

## Capitalism, Immigration, and the Prosperity Gospel

DAISY L. MACHADO\*

In her presentation about capitalism, Professor Kathryn Tanner tells us how certain realities found in a capitalist market can be seen as positive, such as the way capitalist markets are intertwined so that the interests of any one group depend on whether or not other people can further their own interests. Or that capitalist markets create a need for people we do not love and they force us to interact with people who are outside of our own groups, thereby breaking social prejudices. Seen in this light it would seem that the self-interest promoted by capitalism could indeed be channeled, as Professor Tanner suggests, “away from its socially destructive potentials.” However, Professor Tanner also makes this observation: Humans “deceive themselves about what is in the best interest of others out of simple ignorance or an arrogant overestimation of their capacities to figure this out on their own.”<sup>1</sup> It is here that I respond by using the words from Psalm 19:12, “Who can discern their own errors? Forgive my hidden faults” (TNIV). It is this very inability to perceive our faults and honestly to define what is the good, as well as our inability as a nation and a people to live this “good life” within and outside our borders, that continues to serve the kind of neoliberal ideology that undergirds our current economic system. In reality, capitalism in the United States is a deeply entrenched ideology (belief system) that has survived and benefited from slavery, immigrant labor, and other forms of exploitation. Social scientists have also shown that there is a relationship between a belief system and how people make decisions.

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\* Daisy L. Machado is Professor of Church History with a special focus on U.S. Christianities and Academic Dean at Union Theological Seminary, New York. She is the first U.S. Latina ordained in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in 1981 in the Northeast Region, and has served inner-city congregations in Brooklyn, Houston, and Fort Worth. This article is based on a response to Kathryn Tanner’s presentation “Is Capitalism a Belief System?” given at the Trinity Institute Conference in January 2010.

<sup>1</sup> Kathryn Tanner, “Is Capitalism a Belief System?” *Anglican Theological Review* 92, no. 4 (Fall 2010): 624, 629.

Because systems of belief help us to interpret the world around us, they shape our perceptions as well as the decisions we as individuals and as nations make.

As an historian of Christianities in the United States I am very familiar with what is often referred to as the *historical imagination*. All of us have encountered this historical imaginary in a variety of ways, such as in the textbooks we read in grade school and high school, in the speeches given by presidents and other politicians, in the rhetoric used to justify overseas military interventions by our government, in our national conversation around terrorism, in the analysis of our economic policies, and even in the discourse about citizenship and immigration. The vocabulary used both for the written page and the spoken word in speeches or opinions helps to create an image of the United States as a nation above all nations, a nation that believes in its right to be a world leader, a nation that, to use the theological language of the nation's early English settlers, was called by God to be a light to the nations, "a city on the hill," a nation chosen to be divinely blessed so it could be a blessing to other nations. This self-understanding is called "exceptionalism," and like capitalism it is deeply embedded in the nation's DNA. Therefore one cannot talk about capitalism in the United States without also talking about this historical exceptionalism and how each has fed the other, and has not only created the economic policies of this country but has also shaped this nation's ideas about race, citizenship, and immigration, all of which are very important issues we face today. Historically, this same exceptionalism combined with capitalism helped to support slavery from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, and in the twenty-first century continues to undergird the exploitation of immigrants even while it also fuels our fear of immigrants, especially those who cross our southern border.

One very clear and recent example of how this exceptionalism has been linked with existing neoliberal economic policies can be seen in the formulation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA, 1994) and more recently in the Central America-Dominican Republic Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA, 2004). Both of these trade agreements promote deregulation, open borders for goods and products (but not for people), push job outsourcing, and have supported privatization of the most basic of services (water, electricity) in all of Mexico, Central America, and the Dominican Republic.

NAFTA greatly contributed to expanding the harsh realities of the *maquiladoras*, multinational assembly plants along the northern Mexican border, that in September 2009 hired 1.2 million workers, over 80 percent women ages 18 to 35, who make an average of \$50 to \$70 USD for a forty-five to sixty hour workweek. In these *maquiladora* zones along the U.S.-Mexico border, union organizing is suppressed and industrial pollution, which remains unregulated, has dramatically increased cases of hepatitis and birth defects among workers. CAFTA has expanded the NAFTA market by opening up Central America and the Dominican Republic to the *maquiladoras* and in so doing to exploitation, poverty, and environmental damage. CAFTA also makes it impossible for these nations to ensure that foreign investment serves development goals. Here we clearly see how neoliberal economic ideology can commodify not just workers but also entire nations—Central American nations become commodities that can be bought and sold. When faced with the exploitation of workers throughout this region who have no choice but to live in miserable poverty despite all their hard work, it is difficult to believe that capitalism can, as Professor Tanner argues, in any way channel the self-interest so essential to its functioning into promoting the good of the other. Yet it is one thing to talk about capitalism and the economic policies it produces and another to meet the people who are at the receiving end of these realities. Let me share my experience.

I have been taking seminary students to visit the U.S.-Mexico border since 1996. Each immersion trip provides an opportunity to examine the realities of NAFTA from both sides of the border. Through the years I have had the opportunity to meet and talk to many *maquiladora* workers living along the northern Mexico border with Texas. I have met workers who have been contaminated by exposure to chemicals and as a result have been either blinded or have developed seizures; some of the women we met have developed cancer. Needless to say, these workers have access to very poor quality medical care, and most times there is no workers' compensation. In the *maquiladoras* there is little concern to provide workers with safety equipment such as industrial masks or gloves, since it seems that as soon as one worker becomes ill and is dismissed another is there to take her or his place. In the many conversations I have had with these young *maquiladora* workers, who are teenagers or young adults in most cases, the plea has been the same. They tell me: "We do not

want to make as much as workers in the U.S., we only want to earn a just wage. We want to make money so that we may have enough to eat, to feed our families, to provide for our needs.” I met a young mother of a two-year-old who has never been able to buy milk, since milk is a luxury along the border, so she breastfed her child and then fed the toddler rice-water. I met a young couple who wanted to save enough to buy small panes of glass to put in the windows they had made and which were covered up by cardboard. They wanted “real” windows that would keep the air out of their small shack and still let the sunlight in. The majority of these workers come from the interior of Mexico, mostly from rural areas where their families had always survived by farming. Again and again we were asked to pray for their families, to pray for their efforts to organize as workers within the *maquiladoras*, to pray that God would give them the courage to speak up against the many injustices they faced in their jobs.

I have seen devastating poverty and great economic injustice in the scattered *colonias* where these workers live in homes made of loading pallets, where there is no electricity, no sewers, no clean drinking water, and yet I have never heard words of hate. Instead there have been warm smiles and the acknowledgment that God is their ultimate source of comfort. These women and men share what little they own in an effort to help a neighbor. They opened the doors of their very simple houses and made the students and me feel welcome, often apologizing that they could not offer us something to drink or to eat. Here in the midst of this desolation, this great poverty, this very real commodification of so many human lives by international corporations (LG, Kohler, Maytag, Ford, AT&T, General Electric, IBM, DuPont, and others), my seminary students and I encountered the real-life impact of the policies signed into law by those in power on both sides of the border. In the faces of the *maquiladora* workers I have had the honor and joy of meeting through the years of my teaching I have seen firsthand what capitalism does every day and the great despair it brings to so many. In trying to understand why so many are exploited and live in such grinding poverty, the sad realization is that millions of workers live in poverty so that nations like the United States, Germany, France, Japan, and others can maintain a standard of living that continues to ignore the ethical implications of its economic policies.

It is not surprising, then, that the great economic upheavals caused by NAFTA and CAFTA have also led to the northward

migration of millions of our neighbors to the south—yet the folks in the United States still don't seem to "get it." The bottom line is very simple: small farmers can no longer sustain their families, and as many of these displaced farm workers move to urban areas they become the factory workers employed in the international *maquiladoras*, thereby creating a new class of working poor. Or often, facing no hope for employment in their countries, these women and men migrate to the United States. Yet while a capitalist ideology led to the creation of the economic policies that provide for the free movement of goods across borders, these policies did not make the same provisions for the movement of workers. As a result, those who were displaced and must migrate because they can find no work in their countries find that when they enter this country they are identified as illegal border crossers, defined as criminals, and treated as such. That is why we cannot talk about neoliberal economic policies and globalization without also looking at its impact on immigration. The U.S.-Mexico border has been and continues to be contested space, a place of conquest, reconquest, and colonization, where human bodies are at the core of both experience and history. In today's borderlands the international processes of economic, political, and social globalization happen every day in the midst of terrible poverty, overt and often violent racism, a rising xenophobia, and fear. The most recent example is the passage of immigration Senate Bill 1070 and its acceptance by Arizona Governor Jan Brewer, who signed it into law on Friday, April 23, 2010, in Phoenix. The passage of this law in Arizona continues the trend around the country in legislative activity at the state and country level to restrict or halt immigration. According to Niels Frenzen, director of the Immigration Clinic of the Gould School of Law at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, "in 2007, 1,562 immigration-related bills were introduced by state policymakers across the United States, about three times the number introduced in 2006. Of the bills introduced in 2007, 240 were enacted. In the first half of 2008 alone, 1,267 bills were introduced and at least 175 signed into law."<sup>2</sup> Can it be that at the core we will find that this nation's xenophobia is purely about selfish economic concerns? Are we so blinded by

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Daniel B. Wood, "Arizona Immigration Bill: Just the Latest Among State Measures," *The Christian Science Monitor*, April 23, 2010; <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Politics/2010/0423/Arizona-immigration-bill-just-the-latest-among-state-measures>.

our complete belief in capitalism that we cannot make the connections between the economic policies we enact and the ways they hurt other nations? Why do we continue to persecute and criminalize immigrants who cross into our borders when they have been victims of this nation's economic policies?

The second issue I want to address has to do with this problem: Kathryn Tanner argues that religion, in our case Christianity, gives a "deeper and fuller sense to many of the moral concerns that underlie markets."<sup>3</sup> However, what happens when Christianity is itself being shaped by ideologies that have little or nothing to do with the gospel ideals, but have everything to do with the ideal of the American Dream that has been enmeshed with religious faith, a faith that is all about wealth and blessing with a very clear individualistic bent? I am, of course, talking about the prosperity gospel and word-of-faith movements encountered at every religious corner we turn. These religious movements are found not only in the Pentecostal Nigerian immigrant church in Brooklyn, New York, but also in the many Euro-American suburban megachurches in the suburbs of New York, Houston, Phoenix, and Atlanta as well as in Colombia, Brazil, Guatemala, and Korea. In these church communities word-of-faith teaching asserts that Christians have the power to control their physical well-being and financial fortunes through their faith. What is not promoted is a concern for issues of social justice because the emphasis is on personal individualistic economic gain as a result of a very clear-cut relation with God where negotiation for blessing is a core element; the community's welfare has no place in such a theological construction. Whatever we may think about the prosperity gospel, it is a very real presence in the twenty-first-century neoliberal religious landscape in this country and across the globe. So my question is, how do the prosperity gospel and word-of-faith movements impede Christianity's ability to provide a critique to the reality of the capitalist markets that rule our world? In the prosperity gospel we find another example of the self-deception to which both the psalmist and Professor Tanner refer, since there is a very large gap between the religious aspirations of prosperity gospel adherents and the reality they live. The reality of the inadequate paycheck, of the recession, or of being unemployed remains invisible—or at least is not what communion with the divine is about. Belief that what we speak is equivalent to what God will do

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<sup>3</sup> Tanner, "Is Capitalism a Belief System," 627.

changes the way we understand our present economic reality into one that is about a hopeful anticipation of the “blessing” that is to come.

This type of thinking harkens back to the exceptionalism of the founding generation of this nation—we are people who can indeed expect to be blessed. Russell Conwell preached this in the 1880s and into the twentieth century. Oral Roberts preached it in the 1950s, as did Norman Vincent Peale. Today Kenneth Copeland, Fred Price, Creflo Dollar, and Benny Hinn are but a few of the many prosperity gospel preachers who use the idea of the spoken word (word of faith), whose power is discharged to accomplish our desires. Paul Yonggi Cho, pastor of the Yoido Full Gospel Church, Korea’s largest church, has developed what he calls the “law of incubation,” where one imagines a clear-cut goal, draws a vivid image, visualizes it, and then lets it incubate until it is “spoken into reality.” Joel Olsteen’s message for the hard economic times the U.S. faces today is: “God will cause two things, reversal and restoration.”<sup>4</sup>

In the prosperity gospel and word-of-faith movements we find a clear connection between capitalism and Evangelicalism. These religious movements blend a belief in the power of the individual with the idea that a capitalist society provides equal opportunity for all, and hold a very strong work ethic combined with a conviction that prosperity is part of God’s design for humanity. This type of Christianity is not about sacraments and does not focus on a life beyond death; it does not seek to address social ills or social injustices, and does not question or critique any type of economic or government policy. It promotes the accumulation of capital that is meant to change one’s social class and can lead to wealth; thus one’s religion is meant to enlarge and expand one’s vision of what can be in the here and now. Why drive a Ford when a Bentley waits? Why live in a four-bedroom house when a mansion is in God’s plan for your life? The kind of person attracted to the prosperity gospel is one who understands that material consumption is a good thing, even a godly act, and it is the mixing of evangelical faith with an uncritical embrace of capitalism that makes these believers a new kind of neoliberal twenty-first-century Christian. And the number of these Christians is on the rise.

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<sup>4</sup> Joel Osteen, from the Hope for Today message “Keep Your Song”; <http://www.joelosteen.com/HopeForToday/ThoughtsOn/Finances/KeepYourSong/Pages/KeepYourSong.aspx>.

This is certainly not the kind of Christianity that Professor Tanner has in mind—the faith that can or will give a “deeper and fuller sense to many of the moral concerns that underlie markets.” This is a kind of Christianity that fully and uncritically embraces capitalism and promotes it as part of a divine plan. I think the prosperity gospel and word-of-faith movements challenge the Christian message we have received in the gospel, and they need to be on the radar screens in our own church communities. The fact that these religious movements are so strong in Korea, Columbia, Brazil, Nigeria, and Guatemala should also get us thinking what this might mean for American Christianity, when immigrants from these countries are arriving in the United States in such large numbers. How can we raise the alarm about the tremendous impact these groups will have on our growing immigrant population? How will we respond? What do we need to do as concerned Christians to take on the moral and ethical role Professor Tanner has identified for the church? These are the pressing questions for the church of the twenty-first century in the United States.