

Article

The Religion of Consumer Capitalism and the Construction of Corporate Sacred Spaces

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Abstract: If one looks at the United States over the past sixty years, it becomes clear that religious and spiritual practices have proliferated in unexpected places and spaces. They have become thoroughly ensconced in the boardrooms, offices, shop floors, and retail spaces of business establishments. From there, they have seeped into just about every imaginable area of American life, turning schools, parks, shopping malls, sports stadiums, hospitals, gyms, health food restaurants, spas, and the very apps on our computers and cell phones into corporate spaces promising new and enticing forms of spiritual enchantment. The purpose of this essay is to document the way new forms of spirituality have become part of a much longer history of the entanglement of business and religion, a history that began in monasteries, formed the bedrock of the Puritan work ethic, and is now an established aspect of the neoliberal ideal of the privatization and corporatization of all aspects of human life.

Keywords: consumer capitalism; corporate capitalism; neoliberalism; branding; spiritpreneurs; the Protestant work ethic; new age religions; Christian family values; Wal-Mart; Silicon Valley; the Gospel of Prosperity



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1. Introduction

In 1997 Russell T. McCutcheon published a bombshell of a book in which he claimed that Religion was a bogus subject and Religious Studies scholars squatters in the academy, poaching on the territory of other departments (McCutcheon 1997). He rejected the long-held belief that the “sacred” existed as a separate entity above and beyond mundane reality, and that it therefore could and must be studied in its own right. Gone was the idea that religion was something substantial that humans could tap into to experience “holy awe”, as Rudolf Otto believed, or that it was a “power”, as Gerhardus van der Leeuw avowed, or that it represented the “real”, in Mircea Eliade’s formulation (Chidester 1994). Religion was none of these things; it was a category “manufactured” by human beings. Those who refused to accept this were consciously or unconsciously promoting an ideology that benefited the social, economic, and political power of religious institutions and religious studies departments, along with those who staffed them.

The idea that the sacred is a social construct did not originate with McCutcheon, as he readily acknowledged. Émile Durkheim had claimed this at the beginning of the twentieth century (Durkheim [1912] 2008) as had Ludwig Feuerbach half a century earlier in *The Essence of Christianity* (Feuerbach [1841] 2008). However, McCutcheon presented this idea with such persuasiveness that it has become the prevalent view among religious scholars today. In *The Location of Religion*, for example, Kim Knott applies this idea to sacred spaces, arguing that they do not exist in some idealized romantic place that needs to be rediscovered; they are constituted by human beings and reflect the assumptions, values, and social relationships of the humans who created them (Knott 2005, p. 21). Religious spaces consequently change. They evolve as societies evolve. What were once religious spaces are secularized and what were once secular spaces are appropriated by religion. Christopher White provides ample evidence to support this claim in *Other Worlds: Spirituality and*

the Search for Invisible Dimensions. He marshals evidence to show that while scientific discoveries destabilized traditional religious beliefs, especially in regard to the existence of sacred places, they also provided the impetus for individuals to imagine new supernatural spaces: “scientific ideas have not just fostered secularity and religious decline but have also been used to help people believe in the existence of unseen, heavenly realms and recover an imaginative sense for the supernatural” (White 2018, p. 3). Einstein, along with quantum mechanics, for example, showed that nature behaved in confounding ways: clocks ticked more slowly the faster they traveled; events that were simultaneous to one observer were not to another; gravity caused time to slow down; space could be bent and distorted by large objects; energy and mass were interchangeable; and, perhaps most bewilderingly of all, quantum mechanics couldn’t be reconciled with General Relativity, which implied there were two sets of laws and mathematical equations, one for large and another for subatomic particles. Modern physics consequently brought back those “mysterious incalculable forces” Max Weber believed had been banished forever in what he claimed was our modern “disenchanted” world (Weber 1905). This led to an explosion of speculations among artists, scientists, philosophers, and theologians, not to mention science fiction writers, about free will, the mind/body problem, the mystery of consciousness, and the possibility of multiple universes and additional special dimensions in which the sacred might be located. In a series of books from the 1950s through 1970, Marshall McLuhan famously argued that new forms of social media—radio, television, the computer—profoundly shaped our sensory abilities and our psychological and social environments in ways that directly impinged on our religious beliefs and practices. The revival of interest in astrology, clairvoyance, and the occult was therefore not a coincidence, but a development fostered by the new technologies that made the idea of communication over long distances without intermediaries a fact (McLuhan 1967; White 2018, chp. 9, p. 7).¹

The concept of “Liquid Religion” helps to explain this evolution and transformation of religious spaces: religion “seeps” or “leaks” from traditional spaces into novel ones.² However, the question remains, how do these spaces become “real” in the sense that people acknowledge them as legitimate spaces in which to practice their beliefs and experience spiritual enlightenment? Jonathan Z. Smith claims that spaces become religious when religious rituals are performed in them (Smith [1987] 1992, [1978] 1993). This is undeniable, but for the purposes of this essay, which deals with the seeping of religion into corporate spaces, a clearer answer is that these spaces become religious because they are connected to the object of religious reverence, in this case, corporate capitalism. With this insight, the debate about whether or not Western nations are actually becoming less religious and more secular becomes moot. While it is undeniable that traditional religions have seen a drop in numbers, people do not seem less religious or spiritually inclined. In fact, if one looks at the United States over the past sixty years, it becomes clear that religious and spiritual practices have become thoroughly ensconced in the boardrooms, offices, shop floors, and retail spaces of business establishments. From there they have seeped into just about every imaginable area of American life, turning schools, parks, shopping malls, sports stadiums, hospitals, gyms, health food restaurants, spas, and the very apps on our computers and smartphones into corporate spaces promising new and enticing forms of spiritual enchantment. This is the message of Eugene McCarragher’s monumental, brilliant, and timely jeremiad, *The Enchantments of Mammon: How Capitalism Became the Religion of Modernity*, which joins a small library of books detailing the rise of the religion of corporate capitalism and the disastrous effects it has had on the earth and its inhabitants (McCarragher 2019; Klein 2007; Tarnowski 2007; Kotsko 2018; Crockett 2021).

As McCarragher and other have shown, the transformation of capitalism into a religion required the concerted effort of a huge array of spiritual leaders, from conservative evangelical Christians to esoteric gurus and a new class of “spiritual entrepreneurs”, all of whom have dedicated themselves to creating “soul-centered” workplaces offering employees new arenas for spiritual experience and growth. With personally designed rituals incorporating old and new forms of Christianity, Zoom sessions with New-Age religious

counsellors,³ yoga classes, and watered-down versions of Buddhist mindfulness training, experts promise to help workers reach ever higher levels of creativity, productivity, and spirituality. This development has not been a one-way street, however; it goes hand-in-hand with the corporatization of religious spaces, especially in mega churches and religious institutions that preach the “Gospel of Prosperity”.

What has increasingly come to pass in the US since the end of World War II is a further stage in the evolution of religion, as practitioners turned their attention away from an other-worldly spirituality to the pursuit of health, wealth, and success in this world. One might say the Protestant Ethic has come home to roost in surprising ways. In Matthew 6:24 Jesus proclaimed, “Ye cannot serve God and mammon”. However, time has shown that, yes, you can, once God has become Mammon, the profane sacred, and work a religion—in other words, once consumer capitalism has become sacred. Capitalism is well on its way to making religion one more profitable commodity. The question is, exactly who profits from this transformation, and what happens to spirituality and religion in the process?

2. The Religion of Neoliberal Consumer Capitalism

In an address to the nation on the evening of the 9/11 attacks, President George W. Bush’s first order of business was to remind the public that “our financial institutions remain strong” and that the American economy was still “open for business”. He advised Americans to support the US’s airlines by traveling to Disney World and other places of fun and entertainment: “Take your families and enjoy life the way we want it to be enjoyed”. In short, he made it clear that the patriotic duty of Americans is to “buy American” and consume as much as possible. Robert Reich pointed out the irony of this definition of patriotism by remembering a time when patriotism had demanded sacrifice, asking individuals to give up luxuries for the common good. However, unlike the response to World War II, which introduced Americans to rationing, the response to 9/11 linked individual consumption to the common good. As Emily Stewart put it:

In the face of crisis, people want to do their part, and if consuming is a way to do that, so be it. But there’s a cynical interpretation, too: To be a patriot is to wholeheartedly believe in American capitalism and the strength of the US economy, to pledge allegiance to the flag and the market. Consumer patriotism reduces civic participation to spending money. (Stewart 2021)

Business enterprises were not only happy to embrace this definition of patriotism but to embellish it further, turning consumerism into a form of spirituality that links capitalism, religion, and nationalism in a toxic trinity that subordinates religion and ethics to economics, putting profits before people.

In their introduction to *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion*, Jeremy Carrette and Richard King identify two major trends in the modern world: The privatization or individualization of religion and the breakdown of communal values and responsibilities. Both trends have merged in what they describe as “Corporate Spiritualities”, which are based on the following assumptions: (1) the atomization of communities; (2) seeing self-interest as the primary motivation for human action; (3) putting the good of the corporation above the individual or community; (4) treating others as means not ends; (5) defining happiness in terms of conspicuous consumption; and finally, (6) accepting social injustice as inevitable:

Entering public institutions that provide education, healthcare and professional expertise within society as a whole, the ideologies of consumerism and business enterprise are now infiltrating more and more aspects of our lives. The result of this shift has been an erasure of the wider moral and ethical concerns associated with religious traditions and communities and the subordination of ‘the religious’ and the ethical to the realm of economics, which is now rapidly replacing science (just as science replaced theology in the previous era), as the dominant mode of authoritative discourse within society. (Carrette and King 2005, pp. 4–5)

There is nothing especially new in this transformation of capitalism into a religion except the speed with which its last stages occurred from the nineteenth century until today. It is part of a much longer history of the entanglement of business and religion in the West, a history that was well underway in monasteries, formed the bedrock of the Protestant work ethic, and is now an integral part of the neoliberal ideal of privatizing and corporatizing all aspects of life. Work has always been a part of religion. “Give us this day our daily bread” is a Christian version of a universal contract joining men and their Gods in a mutual support system in which humans offer sacrifices and expect a return on their investment (Mauss [1925] 1954). Thus, while there is some truth to the division between the sacred and profane described by Émile Durkheim in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, the division was never as clear-cut as he suggested. In the West, holidays, short for holy days, only made sense as part of a holistic scheme in which work and religion went hand-in-hand. To work is to pray (*Laborare est Orare*) was an idea at the heart of the Catholic monastic tradition. Monasteries were among the first capitalist institutions (Kieser 2016). By the late Middle Ages, the Catholic system of confession and penitence had evolved into a complex system of accounting in which salvation became a matter of balance sheets and bottom lines (Lindberg 1996, chp. 2).

The monetization of religious life intensified with the Protestant Reformation. At the time Durkheim was writing *The Elementary forms of Religious Life*, in which he discusses the dichotomy between the sacred and the profane, his contemporary Max Weber was examining the collapse of this distinction in *The Protestant Ethic and the Rise of Capitalism*.⁴ By rejecting the division between priest and laity, Luther transformed every Christian into a priest, whose “calling”, whether shopkeeper or theologian, was a religious undertaking glorifying God. The Protestant doctrine of predestination initially created a psychological dilemma for Protestants insecure about their eternal futures, but with a little ingenuity it became clear there had to be a reliable sign separating the saved from the damned, and what better sign could that be than material success? It was but a short step to conclude that wealth was an indication of eternal life, a step taken by Andrew Carnegie in *The Gospel of Wealth*, an enormously successful work in a long line of texts preparing the way for the contemporary “Gospel of Prosperity” (Carnegie 1904; Coudert 2023). However, it was not until the rise of the modern corporation that management began to systematically utilize the religious and spiritual needs of workers to increase their productivity (Fones-Wolf and Fones-Wolf 2015; Miller et al. 2018).

It would be easy to claim, and many people have, that the “Gospel of Prosperity” has nothing to do with “real” Christianity. However, as societies change, so do religions. Religion and spirituality reflect the assumptions and values of a particular society, and these reflect, in turn, the interests of those in power. Communism, socialism, anarchism, and white Christian nationalism are therefore among those ideologies included under the rubric religion. To this list, we can add the neoliberal capitalist consumer religion enshrined in the Prosperity Gospel. As Karl Marx pointed out, religion acts like opium on the minds of its adherents, dulling them to the realities of its true nature and the power relationships embedded in it.⁵ Capitalist religion is no different, especially in its neoliberal form, which privileges profits over people and corporate over individual and community rights and civil liberties.

We live in an age of assessment, in which human experiences are quantified in pursuit of greater work efficiency, productivity, and compliance. Everything from drinking Coca-Cola to wearing Nike sneakers or buying a Tesla have become part of what Jeremy Bentham once described as a “felicific calculus” (Bentham 1789, chp. 4), and we now measure well-being in terms of consumption. Corporations have assumed the role of religions by providing people with ideas for what is worth living for. In the words of Carrette and King, “We now see how corporate capitalism begins to operate according to the traditional role of religious institutions in providing meaning and order. *Capitalism in effect is the new religion of the masses—the new opium of the people—and neoliberalism is the theological orthodoxy that is facilitating its spread*” (Carrette and King 2005, p. 138).

Corporate capitalism is subtle, flexible, and tolerant when it comes to coopting the religious and spiritual lives of Americans for its own purposes. Unlike regimes based on force, one size does not have to fit all. The alluring variety of choices seemingly available makes workers and consumers complicit in their own subjugation and grateful to those subjugating them. This is a point made by Byung-Chul Han in his searing critique of neoliberal capitalism, *Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*. Han describes this new dynamic as a kind of “soft” power that lies at the heart of neoliberal capitalist religion. (Han 2017). The concept of “soft power” has been widely used in connection with politics and international relations, but it has only been applied to religion relatively recently (Ozturk 2023). As far as I know, Han is the first to utilize the idea in connection with neoliberal economics as it has taken on a religious veneer.⁶ We see this neoliberal “soft” power at work in all its devastating efficiency if we look at three very different groups of workers in the contemporary US: the conservative evangelical Christians studied by Bethany Moreton in her analysis of Wal-Mart employees, employers, and patrons (Moreton 2010); the more technologically educated workers studied by Carolyn Chen in her book on Silicon Valley, *Work, Pray, Code* (Chen 2022); and, finally, the spiritual entrepreneurs and their clients on social media. All three groups willingly undertake the process of transformation demanded by religious institutions across time and cultures, but the transformations required today fit squarely within the parameters of neoliberal capitalist religion.

3. Wal-Mart: A Modern Sacred Space for the Religion of Consumer Capitalism

In *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise*, Bethany Moreton tackles the enormously complex subject of how the citizens of what she calls “Wal-Mart America” have come to embrace political and economic policies that militate against their own economic interests. This was a question raised by Thomas Frank in *What’s the Matter with Kansas: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (Frank 2005). Frank’s goal was to find out why a state with a population that spearheaded the war against corporate greed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century has become a hot-bed of conservative Christian values, a staunch promoter of deregulated capitalism, and a core constituent of the pro-business Republican party. Moreton adds brilliantly to Frank’s analysis by concentrating on Sam Walton and the factors that allowed him to rise from a small-time rural retailer to the head of the enormously powerful and profitable corporation that is now Wal-Mart.

In charting the history of Walton and Wal-Mart, Moreton lays bare the huge appeal the myth of Jeffersonian democracy has exerted throughout US history, and she shows how this myth shaped Walton and his corporation. Moreton describes Wal-Mart stores as mini-theme parks, “living diorama[s] of America’s Yesterday”, celebrating an imaginary ideal Jeffersonian world. The Wal-Mart Visitor Center, now museum, located at the first Wal-Mart store in Bentonville, Arkansas, has a “museum-quality” with its recreation of Sam Walton’s first five-and-dime store, complete with his 1979 Chevy pic-up truck, “a monument to his humility and rectitude” (Moreton 2010, p. 35). From a Religious Studies standpoint, the Visitor Center has all the markings of a sacred space, a pilgrimage site, and a shrine to Sam Walton and his puritan values of hard work, thrift, and humility (Ron and Timothy 2018). At the time Moreton’s book was published in 2010, The Visitor Center attracted some 50,000 tourists each year, and Moreton reports that many of the visitors “become visibly emotional at the sight of the famous truck” (Moreton 2010, p. 36). As of 2023 attendance has climbed to 330,000. Sam Walton established his first stores in the rural Ozarks, steering clear of urban areas where he would have met more competition. The workforce in this part of rural America retained the patriarchal family structure characteristic of an agrarian economy. This kind of family structure was reinforced by conservative Christian values that have reemerged with such force today, which hold to a literal interpretation of the biblical creation story in which Eve is created from Adam’s rib as Adam’s subordinate and helper, not his equal.

In its formative years during the 1970s and 1980s, Wal-Mart's corporate ethos embodied an early version of White Christian Nationalism. It celebrated life in a world without the complications of multiculturalism or globalization and reinforced women's role as caretakers subservient to men. This came out clearly in celebrations of "Ladies' Day at Wal-Mart". Something of a modern recreation of the medieval "Feast of Fools", Ladies Day" allowed gender roles to be reversed. Men made the morning coffee for female employees and women conducted the weekly morning meetings. Male managers were encouraged to dress up in drag or children's clothing to show their humility and ability to enjoy a joke at their own expense. While such performances allowed subordinates to take the upper hand for a limited time, their real function was to reinforce existing power structures and gender dynamics (Moreton 2010, p. 60).

It is impossible to imagine "Ladies' Day" in Wal-Marts today, given the contemporary war waged by conservative Christians against LGBTQA+ communities and their picketing and banning of drag shows. While not specifically connected with "Christian family values" in its early years, Wal-Mart soon became so. Speaking in the 1990s, Ralph Reed, Director of the Christian Coalition, claimed that Wal-Mart stores had become evangelical religious spaces in their own right: "If you want to reach [Christians] on Saturday, you do it in Wal-Mart" (Moreton 2010, p. 90). According to Moreton, the association of Wal-Mart with "Christian family values" was largely the work of the "Wal-Mart Moms". Growing up in an agrarian culture, early women workers at Wal-Mart already embodied the service ethos developed to counteract the effects of industrialization on male workers, which had transformed them from employers and the self-employed to wage laborers. Losing their independence, male workers were essentially becoming "feminized". This development was met by the emergence of "Muscular Christianity", a religious movement originating in England in the mid-nineteenth century that rejected the characterization of Jesus as meek and humble, claiming instead that he was a man's man and that he and his male disciples embodied a holy code of patriotic duty, discipline, self-sacrifice, and athleticism (Hall 1994; Putney 2003). In this scenario, male wage-earners were encouraged to pride themselves for engaging in the sacred calling of helping others provide necessities for their families. This, of course, is what women were expected to do "naturally", but once men became involved, the ideal became a badge of male honor. Moreton describes the way this ideal "attached itself with particular tenacity to the down-home, how-may-I-help-you image of Wal-Mart and its frugal founder" (Moreton 2010, p. 107).

Just as Wal-Mart made mass service work an honorable calling, it made mass consumption safe for white Protestants. The fact that Wal-Mart stores offered few amenities and looked more like warehouses than department stores obscured the contradiction at the heart of Christian consumerism and the Gospel of Prosperity. Wal-Mart stores were purposefully "desensualized", according to Moreton. Instead of alluring their patrons with opulent displays and promoting "conspicuous consumption", Wal-Marts were more like the sacred spaces of early Protestantism, plain unadorned buildings for reflection and service devoid of secular distractions (Moreton 2010, pp. 88–89).

Wal-Mart provides an example of the way the neoliberal economic agenda has coopted conservative evangelical Christianity to serve the interests of big business. In the long run, the emphasis on service work as a Christian duty has proven detrimental not only to female employees but to their mid-level male managers as well. It allowed top management to justify their stringent cost-cutting controls, low wages, and lack of benefits as part of a larger Christian agenda to advance the welfare of Wal-Mart customers, when, in fact, the true beneficiaries were Walton family members and owners of Wal-Mart stock.

As suggested earlier, Christianity is not the only religion coopted by neoliberal capitalism to serve its interests. In recent years, more exotic and esoteric forms of spirituality have experienced the same kind of take-over and make-over. The only difference is the audience targeted.

4. Esoteric Spirituality in the Service of Corporate Consumer Capitalism

As we have seen, the connection between Christianity and business has a long history. The connection between business and esoteric forms of spirituality is shorter but has proven very influential in today's business world, especially among professional and tech workers. Carolyn Chen's book, *Work, Pray, Code: When Work Becomes Religion in Silicon Valley* offers an insightful analysis of the ways and reasons why esoteric spirituality has been integrated into tech company policies.

Since the 1950s there has been a tendency on the part of a growing number of people, especially young people, to emphasize their spirituality rather than their religious affiliation, which with increasing frequency does not exist. As religious institutions became more tribal and polarizing, the notion of spirituality grew in popularity precisely because it can mean virtually anything. It has essentially become a "brand-label" for "the search for meaning, values, transcendence, hope and connectedness in advanced capitalist societies" (Carrette and King 2005, p. 32). The very vagueness of the term paved the way for the explosion of novel religious sensibilities characterizing "New-Age" religions. These draw on ancient paganism, Eastern religions and philosophers, and magical and esoteric traditions from alchemy and astrology to shamanism, witchcraft, Voodoo, and Chaos Magic, all of which offer new ways for individuals to express their innermost selves and shape their identities in unique ways (Hanegraaff 1997). To enter the corporate world, however, New-Age spiritualities had to undergo a radical make-over. The 1960s counterculture was dedicated to discovering new forms of spiritual transcendence that would disrupt and fundamentally change society. New-Age corporate spiritualities are designed, however, to enhance worker productivity and, in so doing, support the existing economic system as well as the social and political status quo.

On the very first page of her book, Chen makes the startling assertion that Silicon Valley "is one of the most religious places in America" (Chen 2022, p. 1). She provides examples of tech companies creating managerial positions such as "chief spiritual officer" or "chief mindfulness officer", designed to offer "pastoral and spiritual care as a way to make ... employees more productive". Like traditional religious leaders, these spiritual advisors create community through rituals of bonding: shared board and video games, happy hours, or TGIT at Google, when employees would watch owners Larry Page and Sergey Brin put on a comedy act and different teams give an update on what they have accomplished. Hiking clubs, shared meals, company tee shirts, logos, water bottles, backpacks, even nicknames such as "Googlers" forge a sense of communal identity and loyalty (Chen 2022, pp. 38–39).

Other more recognizably spiritual resources have been employed as well. For example, leadership and professional development programs, sometimes described as "sanghas"—the Buddhist term for a monastic community—are established to encourage self-reflection and spiritual renewal. Many companies have created massage and meditation rooms and spaces devoted to yoga classes and mindfulness training. Google has promoted a six-week elective course for employees entitled "Search Inside Yourself". This program has become an independent organization that now teaches meditation to business leaders around the world. For workers who are too busy to attend meetings in person, tech companies make these programs available on the web, and employees are encouraged to view these in their free time (Chen 2022, pp. 38–39).

Today's business coaching community rejects Marx's analysis of alienation as the result of the estrangement of workers from their work. Instead, they claim alienation is a consequence of employees working too hard to the detriment of their "authentic selves". Workers interviewed by Chen agreed, reporting "that they had 'traded' away so much of themselves in order to succeed at work that their 'real' selves got 'lost' or even 'died'" (Chen 2022, p. 97). The spirituality of "authentic selfhood" is now an established aspect of business self-help books and programs. This is especially true in the "conscious capitalism" movement started by John Mackey, co-founder and CEO of Whole Foods, and marketing

professor and motivational speaker Raj Sisodia in their book *Conscious Capitalism: Liberating the Heroic Spirit of Business* (Mackey and Sisodia 2014).⁷

According to Chen, most Silicon Valley company managers do not think of themselves as “spiritual” and believe that if they use words such as “spiritual” openly, the analytical engineers will consider it “woo-woo” and “airy-fairy”. “But”, as she goes on to demonstrate, “behind closed doors with me, many corporate managers said that spirituality is an important—if not the most important dimension of the work they do”. The terminology they use to describe their work with employees reveals this: “helping people connect to self and Universe”, “awakening mystery”, “contributing soulfulness”, and “sneaking in spirituality”. In public, however, they use corporate slogans such as “unleash your potential”, “be your best self”, and “bring your whole self to work” (Chen 2022, p. 90).

Chen describes the Silicon Valley approach to improving the physical and spiritual lives of employees as “industrial maternalism”, rather than the “industrial paternalism” characteristic of earlier corporations such as the Ford Motor Company. This change in terminology is in line with Han’s analysis of newer and “softer” approaches to the corporate control of workers. As Chen says, “Practices like corporate maternalism reflect the late capitalist shift in the control of labor, a move away from practices of overt coercion and toward the creation of strong work cultures that can induce genuine consent to the will of management” (Chen 2022, p. 71). In the end, however, the spirituality endorsed by both corporate paternalism and maternalism are equally instrumental—a means to an end, not an end itself, and this end is to increase worker efficiency and productivity to improve corporate profits.

Like Wal-Mart, Silicon Valley’s tech companies blur the distinction between work and life, but they do this even more consciously and systematically by attempting to centralize all the functions of work, home, religion, and community under one roof—the company roof. “The workplace is supposed to be their home, gym, dance studio, art studio, garden, bar, restaurant, meditation hall, library, laundry room, game room, dentist’s office, and therapist office (and even more), all rolled into one” (Chen 2022, p. 72). Every activity is geared to worker productivity. Even time spent in the bathroom gives workers an opportunity to “learn on the loo”, as one company put it, since information about company policies and tips for upgrading useful computer applications are pasted on the inner doors of bathroom stalls (Chen 2022, p. 72). There is something quintessentially modern about this collapse of the boundaries between work and life. While workers still produce, a major product has become themselves. Reed Hoffman, founder of LinkedIn, and his co-author Ben Casnocha could not have expressed this better than in the title of their book, *The Start-Up is You* (Hoffman and Casnocha [2012] 2022; see also Gershon 2014; Brown 2015).

The idea that individuals are constantly evolving projects is an important aspect of the “soft” power Han describes as characteristic of neoliberalism. While corporations offer programs to assist employees in transforming themselves into more efficient and productive workers, it is left to the employees to internalize the demands of their employers. According to Han, they do this to such an extent that they become both employer and employed. In Han’s estimation, the modern obsession with self-help and self-improvement will lead to a loss of freedom and the most abject slavery: “Today, everyone is an *auto-exploiting labourer in his or her own enterprise*. People are now master and slave in one. Even class struggle has transformed into an *inner struggle against oneself*” (Han 2017, p. 5).

5. The Religion of Consumer Capitalism in Cyberspace

The final group of workers investigated in this essay are the spirit entrepreneurs, often shortened to spiritpreneurs, who have become such a large presence on the internet in recent years. In his article “Popular Religion and the World Wide Web: A Match Made in (Cyber) Heaven”, Christopher Helland emphasizes the fact that many people consider cyberspace an actual physical place where people can legitimately engage in religious or spiritual practices:

... for many people cyberspace is a real space, and for many of them it is an acceptable medium for religious and spiritual participation. It is becoming an environment—a place—where people can “be” religious if and when they choose to be. (Helland 2004, p. 31)

Given the enormous popularity of radio and TV evangelists, this should come as no surprise. However, cyberspace has created entirely new ways of commodifying, selling, and consuming religion and spirituality. Consumers are no longer relegated to the position of “couch potatoes” but can actively participate in Zoom sessions, chat rooms, attach their comments to bulletin boards, send Instagrams, and log into Twitter in real time. Cyberspace is a place where traditional religious services can be observed, and beliefs and practices taught and reinforced but also challenged and reimagined easily and cheaply. In this way, the internet has radically altered the face of religion worldwide in two crucial respects: it has created a crisis of authority and a crisis of authenticity. When individuals are exposed to many varying religious institutions, beliefs, rituals, customs, and practices—real or imagined—how does one gauge the authority and authenticity of any single one? (Dawson and Cowan 2004, p. 2). At the same time, with the increasing fragmentation and tribalization of religion into competing groups, the internet allows individuals to connect with their fellow communicants and reinforce their particular beliefs at virtually any time, day or night.

The crisis of authority and authenticity did not arise with the internet but began in the sixteenth century as a result of printing. Walter J. Ong, a student of Marshall McLuhan, wrote extensively on the effects the transition from oral to print culture had on human consciousness. In oral cultures, knowledge is passed from one person to another. Authority is therefore venerated, and images, sounds, and speech are endowed with magical and instrumental power, as in the book of Genesis, where God creates the world by fiat. Literacy restructures human consciousness by providing individuals with diverse sources of knowledge and the ability to compare and reflect on ideas over time. Ong claims these developments have been reversed to some extent with the dominance of electronic media, and that this has led to a revival of an instrumental view of language, gesture, and image (Ong 1982). Some welcome these developments, but others are critical, stressing the way they stimulate emotional reactions, encourage group thinking, and contribute to the contagious paranoia characteristic of conspiracy thinking. Jacques Ellul was an early skeptic of modern media for just these reasons. He worried about the devaluation of the printed word in favor of images—advertising is obviously a good example here—and the effects this has had in promoting the idolatry of consumer culture (Ellul 1973). Many agree with Ellul, as we have seen (Hedges 2009).

The internet has created a further problem that brings us back to Han. Han has been criticized for exaggerating the extent to which neoliberal economics exerts soft rather than coercive power to increase worker productivity by transforming them into products of their own making. However, if we turn to the spiritual entrepreneurs and their clients on social media, we find example after example of individuals turning themselves into “brands”, products they hope will be unique and uniquely desirable on the open market of the internet (Klein 1999). When we enter this space, we find these spiritual entrepreneurs assuring themselves and their clients that they are special, that they have a sacred purpose which they need to cultivate and reveal to the world: “You have a SACRED PURPOSE. LIVE IT!” exhorts spiritpreneur Abiola Abrams in her Youtube video “Stepping into Your Greatness”.⁸ Once clients become aware of their sacred purpose, they will break through to a new reality, at once physical and spiritual, in which “they grow wings” and “lack for nothing”, to quote Veronica Krestow, spiritpreneur and author of “The Diamond Process”. Internet personalities such as these offer copious advice about how individuals can create their own brands in ways that will attract followers, make money, and achieve fame in the process. Such advice has always existed, especially after the advent of printing and the emergence of the genre of self-help books in the sixteenth century (Eisenstein 1980), but the internet has radicalized and spread the idea of self-transformation.⁹ In the past,

identities were formed in an actual physical community and in the physical presence of others. Communal myths, symbols, and rituals created narratives that gave meaning to individual and collective experience. Online communication offers individuals new ways of forming identities in the absence of an actual community, actual individuals, or even an actual self. Ethereal selves, airbrushed of any indication of physical appearance, age, or gender, can enter a virtual community of similarly airbrushed individuals and assume whatever identity appears most inviting. Models for how people should act are multiplying, and although this can have enormously beneficial effects, especially for those with mental, physical, and psychological issues, it also makes people perfect targets for lifestyles and products marketed by commercial companies, as well as the nefarious forces on what has been called the “dark side” of the internet (Weiss 2020).

Today’s spiritual entrepreneurs take advantage of all these developments and opportunities. They are consummate “bricoleurs”; they mine religious traditions from across the globe and through the ages to construct a neoliberal capitalist utopia of spiritual and material enchantments that surpass the New Jerusalem described in *The Book of Revelations*. On her home page, Krestow offers a brief biography of her spiritual awakening (<https://www.veronicakrestow.com/about/> accessed on 1 March 2023). What we find here is a modern recuperation of the ancient gnostic and Eastern teaching that the self is divine combined with the Christian experience of “*unio mystica*”, which eventually led her to embrace her “Diamond Nature”, a doppelgänger of the neoliberal capitalist God, Mammon. To realize her true nature, Krestow embarked on her own pilgrim’s progress:

Even after years of personal development workshops, a Master’s degree in Spiritual Psychology, and a lifetime of inner-exploration, this hidden world within me remained undiscovered territory until a fateful journey pulled the veil from over my eyes.

Like John Bunyan, Krestow eventually arrived at her destination, but this required the further harrowing step of successfully passing through what Christian mystics describe as “The Dark Night of the Soul”: “Although it got even darker before any sign of life, . . . I was finally led to what I call the ‘Diamond Self’, The True Me at the radiant, unshakable center of my being, unscathed by all the ups and downs of day-to-day life!” (<https://www.veronicakrestow.com/about/> accessed on 1 March 2023).

Cheryl Kaspar is another spiritpreneur who followed a similar path to discover her true self. “It wasn’t easy”, she claims, “shifting into Spiritpreneur. I had to push through the mud like a lotus flower before I was able to bloom”. Kaspar’s transformation required intensive self-reflection and an arduous process of self-improvement, which she likens to trial by fire:

I was burning the fire at both ends, and my mental health was being affected. I was burnt out, resentful, and incredibly stressed out. I felt as if the walls were closing in on me, and I had nowhere to run. I was scared of losing my marriage and my life . . . I knew burning the fire at both ends was not working, and so personal development became an addiction for me. I traveled around the country to workshops and trainings to better myself, both personally and professionally, from top leaders and gurus [sic] I started to feel better . . . This journey led me to find spirituality . . . I have a deep sense of peace, purpose, and belonging. The anxiety and overwhelm [sic] are gone. I am debt-free. My marriage is amazing, I created a life of freedom and peace, and my business is skyrocketing. (<https://www.brainzmagazine.com/post/7-tips-for-becoming-a-spiritpreneur>, accessed on 12 March 2023)

The message that comes through in Krestow’s videos and Kaspar’s posts, as in the videos, posts, and blogs of their fellow spiritpreneurs, is that there is no free lunch. Money is everywhere, but until one realizes this and achieves a financial breakthrough, there is no possibility of a spiritual breakthrough. Krestow learned this lesson the hard way. She had to stop playing the victim and find money to pay for the coaching that led her to her

Diamond Self. The message delivered by spiritpreneurs is basically the same one delivered by preachers of “The Prosperity Gospel”. Money is good, and God wants you to have it. “Ask Big” is the advice offered by Joel Osteen, the immensely successful and wealthy pastor of Houston’s Lakewood Church. “Reject a slave mentality”. “Don’t let your circumstances get you down despite what the enemy whispers in your ear”. “You are God’s most prized possession”. God is there to give, and there is nothing shameful about being prosperous: “It’s Your Time”, “Become a Better You”. These are bold and appealing ideas summed up in Osteen’s audio book *Living In Favor, Abundance and Joy* (Osteen 2010).¹⁰ *Time Magazine* dedicated its 10 September 2006 issue to The Prosperity Gospel. Across the cover was a banner headline: “Does God Want You to be Rich: Preachers of the “prosperity” gospel say, “YES! HE DOES!”

6. Conclusions

In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels claimed that Capitalism “drowns the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervor . . . in the icy water of egotistical calculation”. Instead of “drowning” religious fervor, however, neoliberal consumer capitalism inspires fervent devotion precisely because it legitimizes egotistical calculation and presents consumption as a religious and spiritual end in itself without regard to what is being consumed, how it is consumed, and the effects such consumption has on the planet and the creatures inhabiting it. This essay is not, however, a jeremiad against capitalism *per se* or a condemnation of materialism. Every sacred and enchanted space I have encountered in literature, art, philosophy, theology, myths, fairy tales, utopias, and science fiction are rooted in the material and the benefits that accrue from the possession of material things. Given human nature, this makes perfect sense. We are embodied creatures. Even our most abstract concepts are rooted in matter. This was driven home to me not only by reading Barthes and Lakoff, but when I taught a class on “Ethical Eating” and realized that the most abstract ideas can be expressed in the thoroughly material medium of food: we have food for thought, we ruminate, we hunger and thirst after knowledge, we eat our words, end up with egg on our face, and have to eat crow. Some children are so cute we could eat them up. The person we love is the apple of our eye or our cup of tea. The exam was a piece of cake; the car is a lemon; the bank manager was rotten to the core; my father brings home the bacon and tells us we shouldn’t cry over spilt milk (Barthes 2012; Lakoff and Johnson 2003). When Dante finally arrives at heaven, what does he see but some kind of effulgent light, signifying the divine. His is a very philosophical view of the sacred. However, it is still material, not material enough perhaps for many people who appear to want cities with pearly gates and streets paved with gold, endless food, soft beds, and a prince or two—in other words the land of Cockaigne. The only sacred spaces that are not described in material terms are ones that do not exist in any concrete way because no actual bodies inhabit them, as in Nirvana or the Neoplatonic One of Plotinus. The real or imagined sacred spaces constructed and revered by humans may start out as humble groves, wells, caves, or mountain hideaways, but they soon end up embellished with material objects—stained glass, paintings, frescos, relics in ornamented reliquaries, stupas with precious stones set in the roofs, and golden statues of the Buddha.

Given the fact that humans envision happiness, bliss, or any kind of ideal state in material terms, even if that is expressed negatively as an absence of pain and suffering, one might ask how Capitalism as a God is any different from all the Gods imagined throughout history. Mauss’s contention that sacrifice is basically a contract between men and their Gods rings true: humans give, and they expect some form of material well-being in return. For all the destruction capitalism has done to the world, is it any worse than what has been done in the name of other Gods? One might go even further and suggest that capitalism has answered the deepest wishes of more people than any other God because in many instances money can actually buy health, love, beauty, and success. Ernest Dichter made just this point when he thanked Vance Packard for criticizing him as a materialist. As Dichter pointed out, all good institutions are established on a material basis. Justice requires

the redistribution of wealth and material goods; love, family, and religion all need roses, home-cooked meals, or donations to be taken seriously: “The division between materialist goods and idealistic goals is an erroneous one. There is no sharp dividing line between materialistic and idealistic values” (cited in [McCarragher 2019](#), pp. 561–62). The problem with neoliberal consumer capitalism is not that it is materialistic but that it requires the constant accumulation of capital to continually grow, and this demands the exploitation of the material world and workers. However, capitalism does not have to be unregulated and exploitative. It does not have to downgrade the environment or privilege shareholders and the managerial classes at the expense of workers. John Ruskin drew a distinction between real “Wealth”, which produces “full-breathed, bright-eyed, and happy-hearted human creatures” and what he called “illth”, which causes “devastation and trouble in all directions”. For Ruskin, consumption is good as long as it means “to use everything, and to use it nobly”. In this regard, consumption differs from consumerism, which is dedicated to constant profit making ([Ruskin 1886](#), pp. 5–6). Many people in the past as well as today agree with Ruskin’s distinction.

Up to a point there is therefore nothing wrong with encouraging people to take hold of religion or various forms of spirituality to transform themselves and acquire the necessary means to overcome the obstacles they face. We live in a capitalist society; money and material goods are essential elements in achieving a stable, productive life. The question is, how much money and what kind of material goods are required, and what kind of capitalism is best suited to achieving this end for most people? Economics is not an independent discipline, but one deeply emmeshed in moral and ethical theories about the nature of God, the nature of humans, and the purpose and end of human life. When economics is commandeered by the Gospel of Wealth, spirituality becomes a commodity to be bought and sold, and social justice disappears. Neoliberal capitalist religion is well on its way to commodifying everything, including the air we breathe, the water we drink, and most noticeably our very selves. We have become commodities bought and sold by companies to increase their profits. We are labeled and judged by our ability to spend. Some of us are simply dismissed as “wastes” because of our inability to consume.

As we have seen, the religion of consumer capitalism has taken over what used to be secular and public places, turning offices, board rooms, stores, parks, hospitals, schools, sport’s stadiums, and the apps on our computers and smartphones into corporate spaces which offer enchanting experiences capable of transforming our lives. However, instead of bringing individuals together for the good of the communities in which they live, these developments have isolated individuals. This was the conclusion reached by Carrette and King in 2005:

As long as you feel good and are able to embrace your own private spiritual world you are assured of a place in the nirvana or heaven of corporate capitalism. You can buy your way to happiness with your very own spirituality, cut off from all the suffering and ills of the world and index-linked to the latest business success. Spirituality has arrived in the corporate marketplace and all that is required is a desire to consume. ([Carrette and King 2005](#), p. 53)

Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Taoist, and other traditions have been similarly refashioned by corporate capitalism to deal with the individual self and individual suffering, ignoring their original message that suffering is a universal condition experienced by all humankind. Self-help literature offers individual solutions while ignoring the larger social, political, and economic roots of the problems people face. However, in the presence of injustice and inequality, individuals can only do so much on their own. Where religion and spirituality once challenged the greed, injustice, and inequality arising from the success of a few at the expense of the many, neoliberal capitalist spiritualities acquiesce ([Carrette and King 2005](#), p. 56). Chen’s analysis of Silicon Valley tech workers arrives at a similar conclusion: the more satisfaction individuals derive from work, the less time they invest in their families and the communities in which they live. Tech companies hoard so much

time and energy from their employees that “Techtopia is corroding the collective capacity to build and sustain a common good” (Chen 2022, p. 200).

Providing neoliberal consumer capitalism with a religious veneer—whether conservative Christian or “New Age”—has helped to obscure the effects it has had in sacrificing people and the planet to profits. However, some religious veneers are more destructive than others. The esoteric spiritualities that appeal to tech workers and spiritual seekers on the internet are relatively benign because they engage only a small percentage of the US population and present themselves as inclusive and tolerant. The evangelical ethos of “family values” and “servant leadership” adopted by Wal-Mart and applauded by many conservative Christians is radically different. It has not caused people to ignore their communities but to narrow down what is meant by community to include only those who subscribe to a similar set of conservative Christian values, while building walls to keep those who disagree outside and apart. Evangelical Christianity in its conservative forms has become politicized and weaponized to such a degree that anyone who contests its legitimacy is demonized. Richard Hofstadter wrote *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* sixty years ago, but paranoid politics have only escalated since the book’s publication. With the rise of Christian conservatism and its increasing prominence in the public arena, we find ourselves hostage to an unending barrage of paranoid delusions that mix politics, religion, and economics into a toxic stew of anger, fear, and hatred. The close connection conservatives have drawn between Christianity, Neoliberal Capitalism, Liberty, and Nationalism has stirred up questions about what it means to be American or, more importantly, un-American. The religion of neoliberal capitalism has become a trigger for those who embrace it as a source of meaning, order, and identity. Shaming, canceling, outing, doxing, and just plain threatening have become effective weapons in undermining free speech and free thought. In *Hellfire Nation*, James Morone observes that America has always been a nation on the lookout for ‘un-American’ Anti-Christ (Morone 2003). Such hellfires appear to be burning more brightly than ever. They have real effects on the lives of real people, and no one seems capable of putting them out.

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Notes

- ¹ For a stimulating discussion of the way science and religion interacted in Germany to produce novel conceptions of religious space during the same period, see Treitel (2004).
- ² The concept of “Liquid religion” is a spin off from Bauman’s “Liquid Modernity”, which itself derives from Marx and Engel’s description of capitalism in *The Communist Manifesto*: “All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real condition of life and his relations with his kind” (Marx 1977; Bauman 2000). Along with the concept of “Liquid Religion”, we now have the concept of “Implicit Religion” as well and the online journal “Implicit Religions”. William T. Cavanaugh proposed a similar idea, but he applied it to nationalism rather than capitalism (Cavanaugh 2011).
- ³ On the difficulty of defining “New Age” religion and the need for better terminology, see Sutcliffe and Bowman (2021).
- ⁴ Durkheim’s book was published in 1912. The connection Weber drew between *The Protestant Ethic and the Rise of Capitalism* was first presented in two journal articles published in 1904–1905.
- ⁵ The quotation, “*Die Religion . . . ist das Opium des Volkes*” appears in a manuscript written by Marx, “Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*” (1843), which was only published in German 1927 and in English in 1977, except for the introduction, which appeared in *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* in 1844.
- ⁶ A special issue of *Religions* is devoted to this topic. See Ozturk (2023).
- ⁷ Mackey claims that Whole Foods was unable to grow until “I was able to evolve—in other words I was holding the company back. My personal growth enabled the company to evolve”. The belief that an individual’s spiritual growth translates to capital growth has become a core assumption of the coaching community (Chen 2022, p. 99).
- ⁸ Many spiritpreneurs are concerned with teaching their clients how to unleash their “Sacred Purpose”. See, for example, Jeff Brown, Miles Olsen, and Theta Chi.

- ⁹ Stephen Greenblatt has written about the way social and economic changes in the early-modern period allowed individuals greater social mobility and anonymity and, along with these, the opportunity to reimagine and reinvent themselves (Greenblatt 1980). Terry Castle extends the idea of self-fashioning into the eighteenth century (Castle 1995), and numerous articles, books, acerbic commentaries, and spoofs on the breakdown of class distinctions and hierarchies of power have been written in succeeding centuries.
- ¹⁰ I discuss how we got from Jonathan Edward's sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" to Osteen's upbeat sermons in Coudert (2023).

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