



## *After Purity: Contesting Theocapitalism*

In this lecture I shall sketch a tactical plan, for Christian theology and pastoral ministry, that addresses the contestation of the strategic power of the spiritual discipline of theocapitalism that I proposed in the first lecture. Our focus is on younger generations, and so I begin by quoting the words of one teenager who lives under this discipline. Anna Nussbaum wrote the following letter to *Harper's* magazine recently:

I am a sixteen-year-old girl and I attend a public high school in downtown Colorado Springs. Since childhood my body has been a billboard. Before I could read there were labels on my shoes, on my jeans, and across my bosom. So I was not surprised to find that the wall space of my high school's halls had been sold to local companies. Neither was I shocked when ads adorned my yearbook, my newspaper, my school planner, my library's computer screens, even my regulation book covers.

My school district has a multimillion-dollar deal with Coca-Cola. Only Coke products are sold and endorsed on school property. It's all a part of consumer education. Each day at lunch a Pepsi truck parks across the street, blasting Top 40 music and undercutting Coke's prices.

All my life companies have been competing for my dollar; meanwhile no one has seemed to care about my mind.<sup>1</sup>

Nussbaum is presumably a member of the post-Boomer American generations who have, in the words of Naomi Klein, been thoroughly branded. For younger generations,

the search for self [has] always been shaped by marketing hype, whether or not [we] believed it or defined [our]selves against it. This is a side effect of brand expansion that is far more difficult to track and quantify than the branding of culture and city spaces. This loss of space happens inside the individual; it is a

colonization not of physical space but of mental space.<sup>2</sup>

One effect of this branding, in the horizon of widespread post-1960s suspicion of institutions, a post-feminism, and post-civil rights culture, is the emergence of a sensibility that I will term “living after purity.”

Not everyone in the post-Boomer generations lives with an “after-purity” sensibility, just as not everyone lives with the ambiguity I described in *Virtual Faith*.<sup>3</sup> But like the symbol of ambiguity, I am proposing that “after purity” is a strong enough symbol in contemporary youth culture that even those who define themselves *against* this symbol—for example, by revalorizing purity—still define themselves fundamentally in *relation to* it.

What do I mean by many in the younger generations living “after purity”? I speak here especially of young adults in the cohort often referred to as “Generation X.” I mean living in a world that appears to us daily as irreversibly ambiguous, a particular admixture of sin and grace, exploitation and generosity, getting ahead and giving up, dysfunction and desire, power and peace, depression and delight, rage and recalcitrance. Our imaginations are filled with the soft porn of movies and the sweet visage of the pope or Dalai Lama. We live with a taste for intensity and ecstasy and a temptation toward addiction. We live with the knowledge and helpless feeling that someone somewhere may be suffering because of the way that the coffee we savor or the clothes we enjoy are produced, and we are too busy, tired, or bogged down with our own “issues” to even begin to do anything about it. We live with the suspicion that every preacher and politician and parent may well be deceiving us or themselves, and yet we live with the need to deeply trust these people. We are neither romantic nor well educated about our American past. We will give ourselves in charity but are skeptical about what gets called justice. We know that changing the system is both absolutely necessary and utterly impossible, whether it be the church or secular politics. We know that being psychologically healthy is important, and we know that an overfocus on this issue can make us self-absorbed. We want some guidelines, we want some structure, but we know that for some parts of our lives it is too late, and we don’t know what to do with those parts of our lives. We don’t want to be judged by others and want to refrain from judging others, yet we also wish that someone would stand up confidently and make some clear judgments about difficult issues. For the most part, we’re not going to fight you about whether there is one true religion, one true sexual identity, and one true way of being family. “Who can know for sure?” And “Who am I to judge?” we ask, wanting secretly to know more surely and judge more confidently.

We are a generation after purity, when purity seems salvific and impossible and when anyone who presents himself or herself as pure must be hiding something. Who can hide behind an adjective like “countercultural” anymore and presume to speak from the single right position? Who can push back against the rest of the culture when all those who push back owe so much, good and bad, to the culture they’re pushing against? We want to feel righteous, confident, certain, and clear about morality, politics, religion, our relationships, and our families. Sometimes we’ll go ahead and become righteous, confident, certain, and clear for a while, because we feel that’s where we should be if we’re going to be mature people. We think maybe if we try it on, we’ll find we really like it, like the way those who go on and on talking about grace all the time are practicing confidence-building, trying to talk themselves into it. My generation is running across the thin ice of a thawing pond in late winter, trying to get across before the whole thing gives way. What is it like to live with this in our souls? Thrilling, exhausting, numbing. It gives us a crack-like addiction to false certainties and a graham-cracker-in-milk-like docility. Even when we opt out by placing all our shares in the stock market, the Bible, the pope, or the Gap, we’re still asking, What is real? Will you be there for me?

We are a generation after purity: you can no longer play, with innocence, the “true Church” off of the “world.” Every attempt to do so has shown only how much of “the world” is inside the “Church” and how much of the “church” is inside the “world”—for better and for worse. Even Pope John Paul II’s distinction between a “culture of life” and a “culture of death” seems to make things simpler than they really are. Indeed, younger generations are more likely to think not in evaluative terms of a “culture of life” or a “culture of death” but rather in descriptive terms, “*whose* culture?” Living after purity means that more young people than ever are aware that the place from which you speak makes a big difference about how you evaluate culture and even what gets counted as culture in the first place. The exceptions among young adults testify to the greater reality: those who have retreated into an often defensive, inward-looking piety are doing so often as the only alternative they see to living after purity.

We are neither the first nor the only generation to so live; what are unique to us are the circumstances and symbols of our history that have brought us to this situation of living after purity. I find evidence of this “after-purity” sensibility in many different aspects of contemporary youth culture. Let me name just a few examples:

- Sara Jewett, a twenty-one year old senior at Duke University, was

interviewed by *Rolling Stone* during a recent trip to Nicaragua to observe sweatshops firsthand. Jewett says, “I think, deep down, a lot of us feel that America’s consumer culture isn’t entirely right, that there’s a spiritual deadening that’s come with it.” The reporter, Katherine Marsh, notes that for Jewett, “consumer culture is not entirely right, but she implies it’s not entirely wrong either. Her position is *an activism of accommodation*.” Marsh quotes Jewett: “I think one of the legacies of Sixties activism is that *the older generation expects you to choose one system or another*. Our generation has really rejected the idea that your choices must be mutually exclusive.”<sup>4</sup>

● From popular media culture, Radiohead’s latest album, *Kid A*, features the song “Optimistic.” The song, which I take to be expressive (but not *only* expressive) of this generalized “after-purity” sensibility, includes these lyrics:

The big fish eat the little ones, the big fish eat the little ones  
Not my problem, give me some  
You can try the best you can, you can try the best you can  
The best you can is good enough<sup>5</sup>

● Finally, one 1995 study “found that a majority of Missouri high-school students who watched Channel One’s mix of news and ads in their classrooms thought that sports stars paid show companies to be in their commercials.” As one ninth-grade girl said, “I don’t know why athletes do that—pay all that money for all them ignorant commercials for themselves. Guess it makes everyone like ’em more and like their teams more.” For the study’s designer, “the comment demonstrates a disturbing lack of media literacy, proof positive that kids can’t critically evaluate the advertising they see on television.” But, as Klein argues, perhaps youth have intuited a deeper truth, “that sponsorship is a far more complicated process than the buyer/seller dichotomy that existed in previous decades, [and] to talk of who sold out or bought in has become impossibly anachronistic.” This cohort may be expected to sense the contemporary branding culture, because they are the ones who, more than any of us, “grew up sold.”<sup>6</sup>

Whether you feel that you are living “after purity” or not, young Christians participating in the discipline of theocapitalism risk practicing an economic docetism. Docetism is the ancient heresy that denied that Christ was fully human: that he did not really suffer, did not really eat and drink, was not truly a human being in the full sense. Its linguistic root is the Greek word *dokein*, “to seem.” The canonical gospels are already contesting this docetism when they emphasize Jesus’ human emotions or the physicality of

his eating, the palpable reality of his wounds, or other sufferings of his body. By *economic docetism*, I mean Christian participation in the economy that denies our or others' bodiliness, our body as the locus of our sufferings and pleasures, our human dignity, the fullness of our humanity. In short, economic docetism is the use of economics to abbreviate our living of our full humanity, in all its complexity, richness, and ambiguity. This often occurs today through a denial that the body is essential to human flourishing, and a presumption that the sufferings and pleasures of some bodies are less important than others.

This economic docetism takes new forms in our new situation: separating a brand from its production; the finished product from the human makers and material processes of its creation; the idea of a product from the human, bodily, earthly locations of the product's production. An economic docetism tempts Christians to agree with the president of one branding agency who traded on a body-spirit separation when he proposed that "products are made in the factory, but brands are made in the mind."<sup>77</sup> Economic docetism is a performative diminishment of Christian participation in Jesus in the present, by way of economic practices that endorse an abbreviated materiality, an overemphasis on the transcendent meaning of the brand. "After establishing the 'soul' of their corporations, the superbrand companies have gone on to rid themselves of their cumbersome bodies, and there is nothing that seems more cumbersome, more loathsomely corporeal than the factories that produce their products."<sup>78</sup> Many superbrand corporations own few or none of their own factories today. They contract out to brokers who oversee such gross materiality.

What does the charge of economic docetism presuppose theologically? It presupposes a theology of economic discipleship. A constitutive dimension of releasing oneself to Jesus as savior is a performative acceptance of the mode of being revealed by Jesus as possible for all humans: a life that becomes fully divine only in and through becoming fully human. Thus what is required for the Christian or, better, what defines Christian maturity—an ever-fuller releasement to this mysterious mode of being—is an ever-deeper appropriation of the social, historical, and cultural discourses, practices, and networks in which human identity and experience are caught, elaborated, even produced, disciplined, and contested. These discourses, practices, and networks are "economic" when they deal with the rationalized exchange of human goods. As taking place within inescapably economic beings, Christian maturing is a function of the communal and individual appropriation of the rationalized exchanges of human goods in which one is implicated, for the

sake of their humanization, which means their ordering toward the common good, affirmation of human dignity, sustenance of health and wholeness, opening of opportunity for personal and social development, and constructive realization of one's vocation. What this humanization means at any one time will unavoidably be subject to reinterpretation, even dismantling and deconstruction, by theological and philosophical reflection and the sciences. In these ways, salvation for the Christian is intrinsically linked to the transubstantiation of economic reality in the direction of greater human flourishing.

Let me attempt to distill this theology of economic discipleship into just a few basic theses:

1. All human life has an economic dimension, both personal and social.
2. Because Christian life is always human life, Christian life always has an economic dimension.
3. Christian maturation can be understood as a christocentric process of accepting our "participation in the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4).
4. This *christocentric* participation is most fully *christological* when it includes solidarity with one's concrete and particular human situation, personal and social. That is to say, not just *seeming* to be fully immersed in human life, the body or suffering.
5. This christological solidarity in its economic dimension is expressed by transforming our economic relationships toward more fully human lives for all—and not just lives that seem human.

And so we must ask anew: "Who is my neighbor?" In global capitalism, this takes on a new valence. "The young women in the export processing zone are our roommates of sorts, connected, as is so often the case, by a web of fabrics, shoelaces, franchises, teddy bears and brand names wrapped around the planet."<sup>9</sup> Am I my brother's keeper? Yes, my brother who made my Timberland shoes, my Wilson's Leather belt, my Chaps Ralph Lauren jacket.

The logic of the practice of Christian faith involves an expansion, that is to say a conversion, to ever broader circles of political and economic engagement. So we cannot even content ourselves with being critical of buying particular brands, though that is an important step. "Why single out Nike or Michael Jordan when the U.S. government itself is implicated in the same sickness?"<sup>10</sup>

All this can be said with the knowledge that the theological formulations I have posited are themselves always already implicated in economic problematics, metaphors, and practices and are permanently subject to idoloclastic reconstruction.

There are many ways of practicing these theological commitments, this economic discipleship. Based on my own and others' ministerial praxis and my own imagination, I propose the following, with general elements first and specific tactics following.

A contestation of theocapitalism is possible whenever ministry sponsors:

—young adults to accept in small but still meaningful ways the mysterious depth of their human identity, a depth that today can be rendered as that undomesticatable region of themselves that cannot be bought, branded, traded away, drugged up, compromised, dieted off, sold, sweated away, or coopted by an advertiser.

—a vigilance about the economic enmeshment of the Church's spiritual practices... against the idea that God's grace is a set of coins stored in a chest that the Church may give out when someone practices piety, coins that will eventually purchase heaven; against the idea that grace is my private property; against the notion that there are purely "Christian" practices that have escaped the economic circulations in which all cultural materials are caught; against the undialectical equating of divine blessing with material wealth, with sales of Christian books, with big attendance figures in ministry, or with fawning media attention;

—intergenerational ministry, which disrupts a consumer capitalism that divides and demarcates generations according to grids determined by marketing strategies.

—discernment with regard to one's economic life: How are my resources used? Who or what am I actually supporting when I purchase certain products? This discernment then becomes the teaching of a literacy of Christian economic subversion.

—the overcoming of excessive self-consciousness. Ministry may lift up examples of faithful people who slowly transcended self-consciousness about appearance and goods.

In addition to these general elements of contestation, possible specific tactics that the Church may sponsor include the following:

—drawing up declarations of spiritual freedom in consumer society, by individuals, families, or church communities. I have drawn up the following ten commitments as part of such a "confession" in various church ministries:

**1. Dignity.** We will embody the dignity of all life as our most basic spiritual value by nurturing and protecting human life at all stages of the life cycle and by honoring the created goodness of animals and nature.

**2. Stewardship.** We will live stewardship of life as our fundamental spiritual practice by regularly taking an honest measure of our life resources, offering one-tenth to the Church or the world, for the sake of the common good and the salvation of others.

**3. Solidarity .** We will allow the impact of our spending on the poorest and most disadvantaged members of society to strongly influence our purchasing habits. We will inquire into the labor practices of companies we patronize and let businesses know, through our words and deeds, that just wages and working conditions for all laborers are non-negotiable matters to Christians.

**4. Community .** We will share in co-responsibility for our lives and the lives of others by being accountable to at least one community or family for whom we will be actively present.

**5. Toggling.** We will craft our schedules by striving for a balanced life, toggling between the active and contemplative modes of solitude, community, recreation, and work.

**6. Play.** Because all good recreation immerses us in the goodness of all creation, we will make play a priority, both in the form of playful activities and in our taste for the comic dimension of daily life.

**7. Literacy .** We will prepare ourselves to responsibly transform our cultures and communities by gaining literacy in our traditions and fluency in our histories.

**8. Local culture .** We will be creators as well as consumers of culture, supporting local and indigenous popular culture and interpreting all forms of culture through the lenses of faith.

**9. Discernment.** We will practice ways of being attentive to the presence of God in the world, alive to the absolute uniqueness of our own giftedness, and careful about making moral judgments through an informed conscience.

**10. Disattachment.** We know that there is no lasting spiritual growth without disattachment from material goods. We strive to avoid getting entangled in material goods by avoiding the extremes of overvaluing them and hating them. We will regularly reassess our relationship to our material goods.

—encouraging younger generations to take up a “fashion inventory.” By this I mean investigating where each article of clothing they are wearing was manufactured. At each stage, determining were just wages paid? Were safe working conditions present? Were unions allowed? (And one can do this not just with “secular” clothes but also with church clothing materials/vestments, as well as with many other common church materials, such as coffee and flowers.)

—sponsoring media fasts, wherein people support each other in giving up network television, the Internet, or some other technology in our wired world for a certain amount of time to encourage a critical distance from them;

—having the Church reclaim its role as sponsor of the arts by providing resources to encourage young people to create and interpret their own cultural products, to do “local” theology of culture.<sup>11</sup> I know of one church that constructed a recording studio to be used by any young people in the city. Young musicians may use this studio without taking an orthodoxy test. They are welcome to simply create their own forms of culture under the aegis of the church. It is a marvelous example of the church at the service of the world. Why has contemporary U.S. Christianity so often surrendered this once-great role as patron of the arts?

And so I return to what was perhaps the intended meaning of “wired world” for this conference: the increasing prevalence of globally interlinked electronic media, particularly the Internet, in everyday life. Using this wired world to understand and contest our global corporate enmeshment is one important resource for an anti-docetic economics.<sup>12</sup> Many of the protestors in Quebec recently used cell phones, pagers, and hand-held emailers to coordinate their tactics. I used the Internet for much of the research for my own clothing inventory, and I try to help others in ministry to do the same. The dematerialized wired world can help reconnect us to the other wired world: a dematerializing economy built on a very material base.

Our wired world, in these ambiguous senses, serves as both hegemony and resistance. A wired world is the *Sitz im Leben* in which economies of salvation are worked out among younger generations. Indeed, what is the meaning of the “economy of salvation” today? What is its performative content in our churches? Can the spiritual and economic senses of the economy of salvation be more sacramentally or christologically joined in our praxis? Can we talk about or practice the economy of salvation anymore with a very narrow sense of “economy”?

And so to the legacy of living “after purity”: For many of us in the

post-1960s generations, significant contestation of theocapitalism will have to be undertaken in small steps, supported by a community of spiritual practice, in relation to a church community aware of its own sinfulness, and without the expectation that everything can change overnight. The Internet may well be one important site for research, support, and information-sharing. But at least as important will be the struggle for mature Christian awareness about the ways in which younger generations are already wired to each other and to corporations through the global branding of our cultures and identities.

This wired world is our cross. This wired world is the only site of our salvation. Let us not forget that God so loves this wired world that God continues to send Jesus in the Spirit so that we will be anti-docetic doers of the word and not hearers only. ➤

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## NOTES

1. Anna Nussbaum, Letter to the Editor, *Harper's*, October 2000, p. 98.
2. Naomi Klein, *No Logo* (New York: Picador, 1999), p. 66.
3. Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998).
4. Katherine Marsh, "Spring Break in Managua," *Rolling Stone*, 26 October 2000, p. 90, italics mine.
5. Radiohead, *Kid A* (Capitol, 2000).
6. Klein, *No Logo*, pp. 60-61.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 195.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 196.
9. *Ibid.*, p. xvi.
10. William Greider, *One World, Ready or Not: The Manic Logic of Global Capitalism* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), p. 497, in Klein, *No Logo*, p. 421.
11. With regard to the latter few practices, I have learned a few lessons since *Virtual Faith*: (1) How creatively practicing theology of culture with pop culture artifacts can lead to remaining bound by the theocapitalist logic (though it does not necessarily do so), a logic that says "interpret me," "notice me," and to academics, "purchase me for your 'research'" (one of the most subtle seductions to which the theologian of culture is vulnerable), and above all, "do not ignore me." Foucault approached this quagmire from a different perspective when he argued for the critical bankruptcy of the "tradition" of (theological and philosophical) "commentary." His argument was that the "tradition" of "commentary" was profoundly conservative, forever reinscribing, reifying, and reprivileging what is being commented upon. (See, for example, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Vintage, 1994), pp. xvi-xvii, and "The Discourse on Language," trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith, in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon, 1972), p. 221. On this reading, no matter how many creative, critical, or even deconstructive "commentaries" were worked on a text (or, for theology of culture, a cultural event), we can expect severely limited liberative results. (2) How resistant young people are to submitting their pop culture artifacts to theological interpretation. This can be (2a) positively understood as the instinctual protection of the young (or the not so young) of the dignity and authenticity of their secular lives (the great gift of modernity: the relative autonomy of secular culture from the Church), which they rightfully resist allowing to be folded into the often

flat-footed narratives and lessons of the Church. They want to protect an area of their lives from intrusion by people who frequently don't understand it. But it can be (2b) negatively understood as homage to a theocapitalism that will tolerate no other gods before it. On this reading, capitalism protects itself by cloaking its practices in the aura of the dignified, semi-autonomous secular sphere of life, prohibiting theological analysis from disrupting this Edenic site, from tossing any bombs in the playground.

12. The Internet seems to be proving an example of one technology that can multiply serve both consumer capitalist as well as nonconsumerist and even perhaps anticonsumerist impulses by providing access to local forms of popular culture (locally and independently produced and globally available). This is true particularly for rock music and films. See Andrew Pollack, "Indie Films and Shorts Find the Web a Good Ally," *New York Times*, 4 Jan 2000, pp. B1, B7.