

Money, Consumerism and the Spirituality of our Times

Address by Alastair McIntosh to Eco-Congregation Ireland conference 2012



“Thou hast taken usury and increase.”—*Ezek. xxii. 12.*

Many years ago when my children were young I was part of a babysitting circle. The way it worked was that when you joined the circle, you got given four coloured pieces of paper, each of which represented one hour of babysitting. That was your birthright – your share in what it meant to join the economy of the babysitting community – and when you moved out of the area or your children grew up you were duty bound to pay four tokens back so that the economy remained in a proper balance.

Now, it seemed to me that this circle, devised by local parents, perfectly illustrated what money is. Those tokens could also be traded for other things, like gardening or excess garden produce. They were a local currency, based on *confidence* which is to say, *con-fidere* or “faith together”. They illustrate the primary quality of money – money as a simple token of exchange between one another – and we might note that Jesus used money in this way because the disciples kept a common purse.

Jesus also said that when you lend, expect nothing in return (Luke 6:35). It is not clear whether he meant not to expect the loan back, or whether he meant not to take interest on the loan, but in this context it doesn't matter because if he meant not to expect the

loan back, he'd hardly have been demanding interest! If the primary quality of money is to be a medium of exchange, its secondary quality is that it carries the capacity to make money out of money – to generate “interest” or as the Bible calls it, “usury”. Some people try to reserve the use of the word usury only to excessive levels of interest, but I can see no Biblical basis for this. As the passage illustrated in the (above) picture puts it: “thou hast taken usury and increase, and thou hast greedily gained of thy neighbours by extortion, and hast forgotten me, saith the Lord God” (Ezekiel 22:12, KJV). As such, usury is very clearly cast as a form of idolatry.

It gets worse! Imagine back in the babysitting circle. Imagine that instead of playing a straight game, one member of the group decided to exploit the secondary quality of babysitting tokens, and he or she did lots of babysitting, cornered the supply of tokens, and then offered to lend them back ... at interest! Such a person would then be able to live off unearned income. Injustice would creep into the system. It was for this reason that the Medieval Catholic Church tried to outlaw usury, and why strict Islam still does so to this day. It was for this reason also that the Old Testament proposed times of Jubilee – that every seven and fifty years, debts would be cancelled, to prevent the economy from being skewed and injustices from building up.

We, however, live in a world that since the Reformation has lost such restraints. John Calvin very reasonably argued that usury was happening anyway and so, he said, it was better to have it “accommodated” in a way that would try to keep it reasonable. The background to Calvin’s logic was that the Jews were already practicing it towards Christians. Why were the Jews doing that? Over much of Medieval Europe, the Jews had been marginalised. As part of the psychology of trying to make out that Jesus was a Christian but not a Jew, Jews became stereotyped as the “Christ killers”. This resulted in anti-Semitic racism all the way to houndings and pogroms. The Jew became the “wandering Jew”. Gold was easy to carry with you. That provided the base for banking and lending, and so the picture emerged of Shylock, the Merchant of Venice, who was in many ways Christendom’s own shadow side inasmuch as it had helped to create him.

Calvin’s accommodation of usury as interest is why world banking developed such an edge in Geneva. At first such banking was seen as a responsible trade. I am a Quaker, and both Lloyds and Barclays were originally Quaker banks that succeeded because they valued truth and integrity in public affairs. But over time, that changed. There was no Jubilee. There became no restraint. The expectation of a rate of return on capital – whether as interest or as dividends – fuelled the growth of capitalism. Capitalism is control of the economy via capital. It allows for the possibility that an investor’s sole interest is what they’re going to get back out of it ... and whenever we move money from one account to another, or seek the lowest price for a product, we are all feeding the competitive spirit that comprises capitalism as distinct from the alternative, which would be a cooperative spirit of mutuality. We are all complicit. Look in the mirror of the corporation in a free market society, or the government in a democracy, and it is our own collective shadow that we may see reflected back.

With growing inequity of the distribution of capital aided by the secondary quality of money – the ability to make money out of money – consumerism started to take off. The economies of Europe and America became distorted by both the first and second World Wars in the twentieth century, and after each of them governments were

concerned with how to keep their economies booming. Men like Edward Bernays (a nephew of Sigmund Freud) and Ernest Dichter (both of whom lived until the 1990s) were pivotal in advising governments and corporations on a new way of boosting their economies. The economy was no longer only to satisfy human needs. It also had to generate *wants*. It had to create markets for perceived needs that had not previously existed. Bottled water is a good example, but there are many. Fuel became “a tiger in your tank.” Shoes became less about protecting the feet than making them sexy. Cigarettes were to “blow your troubles away” because with a cigarette “you are never alone.” In short, and in theological language, products took on an idolatrous role.

Psychologically the “depth boys” in advertising such as Bernays and Dichter studied the work of psychologists like Freud, Adler and Jung and used these works, intended for the therapy of the human soul, to figure out how to exploit it. How could the complete range of emotions – love, joy, sex, hate, guilt, fear, anxiety – all be used to push products. How could they be placed on the hook of advertising, lowered into the unconscious, and used to trigger buying behaviour. In short, how could a consumer-addicted society be created?

Allied to all of this was a shift from real reality to virtual reality. No longer was our sense of world to be parochial, “of the parish”. That was deemed “inward looking”. And yet, the very word, parochial, comes from the Greek, *para* meaning alongside (like with parallel lines), and *oikos* meaning the household and its economy. It is the same Greek root from which we get the words *ecumenical* and *ecology*. *Diocese* also has the same etymology – *dia* meaning *through* and *oikos* meaning the home or neighbourhood. As such, a parishioner was a neighbour, a fellow sojourner through a place, and when Jesus asked who is our neighbour, the answer takes us very deeply into questions of fair trade, and how we might invest any money that we have.

Deeper than that, a non-idolatrous view of the *oikos*, of the household or the economy, takes us to the heart of the divine nature. It is significant that the most commonly cited miracle in the gospels is the feeding of the five thousand (or thereabouts, the numbers vary from version to version). What was happening here politically is very significant. The Roman Emperor saw it as his function to feed the people. Jesus, however, was saying ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life.’

His was what the French Jesuit Jean Pierre de Caussade called “the sacrament of the present moment.” That was why Jesus recommended that we celebrate the Eucharist “in memory” of him. Amongst other things, he is revealing to us a lesson in real economics.

The Greek word used in the gospels for “in memory of” is *anamnesis*. Its literal meaning is “without amnesia” or “without loss of forgetfulness.”

It is as if we need to be periodically woken up from our spiritual sleep. We need to be, and the hyphens are deliberate, re-minded. We are called to re-member that which the hustle and bustle of everyday life and, yes, its commonplace violence, has dismembered.

To me, this is what Jesus was doing with the bread and wine. He was calling us to the sacrament of the reconstitution of a world and humanity that is broken, like his own

world and physical body was shortly to become.

By saying “Do this in anamnesis of me,” he is calling us back to the forgotten nature of nothing less than ... what? ... the fullness of reality.

And what is that reality? It is “bread” – which is to say, the material substance of the world made up of atoms and energy; and “wine” - the quickening of the Spirit that gives life.

So here we have Jesus, a human being of woman born, foster child of a carpenter, grounded like us all in space and time to live and die; but at the same time, Christ as a “persona” or face of God in whose image we too are fashioned, beyond all dichotomies of gender, social class and even religion, grounded in the pleroma which is to say, the fullness of all eternity.

The story of the Last Supper invites us to step outside of space and time and to gather around that table. What is this God-man doing? He is picking up an ordinary piece of bread from off a table that had been mindfully prepared.

He is raising up a goblet of wine – that fruit of sunshine-warmed and hand-toiled soil that in Middle East cultures symbolised spiritual euphoria.

And he’s saying something that sounds very far out. He’s re-minding us that “this bread ... is my Body” and “this wine ... is my Blood.”

He’s calling us back to the mystical truth of our interconnection, of true nature as branches on the tree or vine of life – roots in the soil, fruits in the heavens - in community with one another. In “communion” with the Providence of Creation, with its grace-given “daily bread” provide-ance of that which gives life.

Different religions have different names and metaphors for such cosmic consciousness, but in some of our traditions this is what it means to be participants as the Communion of Saints in the Body of Christ.

This is the consequence of the breath of the Holy Spirit having breathed itself out into the void, the poetry of “the Word made flesh”. It is the deep song of the Earth, the archetypal patterning of reality without which “nothing was made that has been made,” and with which we acquire vision of the heart because here is “the light of the world.”

This is not pantheism – God as nature - limited only to what is visible, known, immanent. Rather, it is something more. It is *pan-en-theism*. God present in nature but also, God transcendent. God able to be in this world, in all its joys and crucifixions, but also, present outside of it, holding the cosmos as a mother cradles her awakening child, or as Jesus put it, as a hen enfolds her chickens.

Here, as Hebrews 1:3 tells, is the power that “sustains” the world. Here, as 2 Peter 1:4 puts it, is our invitation to “become participants of the divine nature.”

In Roman Catholic tradition the Council of Trent in 1551 defined transubstantiation as

“that wonderful and singular conversion of the whole substance of the bread into the Body, and of the whole substance of the wine into the Blood.”

I think in the sense that I have tried to explore here that this is very true. The differences between our religious traditions perhaps start to fall away when we observe that the “conversion” in question of the bread and wine is precisely what Jesus said it was: anamnesis, a re-remembering, a fresh seeing, a conversion in consciousness that is the sacrament of the present moment, an *apocatastasis* or unveiling of the state that is.

This is the Real Presence of the divine that renders the whole world implicitly holy.

This is that very flesh and blood cosmic love which has, since the beginning of time, always been there, and always will be there, come what may in the come-to-pass of the vicissitudes of both our personal lives and of this planet Earth.

This is the true basis of the economy. Seek this, and all other things shall be added unto us. But seek money for its own sake ... and the day will come when you find that the Celtic Tiger never was indigenous, and that it turns and feeds on the hand that put too much faith in it.

How do we seek the economy of God? “Be still and know that I am God.”

How do we see it? “Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God.”

How do we practise it? “For God so loved the world...” but be gentle on ourselves, for while we might hear and act on the pain of the world, it is ultimately God that carries it.

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