
THE EASY GODS OF THE MARKETS

THE “CATCHY TUNES” OF SPIRITUAL ILLITERACY

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"My words are too difficult for you, that's why they sound too easy."

Yehudah ha-Levi, *Kuzari*

The golden rule of mutual benefit is the basis of much good life for human beings. The market is a network of exchanges of mutual interests, but also associations and even communities and families can be described as a network of mutually beneficial relationships. When it comes to educational processes, in actions aimed at reducing economic and social vulnerability, if we move within the register of mutual benefit we have more hope of giving life to practices that respect the dignity of the person and are more responsible and less paternalistic. For this reason,

many wise men of all ages have pointed out *reciprocity* (not altruism or in the individual interest) as the first rule of community and social life. But there are places of living where looking for mutual benefit is not good, because satisfying mutual interests only and simply leads to the distortion and degeneration of those relationships. One such area is that of spirituality.

Our time is characterised by a great offer of "cheap" spirituality, even in the world of big enterprises. Realizing that workers are spiritual and symbolic beings, the latest chapter of capitalism seeks to offer a bit of spirituality at the workplace, too. For a mutual benefit: happier employees, more productive work teams, more profits for the businesses. But since real and serious spirituality is difficult to "offer" and "demand," - especially in a culture like ours that has lost touch with the faiths and popular piety - the very word "spirituality" has become ambiguous. Understanding and appreciating a prayer or a psalm today is at least as difficult as understanding and appreciating the symphonies of Mahler or Respighi. We are in an immense spiritual process of illiteracy. We have lost our skills regarding inner life, the peace of mind and the silence of the heart. We have accelerated the passage of time, and then we filled in every fraction of it. And when we try to pick up books like the Bible, a text of poetry and true spirituality, they seem difficult, distant, too far away, silent. They do not speak to us, we do not understand or love them, they do not love us.

Authentic spirituality is not a commodity, it does not increase our comfort. It is not equivalent to a massage or to a good shower in the spa of the hotel where the business convention is taking place. The blessed day when we meet a true kind of spirituality and feel called to start a new wonderful journey is the one that begins

a true liberation process. We enter into crisis, we feel upset inside, in the beginning we often lose productivity, we don't increase efficiency, because we are too distracted by "things" that the companies do not want, for a long time, sometimes for years. And so, in search of mutual benefit, the market lowers prices and offers imitations of spirituality. These are easy and harmless; they entertain us and activate simpler emotions in us. When these are over we find that we haven't changed at all. Those emotions do not ask us any conversion but confirm us quietly, in what we already did or who we already were. Instead of "symphonies" they offer us catchy tunes that reflect melodic and harmonic structures of real compositions, maybe sung by opera stars. And we are all happy: businesses, workers, the singers. Only Mahler and Respighi are suffering, and those who love them and respect them. Better Paulo Coelho than Isaiah, better the Gospel of Thomas than that of Mark.

This is a typical case in which the rule of "a little is better than nothing" is not true, because that "little," not being a portion or a taste of the same good, but a commodity with another nature, turns out (almost) always as that catchy tune that kills the desire for symphonies.

This reductionism of faith and spirituality for the good of comfort is influencing decisively even the little that remains of the religious and spiritual life of churches, parishes and religious communities, new and old. This is another of the many paradoxes of our confused age, another eloquent sign of the religious-idolatrous nature of capitalism. Spirituality reduced in a consumer good, considering the faithful as a customer, the carrier of tastes to satisfy, religious offerings designed to answer the demand of spiritual consumption - in fact, these are becoming the characteristics the new religious landscape.

During its long history, Jewish-Christian humanism has often been profoundly influenced by the logic of the market. The Bible is full of episodes, stories, words borrowed from the lexicon and the economy of the mentality of the era. We do not understand the Covenant without knowing the commercial treaties of the time, or the Law (Torah), or Job's friends. And we do not understand many words of the New Testament and even the Christian Middle Ages without considering the economy. Trade and economy have always offered categories and words to interpret and narrate religious things.

But - and here's the main point - the economic and commercial categories and words have always been the ones that systematically conducted faiths onto the *wrong track*, which may have been the easiest, but was bad in the end. The prophets and some wisdom books tried to straighten those crooked tracks, showing another God and another man who is liberated from commercial logic and retributive religion. In Christianity we have not yet completely freed ourselves of the "theology of atonement," which for many centuries made us read the incarnation and death of Jesus as the payment of a "price" to a Father-God, who is a holder of an infinite credit of humanity for our endless sins and debts which could be repaid or paid back only by the sacrifice of his only begotten Son. An economic-retributive ideology-theology that has very much alienated us from the Bible, it has covered and hidden from us the most beautiful pages of the Gospels and St. Paul, and deformed the idea of God and mankind. Metaphors and languages are never neutral tools: words have the capacity to create, all words, even the wrong ones.

Today we are experiencing another season of the profound influence of the economy on faith and spirituality, larger and more powerful than we have ever seen throughout history. The market is gradually changing the religious culture that it had previously fought and reduced to a commodity, and it is creating new "theologies of atonement and debts", more powerful than the ancient ones, for an unprecedented empowerment of this market of ours.

The phenomenon is very vast. The surface of it is manifested in the entering of the language and categories of businesses and management into parishes and church movements. Leadership, speed, efficiency and even merit are words that now constitute the ordinary vocabulary of many communities, movements, parishes and families.

But we must look beyond the surface if we want to see more interesting things. Let's consider, for example, the growing development of "emotional liturgies", where people are engaged by activating their sentimental and emotional dimensions above all. People come to church or groups already influenced by a culture centred on consumption which activates more and more emotions and, in line with the culture of this hedonistic capitalism, encourages the pursuit of pleasure. And so the requirement emerges - whether consciously or not - even for the liturgies and religious practices to meet the emotional needs. If the leaders of communities and movements give in to the economic logic of "mutual benefit", they lower prices, and meet the preferences of the faithful consumers who in turn soon become consumer-faithful.

It is difficult to accept this consumerist drift of faith, because the liturgy and experience of faiths have always been events of a global nature, involving the whole person, including their emotions. In spiritual experiences all senses are activated: the eyes looking at the beauty of the architecture and the stained glass windows and frescoes, the hands shaking other hands, the ears listening to the music... But the idolatrous and totemic cults, too, have always been and are still global sensory experiences which the Bible and Christians have fought hard. We wouldn't have had two thousand years of Christian civilization if the dimensions of emotion and consumption had prevailed in the liturgies in the early days. It would have been absorbed by the surrounding natural cults. Because, as the great tradition of wisdom will always remind us, the road leading to the temples is full of pitfalls and some deadly traps.

There exists a "critical point" on the axis of emotional consumption that must not be exceeded. Without the involvement of emotions spirituality does not become flesh and does not save us; but if the emotional dimension and that of consumption become the only or the main registry of faith, it is all too likely that we lose contact with the biblical world and find ourselves - without either knowing or wanting it - at an idolatrous banquet, where the first sacrifices are we, ourselves. Christian communities have had to struggle a lot to ensure that their dinners were not like the ones so common in the rituals of the Mediterranean peoples, to say that the Eucharist was all and only gratuitousness and communion given, received and given again, a thanksgiving. And this is why they gave that dinner the most beautiful name: *agape*, the same name of their different God.

The eternal temptation of idolatrous consumerism is defeated when people are not held in the liturgies, when "consumer spirituality" is left behind for "production spirituality", the multiplication of communion outside the temple, instead of burying talent in the crypts of churches. But the emphasis on emotional faith encloses people in homes and churches, it even binds them to sofas and benches and does not let them out to free someone, at least one person, at least their own selves. The emphasis on the individual and collective consumption of religious goods inevitably transforms the community into clubs, it distances us from history, from the incarnation, from the suburbs, from the poor. And when the emotional liturgy ends, nothing of that food remains. Authentic spiritual life is not an aspirin, but a substance of slow absorption, which bears fruit in due course, when we find ourselves inside something and Someone who had grown silently in our midst, while we were busy taking care of other things, *of others*. The faith of sole consumption does not help us on our life journey outside the temple. And the nice secularism of the street dies.

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