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# Walter Benjamin

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Edited by Marcus Bullock  
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# "Experience"

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In our struggle for responsibility, we fight against someone who is masked. The mask of the adult is called "experience." It is expressionless, impenetrable, and ever the same. The adult has always already experienced [*erlebt*] everything: youth, ideals, hopes, woman. It was all illusion.—Often we feel intimidated or embittered. Perhaps he is right. What can our retort be? We have not yet experienced [*erfahren*] anything.

But let us attempt to raise the mask. What has this adult experienced? What does he wish to prove to us? This above all: he, too, was once young; he, too, wanted what we wanted; he, too, refused to believe his parents, but life has taught him that they were right. Saying this, he smiles in a superior fashion: this will also happen to us—in advance he devalues the years we will live, making them into a time of sweet youthful pranks, of childish rapture, before the long sobriety of serious life. Thus the well-meaning, the enlightened. We know other pedagogues whose bitterness will not even concede to us the brief years of youth; serious and grim, they want to push us directly into life's drudgery. Both attitudes devalue and destroy our years. More and more we are assailed by the feeling: our youth is but a brief night (fill it with rapture!); it will be followed by grand "experience," the years of compromise, impoverishment of ideas, and lack of energy. Such is life. That is what adults tell us, and that is what they experienced.

Yes, that is their experience, this one thing, never anything different: the meaninglessness of life. Its brutality. Have they ever encouraged us to anything great or new or forward-looking? Oh, no, precisely because these are things one cannot experience. All meaning—the true, the good, the beautiful—is grounded within itself. What, then, does experience signify?—

the meaningful, the philistine has taken experience as his gospel. It has become for him a message about life's commonness. But he has never grasped that there exists something other than experience, that there are values—inexperienceable—which we serve.

Why is life without meaning or solace for the philistine? Because he knows experience and nothing else. Because he himself is desolate and without spirit. And because he has no inner relationship to anything other than the common and the always-already-out-of-date.

We, however, know something different, which experience can neither give to us nor take away: that truth exists, even if all previous thought has been an error. Or: that fidelity shall be maintained, even if no one has done so yet. Such will cannot be taken from us by experience. Yet—are our elders, with their tired gestures and their superior hopelessness, right about *one* thing—namely, that what we experience will be sorrowful and that only in the inexperienceable can courage, hope, and meaning be given foundation? Then the spirit would be free. But again and again life would drag it down because life, the sum of experience, would be without solace.

We no longer understand such questions, however. Do we still lead the life of those unfamiliar with the spirit? Whose sluggish ego is buffeted by life like waves against the rocks? No. Each of our experiences has its content. We ourselves invest them with content by means of our own spirit—he who is thoughtless is satisfied with error. “You will never find the truth!” he exclaims to the researcher. “That is my experience.” For the researcher, however, error is only an aid to truth (Spinoza). Only to the mindless [*Geistlosen*] is experience devoid of meaning and spirit. To the one who strives, experience may be painful, but it will scarcely lead him to despair.

In any event, he would never obtusely give up and allow himself to be anesthetized by the rhythm of the philistine. For the philistine, you will have noted, only rejoices in every new meaninglessness. He remains in the right. He reassures himself: spirit does not really exist. Yet no one demands harsher submission or greater “awe” before the “spirit.” For if he were to become critical, then he would have to create as well. That he cannot do. Even the experience of spirit, which he undergoes against his will, becomes for him mindless [*geistlos*].

Tell him

That when he becomes a man

He should revere the dreams of his youth.<sup>1</sup>

Nothing is so hateful to the philistine as the “dreams of his youth.” And most of the time, sentimentality is the protective camouflage of his hatred. For what appeared to him in his dreams was the voice of the spirit, calling him once, as it does everyone. It is of *this* that youth always reminds him,

tells young people of that grim, overwhelming experience and teaches them to laugh at themselves. Especially since "to experience" [*Erleben*] without spirit is comfortable, if unredeeming.

Again: we know a different experience. It can be hostile to spirit and destructive to many blossoming dreams. Nevertheless, it is the most beautiful, most untouchable, most immediate because it can never be without spirit while we remain young. As Zarathustra says, the individual can experience himself only at the end of his wandering. The philistine has his own "experience"; it is the eternal one of spiritlessness. The youth will experience spirit, and the less effortlessly he attains greatness, the more he will encounter spirit everywhere in his wanderings and in every person.—When he becomes a man, the youth will be compassionate. The philistine is intolerant.

Written in 1913; published pseudonymously in *Der Anfang*, 1913–1914. Translated by Lloyd Spencer and Stefan Jost.

## Notes

1. Friedrich Schiller, *Don Carlos*, IV, 21, lines 4287–4289.

# Capitalism as Religion

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A religion may be discerned in capitalism—that is to say, capitalism serves essentially to allay the same anxieties, torments, and disturbances to which the so-called religions offered answers. The proof of the religious structure of capitalism—not merely, as Weber believes, as a formation conditioned by religion, but as an essentially religious phenomenon—would still lead even today to the folly of an endless universal polemic. We cannot draw closed the net in which we are caught. Later on, however, we shall be able to gain an overview of it.

Nevertheless, even at the present moment it is possible to distinguish three aspects of this religious structure of capitalism. In the first place, capitalism is a purely cultic religion, perhaps the most extreme that ever existed. In capitalism, things have a meaning only in their relationship to the cult; capitalism has no specific body of dogma, no theology. It is from this point of view that utilitarianism acquires its religious overtones. This concretization of cult is connected with a second feature of capitalism: the permanence of the cult. Capitalism is the celebration of a cult *sans rêve et sans merci* [without dream or mercy]. There are no “weekdays.” There is no day that is not a feast day, in the terrible sense that all its sacred pomp is unfolded before us; each day commands the utter fealty of each worshiper. And third, the cult makes guilt pervasive. Capitalism is probably the first instance of a cult that creates guilt, not atonement. In this respect, this religious system is caught up in the headlong rush of a larger movement. A vast sense of guilt that is unable to find relief seizes on the cult, not to atone for this guilt but to make it universal, to hammer it into the conscious mind, so as once

an interest in the process or atonement. This atonement cannot then be expected from the cult itself, or from the reformation of this religion (which would need to be able to have recourse to some stable element in it), or even from the complete renouncement of this religion. The nature of the religious movement which is capitalism entails endurance right to the end, to the point where God, too, finally takes on the entire burden of guilt, to the point where the universe has been taken over by that despair which is actually its secret *hope*. Capitalism is entirely without precedent, in that it is a religion which offers not the reform of existence but its complete destruction. It is the expansion of despair, until despair becomes a religious state of the world in the hope that this will lead to salvation. God's transcendence is at an end. But he is not dead; he has been incorporated into human existence. This passage of the planet "Human" through the house of despair in the absolute loneliness of his trajectory is the ethos that Nietzsche defined. This man is the superman, the first to recognize the religion of capitalism and begin to bring it to fulfillment. Its fourth feature is that its God must be hidden from it and may be addressed only when his guilt is at its zenith. The cult is celebrated before an unmaturing deity; every idea, every conception of it offends against the secret of this immaturity.

Freud's theory, too, belongs to the hegemony of the priests of this cult. Its conception is capitalist through and through. By virtue of a profound analogy, which has still to be illuminated, what has been repressed, the idea of sin, is capital itself, which pays interest on the hell of the unconscious.

The paradigm of capitalist religious thought is magnificently formulated in Nietzsche's philosophy. The idea of the superman transposes the apocalyptic "leap" not into conversion, atonement, purification, and penance, but into an apparently steady, though in the final analysis explosive and discontinuous intensification. For this reason, intensification and development in the sense of *non facit saltum* are incompatible.<sup>1</sup> The superman is the man who has arrived where he is without changing his ways; he is historical man who has grown up right through the sky. This breaking open of the heavens by an intensified humanity that was and is characterized (even for Nietzsche himself) by guilt in a religious sense was anticipated by Nietzsche. Marx is a similar case: the capitalism that refuses to change course becomes socialism by means of the simple and compound interest that are functions of *Schuld* (consider the demonic ambiguity of this word).<sup>2</sup>

Capitalism is a religion of pure cult, without dogma.

Capitalism has developed as a parasite of Christianity in the West (this must be shown not just in the case of Calvinism, but in the other orthodox Christian churches), until it reached the point where Christianity's history is essentially that of its parasite—that is to say, of capitalism.

and the banknotes of different states. The spirit that speaks from the ornamental design of banknotes.

Capitalism and law. The heathen character of law. Sorel, *Réflexions sur la violence* [Reflections on Violence], p. 262.

The overcoming of capitalism by migration. Unger, *Politik und Metaphysik* [Politics and Metaphysics], p. 44.

Fuchs, *Structure of Capitalist Society*, or something of the sort.

Max Weber, *Collected Essays on the Sociology of Religion* [*Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*], 2 vols., 1919–1920.

Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches* [*Die Soziallehren der christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen*] (*Gesammelte Werke*, vol. I, 1912).

See especially Schönberg's bibliography under II.

Landauer, *Aufruf zur Sozialismus* [Call to Socialism], p. 144.

Worries: a mental illness characteristic of the age of capitalism. Spiritual (not material) hopelessness in poverty and in vagrant, mendicant monkhood. A condition that is so bereft of hope causes guilt feelings. "Worries" are the index of the sense of guilt induced by a despair that is communal, not individual and material, in origin.

The Christianity of the Reformation period did not favor the growth of capitalism; instead it transformed itself into capitalism.

Methodologically, one should begin by investigating the links between myth and money throughout the course of history, to the point where money had drawn so many elements from Christianity that it could establish its own myth.

Wergeld / thesaurus of good works / the salary due the *priest* / Pluto as the god of wealth.

Adam Müller, *Reden über die Beredsamkeit* [Speeches on Eloquence], 1816, pp. 56ff.

Link between the dogma of the destructive—but for us both redemptive and murderous—nature of knowledge, and capitalism: the balance sheet as a knowledge that both redeems and eliminates.

It adds to our understanding of capitalism as a religion to realize that, to begin with, the first heathens certainly did not believe that religion served a "higher," "moral" interest but that it was severely practical. In other words, religion did not achieve any greater clarity than about its "ideal" or "transcendental" nature than modern capitalism does today. Therefore it, too, regarded individuals who were irreligious or had other beliefs as members of its community, in the same way that the modern bourgeoisie now regards those of its members who are not gainfully employed.



## Notes

1. *Non facit saltum*: Latin for “he cannot make the leap.” In rationalist philosophy, the phrase expresses the notion that God leaves no gaps in nature.—*Trans.*
2. The German word *Schuld* means both “debt” and “guilt.”—*Trans.*