

the often-depressing mire of realist worldly wisdom, on the one hand, and idealist naïveté, on the other. As Stanley Hauerwas puts it in his cover blurb, “No doubt some will challenge [Jeffreys’] account of realism, but at the very least he has begun a conversation that needs to take place.” I would modify that sentence only by inserting the adverb *desperately* just before *needs*.

—William R. Stevenson Jr.
Calvin College

Cash Values: Money and the Erosion of Meaning in Today’s Society

Craig M. Gay

Vancouver, British Columbia and Grand Rapids, Michigan:
Regent College Publishing, and William B. Eerdmans Publishing,
2004 (110 pages)

This book promises to begin a discussion among evangelicals and other serious Christians about the compatibility of their basic faith commitment with an uncritical acceptance of the cultural values promoted by capitalism. All too often, evangelicals and others who may already constitute Craig Gay’s intended audience have given the impression of either ignorance or indifference to the corrosive effects of what he describes as the “exaltation of the monetary unit,” while also demonstrating acute distress over the apparent decline in personal morality and family values. Gay’s book is promising precisely in that it may help its readers to see that there is a deep connection between the two and that any serious effort on the part of evangelicals and others to overcome that decline must be premised on a more critical awareness of what we may be doing to ourselves in embracing the “cash values” of a society obsessed with business and financial success.

Gay certainly does not mean to be an enemy of capitalism. His initial chapter is a very positive assessment of “the sources of capitalism’s productivity,” in which he not only recognizes capitalism’s role in providing opportunities for an unprecedented number of success stories in the global struggle against poverty and destitution but also, following Max Weber, Peter Berger, and others, he acknowledges the reality of capitalism’s spiritual and ethical presuppositions, especially their specifically Calvinist origins. He also sees more deeply than some of Weber’s interpreters that capitalism’s success as an economic and cultural system depends upon the nearly universal acceptance of its “money metric” as the ultimate standard of value, not only in strictly economic transactions but also in virtually all forms of human interaction. Gay’s is an admirably accessible survey of the complex line of theoretical development by which social scientists have moved beyond Weber’s original insight into the cultural significance of accounting through the works of Sombart, Schumpeter, and finally Georg Simmel on the broader and deeper meaning of money as such. He recognizes, as earlier

did Daniel Bell in his curiously neglected classic, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976), that capitalism is faced with a dilemma, insofar as the system depends upon cultural values that it inevitably threatens to subvert, if not entirely eliminate.

So far, so good. Where Gay falters, it seems, is in his advice to Christians on how to respond to this dilemma. He calls for “an economy of shrewd stewardship.” Opting out of the system or seriously investing one’s life in developing an alternative are both dismissed as unrealistic. Instead, Gay calls Christians to a renewal of faith, one now chastened by a deeper awareness of the risk of idolatry inherent in the uncritical acceptance of the money metric. He commends Richard John Neuhaus’s sage advice that we should consciously adopt an appropriately biblical attitude of “lightheartedness” toward the understandable stresses and anxieties generated by capitalism’s underlying financial insecurity. He rightly suggests that Christian faith’s greatest resource is its deep understanding that “life is a gift” and that understanding all worldly goods as gifts of God may actually help us resist the tendency to turn everything around us, including our personal relationships, into commodities.

Yes, of course, attitude adjustment is always good for the soul, but is it enough, given the dilemma that Gay has so vividly described? His book, which is charmingly brief, ends at a point where one can only wish it had gone further. Can Gay not say something more about how Christians—individuals, families, churches, and other forms of fellowship—might begin to develop social practices more consonant with the pattern of gift-exchange that seems to be God’s own preferred way of doing things? Perhaps we should be thinking of making gifts for exchange at Christmas, Easter, and other occasions and generally exploring whatever alternatives there may be at hand in which to invest our time and energy, instead of our money, in gifting one another. What would it be like for Christian communities actually to live their common life as a gift exchange? Might such an effort lead, for example, to a serious reconsideration of the Bible’s own expectations regarding social and economic justice? Might not a renewal of our common life prompt us to go beyond the easy ideological polarizations by which the cry of the poor so easily gets dismissed as leftist political rhetoric? I do not see how Gay’s insightful probing of the cash values of capitalism might not provoke a more focused form of structural analysis in which the ambiguous work of societal transformation once more is seen as central to Christian witness.

Despite his silence on these further questions, Gay is to be commended for challenging each of his readers to take up once again the perennial struggle of choosing rightly between God and mammon. He may be right, in that we have no other option than to try to become shrewd stewards, but perhaps we should not give up on reinventing more radical forms of Christian witness, at least not until we have seriously scrutinized them.

—Dennis P. McCann
Agnes Scott College, Decatur, Georgia