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# A GLOBAL MARKET— A CATHOLIC CHURCH

## The New Political (Ir)Realism

D. STEPHEN LONG

Several years ago, I lived among the Guarifuna people of Central and South America. The Guarifuna are an African people displaced to Central America as a result of the slave trade. One evening, I was invited to witness their traditional African dances, passed on from generation to generation despite the oppressive conditions under which they lived. They instructed me to go to a meeting place some distance from their village late in the evening. As I walked toward the place, anticipating a cross-cultural experience, I noticed a familiar rhythm. It became more obvious as I drew closer. When I arrived, the Guarifuna were not dancing the traditional dances I came to observe; they were dancing to Michael Jackson's "Beat It."

This story signifies the dominance of American cultural products over local traditions. This, I believe, poses a serious problem. But how do we define this phenomenon as a problem? Why should anyone be troubled that some Guarifuna (particularly the youth) forsake long-standing tradition in favor of American cultural products? Some might argue that no one but the Guarifuna have the right to pass judgment upon their own cultural traditions and to decide whether they be rejected or maintained. The right of self-determination should allow them to determine the music to which they dance. If Guarifuna youth choose to dance to this particular music, they should be granted the freedom to do so. But this response begs the question. It assumes something to be a normal state of affairs that is not so—that the Guarifuna are free to choose which cultural products they consume.

### CULTURAL COERCION THROUGH ECONOMIC COMMODIFICATION

Guarifuna consumption of American cultural products can only falsely be defined as a free act of will. This is not meant to suggest that the

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Guarifuna are violently coerced to buy and consume these products. However, a coercion does exist. The center of Guarifuna life is neither the church nor the village assembly; the center is the shrimp and lobster plant that operates outside the village square. This plant takes lobster and shrimp from the waters off Punta Gorda where the Guarifuna live, processes them, and ships them to the United States for fast-food consumption. The Guarifuna men provide the hands for the lobstering and shrimping; the women prepare the product for U.S. consumption. The end product is unaffordable to the majority of the Guarifuna people. However, their low wages and erratic employment keep the price low by U.S. standards so that lobster and shrimp can be consumed by landlocked people who eat this produce as a hobby.

In return for their work, the women were paid a wage of seventy cents an hour. They worked as long as shrimp and lobster needed preparation. When the work was done, they waited until it became available again. Sometimes there would be no work for days; sometimes they would work for ten to twelve hours a day. The wages they were paid were insufficient to purchase the product they prepared, yet other cultural products were made available to them—Coca-Cola, cigarettes, audiocassettes, World Wrestling Federation mementos, and, on rare occasions, vaccinations. In this process, lobster and shrimp no longer functioned as food. Instead, they became interchangeable with the American cultural products made available. Insofar as the Guarifuna participated in this process, their lives became increasingly grafted into the global market, which possesses its own rites of initiation (working for the plant) and creates a catholic unity. These people's lives directly make possible the consumptive habits of others and the consumptive habits of others make these people's lives possible.

The incorporation of the Guarifuna "culture" into an increasingly homogenous world economy occurs through a complex exchange where nearly every aspect of their lives can be turned into a commodity and then exchanged for other commodities within the global market. "Lobster and shrimp" no longer signify basic food stuff but become interchangeable with nearly any other product throughout the world.

This process leads to a political irrationalism where almost anything can signify anything else. Because of the global nature of the process, no local power can arbitrate between conflicting signs. The Guarifuna cannot decide for themselves what lobster signifies. Reinhold Niebuhr once wrote, "There must be an organizing center within a given field of social vitalities. This center must arbitrate conflicts from a more impartial perspective than is available to any party of a given conflict."<sup>1</sup> This center formed the basis for his political realism. But the political irrationalism we face cannot be adequately described in Niebuhr's terms. The power operating through the global market does not contain any impartial

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<sup>1</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*, vol. 2, *Human Destiny* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1943), p. 266.

center from which arbitration can occur. The social institutions that carry this power, multinational corporations, cannot act as a center that gives political life coherence; they are more fluid, capable of dissolving everything into the possibility for exchange.

## GLOBAL CAPITALISM DISPLACES THE NATION-STATE

We live in (at least) two times: an earlier time, often characterized as modernity, in which the nation-state was the dominant social institution, and a later time, known only as postmodernity, where the transnational corporation vies for power with the nation-state. Modernity has been characterized as a time of objective truths grounded in a universal account of human rationality. The nation-state, with its connection to land and commitment to supposed universal principles such as freedom and democracy, is the political analogue to a modernist rationality. Modernity has been roundly criticized by a myriad of voices.<sup>2</sup> But the crack in modernity was not made first by its cultural critics; it was made by the flexibility of transnational corporations to live within a global economy and not be constrained to modernist nation-states. This flexibility has a long history.

Since the fifteenth century a global market has been emerging. The conquest of the Americas, the slave trade, and the introduction of spices, coffee, cocoa, and sugar both made possible and resulted from new trade routes that increasingly linked the world into a single market.<sup>3</sup> In its earlier stages, the global market's emergence assisted the development of strong nation-states and undid long-standing empires.<sup>4</sup> The global economy continued to favor nation-states as long as production was dependent upon raw materials. States secured the necessary raw materials and created stable environments for production. In high modernism, oil was the central raw material.<sup>5</sup>

Oil remains important, but it is no longer central. In the postmodern economy, the "energy component of labor" has been replaced with the "skill component."<sup>6</sup> As important as oil and raw materials are, the skill involved in the technology that makes the global market possible has usurped their power. The corporation, with its flexibility, rises to power

<sup>2</sup>See Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2d ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984); Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982); and Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified: Discourse on Life and Law* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).

<sup>3</sup>See Eric R. Wolfe, *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

<sup>4</sup>Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (San Diego: Academic Press, 1974), pp. 133–162.

<sup>5</sup>Daniel Yergin, "Oil: The Strategic Prize," in *The Gulf War Reader: History, Documents, Opinions*, edited by Micah Sifry (New York: Random House, 1991), p. 24.

<sup>6</sup>A. Sivanandan, "New Circuits of Imperialism," in *Communities of Resistance: Writings on Black Struggles for Socialism* (New York: Routledge, Chapman & Hall, 1991), pp. 169–194.

both in cooperation with and in opposition to the power of the nation-state.

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The corporation, unlike the nation, can exist within both a modernist and a postmodernist culture, but it thrives on, and produces, the latter. This is due to its control of communication networks, its transnational character, and the rapidity with which it can exchange products, separating signs from what were once thought to be their references. In 1980, thirty-seven percent of all automobiles made by the top four U.S. manufacturers were made outside the United States.<sup>7</sup> Global sourcing and the mobility of capital allow corporations to shift from one cultural location to another almost instantaneously. The success of Wal-Mart and its devastating impact upon local business is not a result of production but of a highly skilled communication network utilizing satellites to “have instant access to inventories, delivery schedules, and other data.”<sup>8</sup>

The rise of the transnational corporation brings with it a new political configuration. In the words of Robert J. Ross and Kent C. Trachte:

The New Leviathan is not the state, but a newly invigorated system of global capitalism. The multinational conglomerate symbolizes, crudely, the power of the New Leviathan. Yet the irony of the New Leviathan is that its individual agents, global firms, and financial institutions are not sovereigns but severely constrained competitors committed to the economic war of all against all. The only Sovereign is indirect, fluid, acting upon states as well as embodied in them. The New Leviathan is the system of global capitalism, not any of its powerful parts. . . . The characteristic “terror” of the Old Leviathan was the police power of the state. The characteristic terror of the New Leviathan is unemployment, wage cuts, the fear that a family or a community’s aspiration for environmental or economic improvement may cause the agents of the New Leviathan to take their investments to some other place where working people are more vulnerable to the demand of their employers.<sup>9</sup>

We live within a new political irrealism.

The new leviathan reaches into other social institutions such as the state, the military, and the church, conditioning their possibilities for continued life.<sup>10</sup> Anthony Giddens argues that, as long as the state

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<sup>7</sup>Robert J. Ross and Kent C. Trachte, *Global Capitalism: The New Leviathan* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), p. 124.

<sup>8</sup>See James Morgan, “Adventures in the Food Chain,” *The Atlantic*, 296/6 (June, 1992), pp. 30–49.

<sup>9</sup>Ross and Trachte, *Global Capitalism*, pp. 2–3.

<sup>10</sup>Raymond Williams notes this inevitability in his *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 125–126.

controls the means of violence, transnational corporations will be faced with certain limitations upon their power.<sup>11</sup> But this overlooks the relationship between the corporation and the state. If the corporation conditions political possibilities for the nation-state, then the state's control of the means of violence will serve the interest of the corporation. The rise of low-intensity warfare where the military is used to keep certain geographical regions open for the global market and the similarity between the advertising industry and military psychological operations suggest an indirect control of the means of violence exercised by the corporation.<sup>12</sup>

## GLOBAL CAPITALISM DISPLACES THE CHURCH

Of more concern to Christians than the power this new leviathan has over the military and the nation-state is its control over the life of the church. The global market brings its own catholic unity. This new catholic unity should be a cause for alarm to Christians, for the new global village has at its center not a church but a market. It is a competing catholicity, not the catholicity we confess in the Nicene Creed as one of the four marks of the church.

In his disturbing book, *Reaching for Heaven on Earth: The Theological Meaning of Economics*, Robert Nelson suggests that the market mechanism has in fact supplanted the medieval church as that which offers us salvation. Economists and sociologists capable of reading the market have now become priests of a new postmodern faith. For Nelson, this is a positive movement because the market, with its global dimensions and rational efficiency, provides the possibility for a new kind of salvation in which every tear will be wiped away. Let the market alone—free it from governmental interference—and it will be capable of generating wealth and abundance for all.

Nelson persuasively argues that the market rather than the church underlies the contemporary quest for salvation. The world market becomes itself a kind of text that we daily read and meditate upon much as earlier generations practiced morning prayer. Social scientists and economists have become our priests who now interpret this new text and thus provide us with our future security. Nelson's vision for the market is a vision of the end times that replaces that of the church. The market can provide what the church tried but failed to provide:

- (1) The maximization of individual liberty;
- (2) The annihilation of all coercive uses of power;
- (3) The realization of all relationships based on voluntary consent;
- (4) The achievement of perfect harmony;
- (5) The equality of all humanity throughout the world.

<sup>11</sup>Anthony Giddens, *The National State and Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 222–294.

<sup>12</sup>See Michael T. Klare and Peter Kornbluh, eds., *Low Intensity Warfare* (New York: Pantheon, 1988).

This market-driven vision replaces the vision that once went by the name the kingdom of God. Yet Nelson does not want to dismiss God; God is still present in bringing about this new kingdom. But God only has a bit part. God is necessary to ground certain laws of nature that insure for us the rationality of the market. This God is the *deus ex machina*. This God is not found dying on a cross but is merely a power that secures certain laws so that the market mechanism works smoothly if we cooperate with it.

According to Nelson, the natural laws this god secures are:

- (1) The pursuit of self-interest is inherently good;
- (2) To be rational is to be “efficient”;
- (3) The goal of communal life is increased productivity;
- (4) A select group of persons—economists and social scientists—now forms a new priesthood because they are the interpreters of the market.<sup>13</sup>

Nelson’s argument is instructive because it explicitly offers a comprehensive and coherent description of salvation. The transnational corporation becomes the social institution that makes this form of salvation possible. Our economics becomes our theology. Theology is based on the presupposition of the normalcy of the current economic state of affairs. All theology that can be read as contributing to this new salvation is acceptable. All theology that cannot be so read is deemed illicit.

The global market offers an overarching view of salvation that promises the alleviation of suffering based on the inherent rationality of the world and the ability to discover that rationality and then manage accordingly. This overarching view of salvation is theological and is not accidental to the global market; it has even become an acceptable way to market the church. Thus even the language of the church is now used to seduce us into this other catholicity. Yet the theological claims implicit and explicit in the global market are heretical. They present a false form of salvation.

## A THEOLOGICAL CRITIQUE OF THE GLOBAL MARKET

The church should oppose the global market because it is not based on the revelation of God in Jesus. The market, as salvific institution, is and must be heterodox. It cannot be grounded in the Word, for the global market thrives on distancing signs and references; no ultimate referent can be allowed. But the church cannot exist for long without recognizing

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<sup>13</sup>Robert H. Nelson, *Reaching for Heaven on Earth: The Theological Meaning of Economics* (Savage, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1991), pp. 1–27. Nelson’s argument is that the economy is itself a theology that does not need the traditional trappings of Christianity such as “the historic messages of the Bible” (p. 14). Instead, “modern society recognizes that it is the economic priesthood on whom the future redemption of mankind really depends.” Nelson does draw upon some contemporary theologians to support his position, e.g., Michael Novak (pp. xxi, 335). Nelson’s work clearly shows how a free-enterprise agenda can be a great threat to traditional, orthodox Christianity. Surprisingly, some contemporary theologians seem to find Nelson’s work convincing. See, e.g., Max L. Stackhouse’s review of Nelson’s book in *The Christian Century*, 110 (April 7, 1993), pp. 376–377, where Stackhouse calls the book “the most profound book on the boundary of theology and economics in the past couple of decades.”

the ultimate reference of all creation in the Word spoken by the Father in the power of the Spirit.<sup>14</sup>

All orthodox Christians should recognize the deceitful power of the catholic market and oppose it. The laws within the capitalist logic become a false word that is looked to for salvation. The church can oppose the world market because the church cannot for long ignore the Word that calls it into being and sustains its life. The true Word is found in the church's liturgy.

In the offering, the church offers its life, including its economic life, to God as a gift. We claim that we do not own our productive capacity as an inherent right that entitles us to produce in the way the rationalization of self-interest in the global market requires. Even if such productivity is responsible for great financial benefits, to produce without regard for the Giver of all gifts leads to unrighteousness. The task of our economic life is not to produce efficiently but to serve God. Thus, we try to honor the Sabbath and keep it holy, with few exceptions allowed, even though honoring the Sabbath is obviously inefficient and a threat to increased productivity.

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In the eucharist, we discover how God deals with us and, thus, how we are to deal with one another. The eucharist utilizes the basic elements of life, and God transforms them into God's own self. The gifts are distributed to the faithful based on our repentance and baptism. If one person claimed all the gifts for himself or herself and refused the distribution of the elements, we would recognize a violation of God's good order.

The Christian life drastically conflicts with the way of life created by the global market. The latter has its basis in those economists, like Adam Smith, who freed economics from the church's teachings and its moral considerations.<sup>15</sup> The rise of an independent global economy occurred

<sup>14</sup>For a discussion of interpretation and “ultimate reference” see Frederic Jameson, “Economics,” in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), pp. 260–278; and *idem*, “On Interpretation,” in *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), pp. 17–20.

<sup>15</sup>See Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (New York: Random House, 1937), pp. 740–768, where Smith argues that the interest of the clergy “is never the same as that of the sovereign and is sometimes directly opposed to it” (p. 749). Because of the power of religious authority, the clergy must be kept in line by the sovereign. As long as the clergy had the “spiritual weapons” of “hospitality and charity,” they were conceded too much authority (p. 753). Once the need for their charity and hospitality is defeated, then their interests will come in line with those of the state (p. 755).

through an act of rebellion against the church.<sup>16</sup> Such a view of the world replaces earlier views that failed to separate means from ends.

Early church fathers insisted upon honoring the scriptural injunctions found in such places as Exodus 22:25, Psalm 15:5, and Deuteronomy 23:19–20. The latter states, “You may not lend upon interest to your brother, interest on money, interest on victuals, interest on anything that is lent for interest. To a foreigner you may lend for interest, but to your brother you may not lend upon interest.” Since the Gentiles had now been grafted into the covenant, the category of foreigner was no longer permissible. Christians were not to put out their money at interest. St. Albert the Great, the teacher of St. Thomas Aquinas, understood such a practice as the sin of avarice. “Usury is a sin of avarice; it is against charity because the usurer without labor, suffering or fear gathers riches from the labors, suffering and vicissitudes of his neighbor.”<sup>17</sup> To loan money at interest was a sin against charity. Yet the world Adam Smith creates is a world where economics is not to be understood as a species of charity; instead it is a species of self-interest and thus of a peculiarly Enlightenment view of justice that bases social relations on an idea of fairness where fairness is defined as granting each person maximum freedom possible to pursue his or her self-interest. Christians must resist that world. But we must also recognize it as the world we live in, a world without charity.

### THE CHURCH AS A COMMUNITY OF RESISTANCE

A few signs of hope exist. Charity is not yet completely destroyed. Some of the most interesting economic alternatives to the global market occur within the church’s ministries—the Seeds of Hope project, St. Andrews Potato Project, Habitat for Humanity, Christian Ecclesial Base Communities, the monastic life, equitable salaries for clergy, and the like. Yet these few projects exist at the margins of most churches. In truth, the majority of people within our churches fail either to offer resistance to the global market or even to acknowledge the need to do so. Why? Perhaps it is due to the fact that the global market is more constitutive of our daily lives than is our baptism into the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We are being united into a catholicity, but it is not the catholicity of the church; it is the catholicity of the market. It is such a part of us that we can barely recognize how our lives are constituted by heresy. About this we can do little but wait for God to deliver us.

Waiting on God is an ancient and honorable tradition within the church. Patience and hope should sustain us even when we are tempted to despair. Despair is a sign of a loss of faith. Hope acknowledges that

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The result was, “As the clergy had now less influence over the people, so the state had more influence over the clergy,” and we should add, over the people as well (p. 757).

<sup>16</sup>For a helpful discussion of how this happened in England, see R. N. Swanson, *Church and Society in Late Medieval England* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), pp. 191–252.

<sup>17</sup>Quoted in Albert R. Jonsen and Stephen Toulmin, *The Abuse of Casuistry: A History of Moral Reasoning* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 183.

Christ is Lord; it is possible only in anticipation of the realization of God's reign. But even the ancient tradition of waiting in expectation is difficult for us today. Through the increasingly popular practices of the church-growth movement, the global market entrenches itself so fully within the life of the church, especially among its leadership, that little space for resistance remains. The unparalleled popularity of church sociologists, who claim to report merely the facts of our current social situation, unconsciously leads the church to adopt the corporation as the social institution that offers salvation.

If the global market has become a church, has the church not unduly accommodated itself to the market? Has the gospel become one more commodity we seek to package in as many ways as possible so that we might more "efficiently" create increased growth? Has the gospel become separated from Jesus Christ so that it can mean anything to anyone depending upon the target population for which we market it? Can we unquestionably coopt skills from the corporate culture as a way to structure the church?

Books such as Shawchuck, Kotler, Wrenn, and Rath's *Marketing for Congregations: Choosing to Serve People More Effectively* and Lyle Schaller's *Create Your Own Future* adorn the bookshelves of pastors' studies while the ancient wisdom of the church fathers, the mystics, Thomas Aquinas, and the Reformers is no longer consulted. These new intellectual sources consciously adopt the management skills provided by the global market on the pretense that to be rational is to be efficient. The logic of the global market becomes the logic of the church. Who can resist this? But efficiency is not a Christian virtue; patience and hope are.

The mega-supermarket is destroying rural life and reducing farmers to sharecroppers on their own land by concentrating wealth and power in fewer and fewer hands. Is the megachurch following suit? If so, then we find the cultural tail wagging the ecclesial dog. Patterning the church after a mega-supermarket can only lead us to failure. The assumptions of the market—rationality is efficiency, bigger is better, and the goal of communal life is increased productivity—abandon too many people in contemporary society. To apply these models toward church growth is a sign of a profound theological crisis.

The church offers little resistance to the catholic market even though it is a threat to the church's own life. Theologians seldom provide any resistance either. They perpetuate the narrative of the middle, the politically naive assumption that a moderated central position between two extremes exists. We are inhibited from the necessary and radical critique of the catholic market by the dominant and acceptable theological rationality found in Troeltsch's sociological distinction between church and sect. This dominant discourse forms theological intellectuals in such a way that they assume that the primary task of the church is to avoid the two extremes of actualizing the faith's radical demands (sectarian) and of simply using the faith for political purposes. A third "responsible" position is put forward as the preferable one. This third position seeks to

apply the faith *realistically* to politics and thereby to transform the political order. In so doing, theological intellectuals fail to see that this position only serves the political interest of the dominant powers because it assumes that what is is rational politics. It takes on the political situation on its own terms. It fails even to take into account the new political irrationalism.

If the catholic church is to become a community of resistance to the catholic market, then both popular practice and theological inquiry must be converted. We must free ourselves from the rationality of the catholic market and recover a theological rationality grounded in the life and practice of the church. If we are not so converted, the church will simply continue to be incorporated into the transnational corporation until the church can no longer give an account of itself in theological terms, or even feel the need to do so.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>For a helpful discussion of the need for the church to become a tight ecclesial community that resists the global market, see Michael Budde, *The Two Churches: Catholicism and Capitalism in the World System* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994).



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