

**William E. Connolly. *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style*, Durham, USA:
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William Connolly is Professor of Political Science at the prestigious Johns Hopkins University. He is very much worth reading at any time for his views on democracy, religion, and pluralism, having previously published in all three areas. This time, in *Capitalism and Christianity*, he has injected a different strain into a busy genre of works that relate religion, particularly Christianity, with the socio-economic systems of the western Capitalist polity. My shelves contain several of them, ranging from the Roman Catholic Michael Novak's 1982 work, *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism*, and his later essays collected in 1999 under the title, *In Praise of the Free Economy*, through to eminent Sociologist, Peter L. Berger's, *The Capitalist Spirit: Towards a Religious Ethic of Wealth Creation*, published in 1990. A great number of the works in the 'Christianity & Capitalism' genre are similar to Novak's - *apologias* for a system that they consider is not only redeemed by the application of religious attitudes and motivations, but is itself redemptive because of its congruity, or as Connolly refers to it, 'resonance' with certain religious principles of belief, and spiritualities of work and gain. Connolly differs because his fundamental premise is that the whole capitalist project has been subverted and distorted by its infiltrative relationship with conservative right-wing religious beliefs. For Connolly, the capitalist system is not so much redeemed, and particularly not redemptive, but vastly in need of redemption by the democratic left, with its much more humanist mystique.

There is significant evidence to suggest that the first part of his contention, the subversion by right-wing Christian beliefs, especially through their influence on American politics, is accurate. But the second part of the contention, the need for redemption by the left, is patently based on the critical assumption, not shared by everyone, that the Capitalist socio-economic system is indeed redeemable, and worth redeeming. The present so-called 'meltdown' of the financial systems that are the life-

blood of capitalism is yet another pointer to the endemic ineptitude of the system to sustain itself. It is not as though the present crisis represents an unusual and atypical situation. One glance at a graph of world economic performance over the past 150 years shows a continuous cycle of ‘meltdowns’ with their consequent human and scarce resource wastage. Any system in which peoples’ ability to obtain as much work as they want sends the economic components of the system into inflationary spirals and other harmful consequences, treating human wastage, social and cultural damage, as a regrettable but necessary by-product, is not a system that lends itself easily to redemption. Further, a system that displays fundamental urges to subvert its own tenets of market diversity, and the ‘perfect knowledge’ of the whole market needed for participants to recognise their own best interests – the ‘hidden hand’ that runs the whole system - in the cause of its own greed for growth, seems too far gone for redemption. What is even worse, its practices have been imposed on education, the arts and public goods. All these cultural and social entities must now behave like marketable commodities, lose their integrity or their place in society.

Connolly, using a fascinating combination of Weber, Deleuze and St. Augustine for his philosophical framework, correctly names religious beliefs such as the Protestant work ethic, its opposing ‘hard life for an eternal reward’ ethic, and the creationist ethic that the world and its goods were made by God for the wellbeing of humanity and placed under our domination to serve our needs, as key factors that excuse or validate the harmful and wasteful outflows of capitalism, and even justify bellicose incursions into places like Iraq through religious discourses about ‘a just war’. The resonances that these beliefs have with the system, Connolly describes as the ‘Evangelical-Capitalist resonance machine.’ Connolly calls for the healing redemption of these enormities perpetrated by this interlaced system through a solid dose of democratic left-wing policy construction to inject remedies especially for the inequality created by the present system and the damage to the physical environment that the profit motive has ignored for all the decades since the second Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth-century.

In naming economic inequality, environmental vandalism and global oppression as related to the subversion that has taken place, Connolly has correctly named and

sourced some of the key anomalies of our time, and suggested ways of shifting power in the institutions of society to remedy them. This for me is the real benefit of his book. While he has concentrated his study on the American situation, his themes may be applied in large measure to Australia as well. Political philosophies that rely on so-called 'trickle-down' economics that holds the view that government support for wealth creation at the top, will distribute wealth to be shared by all as it 'trickles' down to the lower levels of society, have been brought into serious question by the empirically widening gap between rich and poor. Application of more human, more just, and more equitable policies that treasure the inter-generational wealth of a clean world, are similarly relevant in Australia as well as America.

If you agree with Connolly's fundamental assumption about the redeemability of the capitalist system, because in its various formations it seems to be the only workable model alive in Western economies, then Connolly's proposition is a very important one, providing some light and hope in an otherwise desolate landscape of cyclical failures. Even if you do not agree with his basic assumption, the book is well and powerfully argued with some very practical solutions given from which serious lessons may be learned. Connolly is an important political theorist who cannot be ignored in socio-political discourses. The book is not an easy read, but it is a very worthwhile one, even for aging lefties like me.

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