

God and Mammon, Incorporated

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The Money Cult: Christianity, Capitalism, and the Unmaking of the American Dream, by Chris Lehmann, Melville House.

WHILE TRAVELING through the United States in the early 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville witnessed an extraordinary development in the history of religion. If the founder of Christianity had warned his disciples they could not serve both God and Mammon, his American followers had brokered a lucrative merger of the two divinities, a theological duopoly that constituted the largest ontological enterprise in the cosmos. Besides annulling one of the more inconvenient and increasingly obsolete passages in the Bible, the deal had reconciled two formerly internecine competitors for the human soul. “The passions that move Americans most deeply are commercial,” Tocqueville asserted in *Democracy in America*, and those passions were encouraged, not bridled, by Protestant ministers and theologians. In a chapter entitled “How the Americans Apply the Doctrine of Self-Interest Well Understood in the Matter of Religion,” Tocqueville sketched his puzzled and bemused impressions of this nascent capitalist covenant. Noting that Americans performed their religious duties with unfeigned and even cheerful devotion, he added that “one ordinarily sees in the midst of their zeal something so tranquil, so methodical, so calculated, that it seems to be reason much more than heart that leads them to the foot of the altar.” The calculations were those of the instrumental, pecuniary rationality that governed the marketplace, the venue for those commercial passions exonerated and anointed by clergy and moralists. Harkening to the pulpits, Tocqueville marveled at how “American preachers refer to this world constantly and, indeed, can avert their eyes from it only with the greatest difficulty”; listening to them, he could not determine “whether the chief object of religion

is to procure eternal happiness in the other world or well-being in this one.”

That last observation could be easily read as a subtle indictment of hypocrisy. But Tocqueville—a liberal aristocrat—doesn’t seem to have been terribly nonplussed by the mercenary character of American religion. Indeed, he implied that those worldly preachers were wise and not impious to insist on the material advantages to be wrought from religious faith. “Interest,” Tocqueville reasoned, “is the principal means religions themselves make use of to guide men.” Although many Christians claimed to love their fellow men and women “to merit the goods of the other world,” he felt that “they deceive themselves.” (“I respect them too much to believe them,” he added.) If commercial passions could restrain other vices and even foster or constitute virtues—diligence, frugality, sobriety, what Max Weber would later call the “worldly asceticism” indispensable to capital accumulation—then the Protestant clergy’s benediction on “well-being” brought sinners into the service of God. As if rehearsing for his subsequent role as a venerable sage of American consensus, Tocqueville hinted that a prudent service to Mammon could align the saintly and the highly remunerative.

Citing Tocqueville and other European visitors to America in “On the Jewish Question” (1844), Karl Marx wasn’t buying this lissome convergence of avarice and brotherly love in the “bourgeois society of North America.” Weakened by enlightenment and disestablishment, Christianity was now “thrust among the multitude of private interests,” the sphere of “civil society” marked by ruthless competition and exploitation. In order to survive and flourish in the bourgeois arena of possessive individualism, Christianity had to redefine fellowship as equal participation in market antagonism, what Richard Hofstadter would later characterize as America’s “democracy in cupidity.” Marx concluded that Christ’s American votaries had succumbed to “the spirit of civil society, the sphere of egoism, the *bellum omnium contra omnes*.” Religion in American capitalism was not the opium of the people; it acted more like an amphetamine, invigorating warriors on the merciless, secular terrain of the marketplace.

In *The Money Cult*, his chronicle of the unholy but indissoluble marriage of American Protestantism and capitalism, Chris Lehmann achieves a graceful and compelling synthesis of Marx and Tocqueville, demonstrating how the Protestant consecration of business engendered an ideal of seraphic self-realization through competition in the marketplace. As “the frank celebration of wealth as a spiritual virtue in American Protestantism,” the money cult is also “a gospel of Gnostic deliverance”: in a capitalist agora that providentially fuses brutality and beatitude, the individual forges a divinity of the self that is gradually liberated from imprisonment in the vexing evanescence of matter and time. From John Winthrop, George Whitefield, and Charles Grandison Finney to Norman Vincent Peale and Joel Osteen, and from the Puritan “modell of Christian charity” to the unctuous bromides of “servant leadership,” the money cult has been our effectively established religion, “a bona fide brand of faith” assuring believers that their terrestrial ambitions accord with the celestial harmonies of the universe. Because contemporary American religion “has failed miserably to marshal any critical resources”—even worse, “religion no longer affords a sturdy vantage for persuasively criticizing the dominance of market values”—the money cult’s hegemony seems unassailable. The arc of the moral universe remains long, but now it bends toward the sanctity of riches.

With all its astral, other-worldly connotations, Gnosticism would seem an unlikely suspect in the capitalist corruption of American Christianity, but Lehmann makes a serious case that its empyreal credo has very this-worldly consequences. Emerging in the late first century BCE, Gnosticism has a long and impressive historiography, from the early researches of the German philosopher Gershom Scholem to Hans Jonas’s classic study of *The Gnostic Religion* (1958) to Elaine Pagels’s *The Gnostic Gospels* (1979), a study of how its earliest adherents tried unsuccessfully to mold Christianity in its ethereal (and elitist) image and likeness. Lehmann (relying on Jonas) defines Gnosticism as a form of “heroic spiritual individualism” that acknowledges “an eternal principle of liberation” from “the corrosive encrustations of tradition, habit, and nature.” The individual carries a

“divine spark of cosmic truth” or *gnosis* that is “tragically marooned in an alien and fallen external world.” In order to free this “spark,” the gnostic soul must raise itself above matter and society to be reunited with the obscure and transcendent God who ignited its existence. As seraphic as it sounds, Gnosticism, Lehmann contends, is ironically a veritable “theology of power”: if the material world is governed by sheer physical force, then liberation from that world requires power—in the case of the money cult, power defined as capital accumulation and commodities.

Alluding to Robert Jay Lifton and Christopher Lasch, Lehmann argues that, condensed in such figures as the “Protean Self” and the “Narcissistic Personality,” Gnosticism has been “hiding in plain sight throughout our religious past.” Lehmann isn’t the first to detect a strong and abiding filament of Gnosticism in American history. In *The American Religion* (1992)—whose title clearly echoes Jonas’s volume—Harold Bloom claims that American Protestantism is, in effect, a heretical Gnostic offshoot of traditional Christianity. With Ralph Waldo Emerson as its signature theologian, and with Mormonism, Southern Baptism, Pentecostalism, Seventh-Day Adventism, and the “blissful vacuity” of New Age as its most representative denominations, the American religion, in Bloom’s narrative, is Gnosticism draped in Protestant and increasingly “post-Christian” spiritual raiment. For American Gnostics, the drama of salvation plays out not in history but in the self, not in community with other believers but in “total inward solitude.” Bloom’s audacious and often illuminating argument is marred by tendentious overstatement, especially since, as a self-avowed Gnostic, Bloom welcomes the advent of a post-Christian America. Although Lehmann himself is a kind of anti-Bloom who clearly dreads a Gnostic ascendancy, he grounds his own case more firmly in the soil of economic and cultural history, tying the putative Gnostic desire for liberation to the capitalist rage to accumulate.

It’s a bold and unsettling thesis, elaborated in the sinuously elegant prose that Lehmann has crafted as editor of the *Baffler* and author of *Revolt of the Masscult* (2003) and *Rich People Things* (2011), the latter one of the most incisive explorations of our ever more openly

plutocratic culture. In the course of reporting the theological inception and evolution of the money cult, Lehmann offers deft and often brilliant expositions of the “Puritan social gospel”; the hermetic philosophy of alchemy, divination, and money-digging; the pre- and post-millennial schools of eschatological prognosis; the bizarre genius of Mormon history and cosmology; the protean credos of New Thought and Pentecostal holiness; the ever-new testaments of prosperity thinking from “acres of diamonds” to “name-it-and-claim-it.” While the notion that Protestant Christianity has sanctified capitalism is hardly new, Lehmann tells the tale with a breadth and bravado that’s rare in scholarly writing. And while this could have been a snarky, condescending narrative of credulity and its discontents—akin to the theologically illiterate smugness of cable television comedians—it’s all the more persuasive because Lehmann refuses the temptation to emulate H. L. Mencken, the beau ideal of smartass punditry. Rejecting “left-leaning secular cultural superiority,” he tells a story, not of mere charlatans and rubes, but of anxious, fraught human beings and their fallible longing for transcendent experience.

Yet if Lehmann establishes that the money cult has indoctrinated American Christians with “an abiding sense of the market order’s metaphysical rightness,” he never really explores the metaphysics of the market. While the “Christianity” of the subtitle is masterfully explicated—even if Christianity here means Protestantism—the ontology of capitalism goes unexamined. For over a century, Weber’s story of capitalism’s “disenchantment of the world” has been a precept of modern intellectual orthodoxy; but if, as Lehmann claims, “the disenchantment that supposedly crowned the historical evolution of the Protestant spirit of remorseless accumulation was far less secular. . . than [Weber] imagined,” he misses an opportunity to challenge Weber by ignoring the metaphysical architecture of “the secular.” Is there anything about the “secularity” of capitalism that allowed and even invited its sanctification in Protestant theology? If there is, an interpretation and critique of the money cult in terms of Gnosticism can go only so far; we may require other theological ideas to illuminate the perversity of the monetary confession. They might kindle the

moral and ontological imagination that Lehmann and other prophets against the idols of the market so desperately need at this moment.

“The worship of wealth,” Lehmann begins, “didn’t come naturally to the first European settlers in North America.” Opening with a meticulous and sympathetic analysis of John Winthrop’s “Modell of Christian Charity,” Lehmann reads it as a quintessential statement of the moral economy of the Calvinist saints. In his view, Winthrop’s imagined community suggests that, far from being the shock troops of capitalist modernity, the Puritans envisioned a hierarchical but benevolent order that abounded in the works of charity and justice, not the riches of greed and parsimony. Like one of Aristotle’s “magnanimous men” marked with the invisible seal of predestination, Winthrop exhorted wealthy Puritans to practice “liberality” toward their social inferiors; “the care of the public,” he insisted, “must oversway all private respects.” God instituted inequality and hierarchy in order to promote the mutual love and service that welded believers into a godly body politic.

You don’t have to be a Marxist (or a Menckenoïd cynic) to note that ruling classes always proclaim their unwavering dedication to the commonweal. Besides, all that “liberality” to which the saints were enjoined was never so great as to disturb God’s ordination of hierarchy; however “radically egalitarian” the Puritans were for their time, their commonwealth was not communist. But Lehmann’s rendition of the “Puritan social gospel”—confirmed by the innumerable denunciations of acquisitiveness by clergy, theologians, and magistrates—reminds us that, as Andrew Delbanco observed in *The Puritan Ordeal* (1989), Winthrop and his brethren articulated “a powerful critique from within the early capitalist mind” of the anomie and callousness that beckoned with the erosion of medieval restrictions on market activity. For all their mercantile prowess, the Puritans would have been appalled by the practices of Wall Street and Silicon Valley. Moreover, as *premillennialists* in eschatology—believers that Christ’s reign on earth would be preceded by historical and natural cataclysms—Puritans could not have imagined that their efforts, however gainful and productive, would bring the *eschaton* one second closer.

Alas, the city on a hill was a profit-making venture as well as an experiment in beloved community; as the royally chartered Massachusetts Bay Company, the Puritan theocrats were required, not only to dispense “liberality,” but to generate “healthy net returns for the Crown” and revenue for the corporation’s directors. Over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the moral and legal strictures against avarice atrophied as Puritan commercial passion and talent filled up the colony’s coffers, inducing ministers as well as merchants to see the hand of the Almighty in their growing embarrassment of riches. As Lehmann shows, a Puritan apologia for lucre uneasily paralleled the “social gospel”; clergymen from John Cotton and the Mathers to Jonathan Mayhew maintained that prosperity was a material sign of favor from the Lord—who insisted in any case on the very highest returns from his righteous congregation of investors. As the English Puritan theologian Richard Baxter incentivized his readers in his oft-cited *Christian Directory* (1678), “if God shows you a way in which you can lawfully get more than in another way. . .if you refuse this, and choose the less gainful way. . .you refuse to be God’s steward.”

This Puritan vindication of moneymaking dovetailed with a motley panorama of occult superstitions that appeared as dissenters poured into New England over the course of the eighteenth century: alchemy, astrology, divination, and money-digging, all leavened with magical and Gnostic beliefs and capped by “a fascination with the spiritualization of matter.” (Here Lehmann relies heavily on John L. Brooke’s pioneering study, *The Refiner’s Fire*.) Popular religion was awash in this exotic enchantment, beguiling treasure seekers with the conjuring powers of the *lapis aurificus*, the “philosopher’s stone,” witchcraft, and divining rods. These acolytes of a hermetic mercenary faith—many of whom attended church on Sunday morning before embarking on quests for gold—weren’t all that different from the Puritan divines who saw the hand of God in market success. (John Winthrop Jr. amassed one of the most extensive libraries of alchemical literature in the North Atlantic world.) Epitomized in none other than Benjamin Franklin—whose heterodox religious views Lehmann elucidates with engaging originality and nimbleness—the money cult

was, by the early national period, “an improvised work of syncretism” that fused a declining Calvinist theology with the gilded fantasies of folk religion.

Already compromised even slightly by this gaudy symbiosis of theology and sorcery, American Protestantism hustled farther down the yellow brick road with its first two Great Awakenings. Eager to raise “a large Strong Body of Religious and Industrious People,” George Whitefield and his revivalist epigones recast the gospel in the vernacular of a nascent market society. Whitefield melded the preacher and the salesman, hawking salvation and its mundane rewards as “valuable commodities to offer for sale.” The “bank of Heaven” had “drawn thousands of bills,” he assured his listeners, and “never had one sent back protested.” With their homiletic flamboyance and accessible imagery, Whitefield and other peddlers of the gospel ushered the money cult’s pecuniary concerns into the inner sanctum of Protestant piety. Meanwhile, their *post*millennialist eschatology—the conviction that a period of social and material improvement would antedate Christ’s earthly supremacy—lent further warrant to the spreading inclination to see success as a token of Providence. In a brilliant discussion of Jonathan Edwards, Lehmann transforms the author of “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” into a celebrant of colonial commercial performance and a seer of American exceptionalism, espousing an “evangelical consensus” that would hearten American Protestants from the Revolutionary era to their waning and beleaguered condition today. “American believers would point to the military rewards of their embattled colonial lives, as well as the overall condition of the American economy, as decisive proof that they continued to enjoy a direct and overweening divine favor.”

For Lehmann, the Second Great Awakening was the watershed moment in the formation of the money cult, when the Gnostic impulse overwhelmed Protestantism and merged the drive for self-divinization with the trials of market rivalry. Rejecting classical predestination, the Arminian theology that galvanized the Awakening enabled an unprecedented liberation of inner spiritual freedom from external ecclesiastical control. As religion became, in Lehmann’s words, “the first

deregulated industry in American life,” it commingled with the chaotic forces unshackled by the market revolution, and the “Babel-like confusion of free-will doctrine” mutated inexorably into the Gnostic religiosity that forms the molten core of the money cult. Adopting stringent regimens of self-improvement, more and more men on the make identified their travails with the ongoing perfection of the self, spawning “the intensely individualist American gospel of self-help.” Exemplified in the “Businessmen’s Revival” of 1857–58, evangelical capitalism concentrated its devotees’ energies on personal salvation in the capitalist market. Inculcating “a faith organized on the model of the counting room,” evangelical clergy and business leaders set out to remodel the spiritual life with strictly timed liturgies, concise and detailed petitionary prayers, and exhortations to “pray harder” and “feel more deeply.” Applying the work ethic to the soul and translating Christian faith into “the idiom of an annual report,” the new mystics of the money cult fabricated an industrialized Gnosticism, an entrepreneurial kabbalah in which “believers knew themselves to be entirely saved. . . within the hermetic confines of the self.” From the Civil War onward, the money cult’s esoterica served, Lehmann maintains, as “the bedrock spirit of a new market-driven American capitalism.”

Although Lehmann doesn’t put it this way, the Second Awakening also witnessed the first serious sectarian divisions within capitalist Gnosticism. While preachers such as Charles Grandison Finney conveyed the new Gnostic evangel in the rhetoric of traditional Protestantism, Ralph Waldo Emerson initiated a post-Protestant denomination of the money cult, eschewing the “priesthood of all believers” in favor of “every man and his own divinity.” (“Are they *my* poor?” the sage of Concord once asked with lofty Transcendentalist meanness.) Meanwhile, despite their virulent and sometimes violent rejection by evangelicals, Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, and their Mormon followers invented what Lehmann considers “the most intense form of American Protestant prophecy in the American grain.” From their money-digging origins in northwestern New York to the founding of their “great basin kingdom” in Utah, the Mormon patriarchs devised a religion that was unashamedly monetary in its values,

evaluating earthly conduct and even “progression” and “exaltation” after death in terms of hard work and property acquisition. (Although Lehmann’s pages on Mormonism are among the most absorbing in the entire volume, he arguably doesn’t spend enough time on its theology to reveal how thoroughly saturated in pecuniary values early Mormonism was.)

In the century-and-a-half since the Civil War, the money cult has changed little in its fundamental theology while attracting an array of rapacious devotees. Echoing Richard Baxter, the Baptist divine Russell Conwell (that last name just seems too apt) told audiences at his “Acres of Diamonds” orations that opportunities for riches lay all around them and that “it’s your God-given duty to seize them.” Pentecostal and “holiness” reverends such as Sister Aimee Semple MacPherson promised “ongoing supernatural service in the material realm in exchange for a shared partnership in the Gnostic godhead.” Excising the darker passages of the Bible, Norman Vincent Peale highlighted what he reinterpreted as “the sunnier, meritocratic parables of Jesus,” producing an “ultra-pragmatic” Savior amenable to the sensibilities of middle management. When the New Deal rose like a Whore of Babylon against God’s blessed economic system, Peale, “Battling” Bob Schuler, J. Vernon McGee, and other preachers spearheaded the counteroffensive of “Christian economics,” a familiar but revitalized version of the evangelical concordat with *laissez-faire* dogma.

Bringing the story of the money cult to the charismatic tawdriness of our own time, Lehmann sheds the harsh light of scrutiny on the evangelical resurgence since World War II, tying its increasingly hysterical timber to the rise of the postindustrial service economy. (He draws upon the magnificent historical work of Darren Dochuk, Bethany Moreton, Kate Bowler, and Kathryn Lofton.) Anchored in the Sunbelt capitalism of the booming electronics and aerospace industries, a “modernist, pleasure-loving incarnation of the popular gospel” supplanted the austerity that chastened the older avatars of the producerist dispensation. The breakdown of the gray-flannelled managerial order and its displacement by the current financial regime spurred both the clerics and the laity to even more frenzied professions of

belief. “Suburbanizing the eschaton,” the latest generation of Gnostic go-getters toils in a neoliberal desert of the dry bones, seeking the balms of divinization and plenty in a casualized, post-Fordist Gilead. In this consumerist dispensation—typified by Wal-Mart and its corporate creole of “the evangelical gospel and management consultancy”—the dreary realities of low-wage, precarious labor are infused and obscured by a “straightforward dogma of libertarian entitlement.” With store shelves and cubicles hallowed as the sites of their nonunionized *imitatio Christi*, the money cult’s managerial and proletarian flock still harken to the reveries of Joel Osteen, with his upbeat gloss on a strenuous life of mobility and glossy consumption. In what Lehmann characterizes as a “mysticism of small things,” Osteen declares that God chooses your car, assesses your appearance, and appraises your work performance.

The money cult has not gone unchallenged, but its opponents have been hampered by the individualism endemic to American Protestantism. Although Lehmann characterizes Winthrop’s “modell of Christian charity” as a genuine social gospel, it entailed no social reform; charity remained a matter of wealthy individuals bestowing largesse on the poor. Aroused by postmillennial eschatology, antebellum evangelicals were often champions of temperance and the abolition of slavery; but they conceived of social reform as little more than a tally of individual transformations, and they enlisted the state not to renovate structures but to refashion characters in accordance with the competitive rigors of the marketplace. (Lehmann perceptively notes that the dissolute master, not the downtrodden slave, was the leading figure in evangelical discourse about slavery.) “The apparatus of the state,” as Lehmann describes this evangelical political theology, “is morally obliged to eliminate the most detrimental institutions and practices that undermine the sanctified progress of the individual believer.” In the nineteenth century, this meant vigorous state action against the vices of gambling and drunkenness; today it inspires efforts to regulate sexuality and protect the “religious liberty” of employers—that is, their right to enforce their personal morality onto their powerless employees. In Lehmann’s view, the last evangelical to take seriously any commitment

to a moral standard outside the market was William Jennings Bryan, whose failure “foreshadowed the collapse of the prophetic Protestant creed of economic justice.” Despite its prophetic denunciation of the money cult, the “Social Gospel” tradition has seldom had a purchase on the Protestant imagination outside the circles of seminaries, universities, and denominational hierarchies.

With its impulses for social and economic reform, liberal postmillennialism might have served as a redoubt for resistance to pecuniary Gnosticism, but with the attrition of the liberal churches, premillennialism provided the most popular timetable for the arrival of the end of days. One of Lehmann’s more supple subnarratives is the unlikely linkage of premillennial eschatology to a Gnostically optimistic gospel of prosperity. If history is scheduled to end in a catastrophic erasure of material riches, then why pile up money and possessions? In a penetrating exegesis of the best-selling, sado-apocalyptic *Left Behind* novels, Lehmann stresses that these sanguinary tales of tribulation and rapture amount to “a deeply consoling gospel”: that money cult believers, no matter how successful, are “*already saved*, with no need to dally in the sullied, unreconciled matter at the grubby heart of humankind’s historical endeavors.” As Julian of Norwich might sing if allured into the choir of Osteen’s Lakewood Church in Houston, “all shall be well, all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.” Hence Lehmann’s ominous forecast: “The smooth, shiny surfaces of the comfortable market order hum onward, with no rough beast slouching in its way.”

Can those undecieved by the money cult prevent more anarchy from being loosed upon the world? Evangelical Protestantism has been thoroughly leveraged; four-fifths of its electorate cast votes for Donald J. Trump in November 2016, pounding more firmly the nails that keep it skewered on the cross of neoliberalism. Just as unlikely is a revival of more traditional Calvinist reprobation of avarice. Although Lehmann rightly underscores the communitarian features of the Puritan covenant, he doesn’t follow the tension between that “social gospel” and its capitalist doppelgänger to its inexorable conclusion: not, as the Puritan jeremiad proclaimed, that rededication to the founding principles of

the covenant would reverse the declension triggered by prosperity, but rather that the Puritan experiment was an exercise in futility from its very beginning. With whatever degree of ambivalence or hypocrisy, the Puritans attempted and failed to build a beloved community on the foundations of capitalism. Arising from the Protestant political unconscious, the “American Dream” in Lehmann’s subtitle is precisely this reconciliation of God and Mammon.

But if the money cult has been a predominantly Protestant persuasion, what about other Christians or even non-Christians? “Christianity” in this book is Protestantism; no Catholics make even a cameo appearance, not to mention Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, or Hindus. Yet, alas, under the ubiquitous pressures of the market, other religions have had to warp their own theologies and commandments to fit the Gnostic canons of consecrated capitalism. Especially since they entered the middle classes in large numbers in the wake of the Second World War, Catholics, for instance, have been enthusiastic converts to the tenets of Moneytheism. (Paul Ryan, current Speaker of the House and a self-advertised devout Catholic, once acknowledged Ayn Rand as a significant influence on his life.) The most inventive Catholic theologians of the money cult have been right-wing intellectuals such as the late Fr. Richard John Neuhaus; Fr. Robert Sirico and his Acton Institute; and the recently deceased Michael Novak, author of *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* (1982) and winner of the 1994 Templeton Prize for “progress in religion.” For Novak, the evidence of this progress is the business corporation—“the best secular analogue to the Church,” in his view, and a “Suffering Servant” vilified by the cultural elite. Evangelicals can only envy the success with which Catholics have laundered their profits in the font of the money cult.

Despite the devil’s bargain that American Christians have unwittingly struck with the unrighteous Mammon, Lehmann—without revealing any theological commitments—still seems to desire some Christian antithesis to the worship of the Dollar Almighty. As the money cult’s own success testifies, the problem is not, as Lehmann poses it, that “religious values have been shut out” of political discussion; it’s that they’ve been hollowed out, or misshapen out of recognition. A

“mature and morally responsible Christianity,” he admonishes, reiterates the human limitations of “suffering, illness, and death,” and reminds us that a “storehouse of worldly splendors counts for precisely nothing when weighed in the balance of eternity.” The money cult, to the contrary, “needs hysterically to deny or sublimate these core facts of a grown-up believing life”; it makes the world itself into the image and likeness of an unappeasable craving for infinity. “It’s pointedly metaphysical—indeed, almost animistic,” as he writes of Osteen’s petty thaumaturgy, “in its determination to infuse the trappings of everyday life in the capitalist marketplace with divine significance.”

Lehmann’s focus on the Gnostic humanism of the money cult enables him to name the human longing for transcendence that impels the divinization of capitalism. As unlikely a figure as Rand confirms his diagnosis of the ontological insolence that resides at the heart of acquisitive zeal: in her brief early novel *Anthem* (1936), the writer whom Jennifer Burns has christened “goddess of the marketplace” has her protagonist affirm his individuality by adulating “this god, this one word, I.” Still, Lehmann (rather like Bloom) may be making Gnosticism perform too much interpretive and critical labor. In Lehmann’s rendering, the quotidian practices of capitalism are fundamentally secular; they are “infused” with “divine” or “animistic” qualities that they really do not possess, and this “infusion,” in turn, stems from a “Gnostic” perseverance in realizing a fraudulent self-divinity. But this renders problematic Lehmann’s characterization of Gnosticism as a “theology of power.” Why would hard-driving Gnostics “infuse” with divine powers a material world from which they supposedly seek redemption? If a Gnostic desire for consummation with the godhead eventuates, as Lehmann argues, in a “rejection of engagement with the created world,” then how can Gnosticism be a “theology of power”? Besides, aren’t production and consumption, however sordid and unjust, forms of “engagement with the created world”? What is it about that created world—in the social and material form of the capitalist marketplace—that permits or provokes the “infusion” of magical or animistic traits?

Gnosticism may have to yield at this point to two other religious ideas: fetishism and sacrament. Fetishism is, of course, the attribution

of life and agency to inanimate objects; congealed in nature or human artifacts, some force or mana or pneuma is believed to inhabit and stimulate otherwise apparently inert things. It's the world of enchantment that was allegedly discredited with the advent of science and capitalism. Yet the concept of fetishism has also been a powerful tool of social and cultural criticism, especially in the form of the "fetishism of commodities" described by Marx in the first volume of *Capital*. For Marx, the "secret" of the fetishism of commodities lies in their twofold character as "use-value" and as "exchange-value"—their split personality, so to speak, that spawns their "metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties." The use-value of objects resides in their particular, qualitatively different, incommensurable uses: shoes for feet, food for eating, shirts for adornment, etc. Their exchange-value resides in their status as commodities, as objects produced for sale in the market for the purpose of capital accumulation. In order for these commodities to be exchanged for money, their incommensurable use values must be obscured or erased; they must somehow be rendered qualitatively identical to other commodities. This abstract equivalence of otherwise different objects is rendered in terms of the equally abstract equivalence of money—"the god among commodities," as Marx had earlier dubbed it in the *Grundrisse*. Objects thus become "worth" so much in money; their value is defined in terms of money, not in terms of their utility for human purposes. In the market, this pecuniary alchemy induces the spell of "fetishism," by which people attribute a kind of agency and independence to commodities, the products of their own labor. Pervaded and commanded by the "god among commodities," objects are enlivened—enchanted, as it were—by money.

Thus money is the metaphysical substratum of capitalist societies—a point Marx had made over twenty years before *Capital* in his unpublished "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844." There, he contended that capital instituted a metaphysic of money that resembled and supplanted traditional forms of enchantment. For Marx, "the power of money in bourgeois society" animated a pecuniary way of being in the world. Money is "the almighty being," the "truly creative power," the de facto ontological basis for the moral legitimacy of bourgeois civilization. Like the God of the Abrahamic religions, it brings

things into being *ex nihilo*, and consigns all impecunious things to nothingness. As Marx wrote, “If I have the *vocation* for study but no money for it, I have *no* vocation for study—that is, no *effective*, no *true* vocation. On the other hand, if I have really *no* vocation for study but have the will and the *money* for it, I have an *effective* vocation for it.” (In conventional economics, this is called “effective demand.”) As the metaphysical common sense of market society, it defines and even bestows all manner of qualities. “I am *stupid*, but money is the *real mind* of all things and how then should its possessor be stupid?” Money can even procure love: “I am ugly, but I can buy for myself the most *beautiful* of women. Therefore I am not *ugly*, for the effect of *ugliness* . . . is nullified by money.”

If money is the preternatural substance to which believers in the “market order’s metaphysical rightness” are genuflecting when they pay obeisance in the money cult, Lehmann’s concentration on its Gnostic elements diverts him from the religious features of capitalism itself. Contrary to Weber and the lineage of disenchantment—and contrary to Marx and Engels, who in the *Communist Manifesto* had declared that “the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervor” had been drowned in the “icy waters of egotistical calculation”—money is not secular; rather, as Norman O. Brown suggested in *Life Against Death* (1959)—still an invaluable guide to the psychopathology of capitalism—it draws its power from “the magical, mystical, religious . . . the domain of the sacred.” Secularization itself, Brown continued, “is only a metamorphosis of the sacred”—an observation he made, tellingly, in the course of criticizing “the illusion that modern money is secular.” If the secular is a transfiguration of the sacred, then “the psychological realities of money” are, Brown declared, “best grasped in terms of theology.” The money complex, he speculated, is “the heir to and substitute for the religious complex, an attempt to find God in things.”

Beholden to psychoanalysis, Brown ultimately understood money as a form of sublimation, something “infused,” to use Lehmann’s term, with the life of the body. But if we take Brown at his word and draw upon theology—as Lehmann himself seems wont to do, needful as he thinks we are of “some scheme of values that precedes and transcends

the ideal of the market”—then the term best suited to grapple with the metaphysic of money is *sacrament*: the notion that matter can be a vessel of the sacred, conveying divine power and grace in the humble corporeality of space and time. Sacrament is the theological counterpoint to fetish, a religious brand of materialism; where fetishism interprets the “life” of inanimate things as illusory attributions of human agency, sacrament understands materiality as porous, capable of mediating the supernatural. Transposed to a poetic register, sacrament is Gerard Manley Hopkins’s world that is “charged with the grandeur of God. . . the dearest freshness deep down things”—a world ravaged by the avatars of the money cult, “seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil.” Fueled by a promethean aspiration to become lord and master of oneself and everything, the money cult is also a corruption of sacrament, a substitution of money for God as the power that traverses and quickens the cosmos.

The way of seeing appropriate to sacrament—“ontological wonder,” in William James’s words, “sacramental consciousness,” in Theodore Roszak’s—not only enables us to appreciate the scope of the money cult’s depredations; it provides a theological basis for resistance to its catechism of accumulation. However laudable Lehmann’s call upon religion to afford “a sturdy vantage” for contesting the religion of money, his view of religion remains all too moralistic, in its way. The fundamental value of religion does not lie in nurturing a keener consciousness of “suffering, illness, and death,” or in prescribing moral codes to contain our desires within the metaphysical parameters of our finitude. It lies rather in the ultimately joyful wisdom that the world does not and cannot belong to us—that it does not even belong to God, who, having no need for possessions, has no proprietary interest in creation that human beings must emulate. That’s blasphemy to the ears of God and Mammon, Incorporated, and proclaiming it is the first order of business for any infidel challenge to the dominion of the money cult.