Today's golden calf: consumerism as religion

by Melissa Jones
THE MARKET AS GOD
By Harvey Cox
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In his most recent book, *The Market as God*, Harvey Cox argues that the market economy has become deified in our contemporary world. In formulating this argument, he identifies many parallels between the structures of Christianity and those of the capitalist economic system.

This book is an expansion of his excellent 1999 essay published in *The Atlantic*, "The Market as God: Living in the New Dispensation." In both works, he identifies Market (which he spells with a capital M) creation stories, sacraments, heroes and saints, and a theory of the end times.

Cox notes that the inspiration for this expansion of his earlier work sprung from his admiration for Pope Francis' "stinging critique of today's unbridled consumerism and 'economy of exclusion and inequality.' " Cox appreciates the pontiff's 2013 *Evangelii Gaudium* ("The Joy of the Gospel"), which criticizes "trickle-down theories," "the sacralized working of the prevailing economic system," and a "deified market."

A professor emeritus at Harvard Divinity School, Cox is one of the leading Protestant theologians in the United States. With his expansive knowledge of history, theology and religious studies, he is well-positioned to offer insights and revelations regarding this chosen task.

The most interesting part of the book comes when he compares points of epistemology and evangelism between traditional religion and the deified Market, in a manner that shows surprising prescience regarding the political events that were still to come when this book was published in September 2016. Since November's presidential election, politicians, journalists and liberal thinkers have been pounding their heads against the question, "Why don't Trump's supporters care about the fact that his words often don't match reality?" Cox helps provide an answer.

He introduces readers to the work of Alexander Bryan Johnson, a little known 19th-century philosopher and semanticist. Cox describes Johnson as a banker who realized that the paper notes he handled daily had no intrinsic value, but the worth of those notes depended on our human willingness to attribute real value to them. Johnson's philosophical mind leapt to the idea that words, too, were similarly empty and could not be used as reliable vehicles for understanding our reality.

According to Cox, Johnson's ideas led to the conclusion that words were "so devoid of substantive significance, we may deploy them to charm, persuade, even flatter people without any sense of guilt. Words are to be used." Cox asserts that Johnson's theories are useful in understanding the world of Madison Avenue and the deified Market.

Cox successfully argues that the deified Market has formed and shaped humanity into our present state
through a series of religion-like elements. He writes, "The content of traditional religions is made up of narratives: myths, legends, parables, liturgies, and testimonies. But Madison Avenue knows this secret, too." And, like an omnipotent God, the Market knows our needs and desires via focus groups and big data.

Through Madison Avenue and the Market, we have learned to evaluate products according to how they make us feel, not their functionality or our needs. Individuality does not make for easy sales in a mass-production-based economy, so the Market has taught us to speak the language of feelings and to imitate the people we see in our mass media. The flickering messages on our many screens teach us to have unreflective faith that the next hottest product will save us from the evils of our time, things such as wrinkles, fat or unpopularity. Cox notes that contemporary Market evangelists use urgent, hurried voices that call us to an "Hour of Decision" no less fervently than did the famous Billy Graham.

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Continuing his search for the parallels between religion and economics, Cox also examines the "Pentecost" of each realm. Christians generally recognize Pentecost as the birthday of the church, when the Spirit poured out upon all flesh and gave the disciples the miraculous power to spread the word of God to the ends of the Earth. During the miracle of Pentecost, tongues of fire appeared over the disciples' heads, and they were granted the ability to speak in many languages that were heard and understood by a multitude of people.

Cox asserts that in the last few decades, "a new age has opened ? a Market equivalent to the Day of Pentecost with its tongues of fire and descent of the Spirit upon the flesh." He says this proverbial day was the advent of the pixel, that tiny element of light that allows for digital communication.

The author makes some unsubstantiated (or at least unreferenced) assertions about the effect of pixels on our brains. However, leaving those aside, few would argue with his assertion that the quick delivery of multitudinous digital images and messages to our brains via televisions, tablets and cellphones communicates to our emotional selves rather than to our analytical and reflective selves.

He singles out Roger Ailes, the former chief executive officer of FOX News, as an "evangelist for the pixel and unabashed celebrator of the emotion-over-reflection wave." Like a true evangelist, Ailes used emotion, brevity and colorful language to draw in the conservative congregation. Logic was suspended, and belief washed over the crowd. As with the Spirit-washed apostles at Pentecost who spoke in many tongues, Ailes found a way to communicate directly to the hearts of the masses through the power of the pixel and, behold, the previously agreed-upon meaning of words and our willingness to attribute real value to them were suspended.

Cox's exegesis helps the reader to realize that in the realm of the Market, the suspension of rationality in an ecstatic fervor for the one on high is a virtuous act of faith. If Cox could rewrite the book in light of recent history, might he now portray evangelist Ailes in the role of John the Baptist ? a Market forerunner who paved the way for the savior who claimed that he would "make America great again"? The existence of a U.S. president for whom feelings have primacy and whose words have no real meaning could not have happened without the Pentecost of the pixels.
Cox makes a convincing argument that the deified Market has produced a web of values, narratives and institutions that need critical re-examination. However, true to his Protestant origins, Cox is hopeful. He writes, "We as human beings constructed it, and we can renovate, dismantle, or transform it if we want to."

Perhaps a Reformation is at hand.

[Melissa Jones is an adjunct professor of Liberal Studies at Brandman University in Irvine, California.]

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