what politicians the world over would have us believe. In a sense they are right, even though their solutions are often wrong, misguided, misdirected, or short-sighted. William Cavanaugh and Daniel Bell offer us not only ways to think clearly

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about the economic challenges we face (both globally and personally) but also theological and practical wisdom for orienting ourselves rightly and making wise choices about how to live.

The word *desire* in both book titles suggests an underlying theme that might be paraphrased this way: we become what we worship. Neither author puts it exactly that way. Still, both present us with careful reflection on how our desires, or loves, are formed, how our practices shape and are shaped by our desires, and how desiring/loving God has

the capacity to change everything. In that respect, both books offer us practical theologies of the economic life and serve as guides for spiritual formation. Both books are grounded in Christian practices of discipleship, and both assume that an alternative economy, a "kingdom" way of ordering the world, is the proper Christian vocation.

Cavanaugh begins his book with a series of assumptions and questions that have occupied Western Christians for centuries. He assumes, as many Christians have done, that how we handle our money and how we relate to God have something to do with each other. After all, Jesus said, “You cannot serve God and wealth” (Matt. 6:24). Although we have understood him to be saying it’s either one or the other, most often we assume the essential givenness of our current economic realities. Rather than challenging economic assumptions, we most often ask how we ought to orient or adapt ourselves to our economic realities. The option of choosing for God and against wealth, or mammon (as the KJV has it), has given way to negotiating between the two.

Cavanaugh does us a service by identifying the main topics that have traditionally shaped those negotiations: the free market, consumerism, globalization, and scarcity. Each chapter offers an interpretation of one of those topics, and provides rich analysis and practical suggestions drawn from the Christian theological tradition. Cavanaugh aims to offer readers “a view of everyday economic life.” The book, he hopes, will be “a contribution to a kind of theological microeconomics.”

However, Cavanaugh does not present a standard “Christian view” of economics. He assumes the validity of the big questions without presenting a singular answer. As one might expect, he examines some of the “pathologies of desire” in our current economic climate. And he affirms that “the dynamics of desire in Christ can both form and be formed by alternative economic practices” (viii). In doing so he offers a theological reimagining of both consuming and desiring. He focuses each chapter on a set of binaries. (1) Exploring the free market, he suggests both *negative freedom and positive freedom*. (2) Offering an analysis of consumerism, he suggests both *detachment and attachment*. (3) Articulating the challenges of globalization, he offers insight into how we imagine alternative practices that embrace both *the global and the local*. (4) Reflecting on the underlying myth of our economic practices, he juxtaposes both *scarcity and abundance* in order to imagine alternative Christian practices.

Daniel Bell’s book was published in the series *The Church and Postmodern Culture*. Bell’s aim is to offer a thorough cultural analysis and critique of contemporary capitalism and to present a

vision of an alternative economy of desire. Editor James K. A. Smith notes in his foreword that Bell's book "should encourage a paradigm shift in how we stage conversations between Christian faith and economics" (11). The book draws on the insights of French philosophers Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze. They provide Bell with lenses through which to focus attention on the nature of human desire and the capitalist economy. The book is difficult, delightful, and essential reading for anyone interested in fresh, profound, and critical thinking about the economic life. I say *economic life* because this book is not simply about economics. Bell's aim is to show how "the church's life is part of a divine economy of desire—one that redeems desire from the postmodern capitalist economy that would distort desire in ways that hinder humanity's communion with God, one another, and the rest of creation" (19). Bell changes the conversation from its traditional focus on "capitalism versus socialism to capitalism versus the divine economy made present by Christ and witnessed to by the church."

Because he changes the paradigm of the conversation that way, Bell is also able to move beyond convictions and beliefs about

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economics, markets, and consumerism; beyond competing theories about capitalism per se; and even beyond a singular or normative answer or blueprint for the authentic economic life. Like Cavanaugh, Bell draws on the resources of the Christian tradition, including Augustine, Aquinas, and medieval monastics and mendicants, to illustrate that "the way it is is *not* the way it always has to be because it is not the way it has always been" (25). And like Cavanaugh, Bell's aim is "to

provoke further reflection on the difference Christ makes to the economic life of those called as disciples of Christ" (28). Although Bell doesn't offer "a blueprint for the world," he assumes that discipleship "is about the ordering of our desires so that we desire the good that is God and the role that economies play in that ordering" (28). Bell is even interested in economics as a mode of witness or evangelism. The Christian community, living "in accord with God's economy," lives differently in that it is

“informed by a desire schooled in virtues such as charity, justice, and generosity.” Therefore, “we hope others will see how we order our pots and pans, how we deal with material goods, and so turn and join us on our way in giving thanks to God in heaven, who is the giver of every good gift.” In other words, this book is an “inquiry into the economic form of faithful discipleship” (29).

The book is organized in three sections. Chapters 1 and 2 explore the challenging thought of Deleuze and Foucault in order to mine their insights on the nature of desire and its formation. In doing so, Bell makes explicit the connection between discipleship and economics. Chapters 3 and 4 present a thoroughgoing critique of capitalism, not to uncover whether it “works” but to ask what kind of work it does. How does it shape human desire and human relationships with God, others, and creation? The critique

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centers on how capitalism deforms human desire and warps relationships. Chapters 5–7 take the lessons learned from the philosophers in order to imagine how the church as an alternative community becomes a place “where desire is healed by participation in the divine economy of God’s eternal generosity” (29).

Be warned. Bell’s critique is scathing. Bell does not, however, make the mistake of assuming economy in itself is evil. “The divine economy,” he writes, “does not condemn production, consumption, private property, profit taking, contracts, the division of labor, or markets in themselves” (172). But economy, severed from its rightful end in the restorative justice of God, is damaging and idolatrous. The divine economy, by contrast, challenges “a market that is untethered from virtue, from the common good, from the universal destination of all things” (176). The divine economy is rooted in “God’s abundance,” which “takes form in the disciplines that heal our desire so that it moves in accord with its true end, so that we desire what and how we should desire” (180).

It would be difficult to find better books than these by Cavanaugh and Bell that both challenge prevailing assumptions

and practices (and Christian convictions) and also offer fresh, dangerous, and hopeful insight into how we live our vocation as participants in God's love, generosity, and justice. No doubt readers will find ways of arguing with both authors. After all, they challenge our most sacred practices: the beliefs and rituals of capitalist economics. But they also offer an alternative vision grounded in the redemption of desire, the sharing of God's abundance, and the risk of letting go for the sake of the most vulnerable among us.

### **About the author**

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