

# **The 2001 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture**

## Proclaiming the Gospel in a Wired World

### Introduction

Cell phones, e-mail, MTV, the Web, Palm pilots, and pagers fill our lives and the lives of young people. Teens live in a world where “religious chat rooms and web sites act like spiritual supermarkets, offering an assortment of belief systems all within one click” (Newsweek, May 8, 2000). Whether you laud the changes technology has brought or long for yesteryear, there is no denying that today’s wired world affects how we share the good news of Jesus Christ. Those who are engaged in ministry with youth are translators—charged with the daunting task of making connections for young people who are more familiar with gigabytes than with grace.

Rather than offering instructions on how to use e-mail, set up chat rooms, and design multimedia presentations, the 2001 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture examine the theological implications of modern technology and globalization. They help us to reflect on our modes of proclamation—not just preaching and worship but also storytelling, relationships, justice-seeking, service, teaching, and the daily practice of Christian life. They provide inspiration that will refuel us for bearing witness to Jesus Christ with youth in the wired world.

Thomas Beaudoin engages us in a provocative discussion of the relationship of the church to consumer media capitalism. He argues that consumer media capitalism functions strategically as an anonymous spiritual discipline, thus creating “theocapitalism.” Beaudoin then proposes a tactical plan for Christian theology and pastoral ministry to contest the strategic discipline of theocapitalism. His lectures offer challenging insights on ministry in today’s wired world as well as practical directives for discipling young people in this context.

Marva Dawn raises concerns about blind acceptance of contemporary fads and asks how we can teach youth to question their use of technology. The gospel, says Dawn, calls us to be hopeful realists about the wired world and enables us to de-idolize those elements of culture that begin to take primary place in our lives. She gives ten Christian practices that can help us to clear a space for the focal commitments of our faith in today’s culture. Dawn then urges readers to take greater care in how they use words, and she provides insights from Luke’s account of the walk to Emmaus (Luke 24) on how we might proclaim the gospel to young people.

Richard Osmer takes us on a rafting trip through the white water of globalization, exploring this cultural shift’s influence on adolescents through the global media, the globalization of risk, and the new pluralism of globalization. Drawing on the research of the Princeton Project on Youth,

Globalization, and the Church, he explains why we experience globalization as catching us up in currents of change that are beyond our control and discusses the practical implications for ministry with young people. Osmer calls the church to provide young people with three indispensable gifts for their white water journey: a creed to believe, a code for the road, and a dream to esteem. These gifts for the journey are developed out of the practices of catechesis, exhortation, and discernment found in Paul's ministry and are illustrated for today through case studies of two very different congregations.

Finally, Katherine Paterson blesses us with the gift of story. We are important, she persuades, not because we can teach our young people about the wired world or because we must warn them away from it, but because we are the church and we have a story to tell. Paterson explores how we might tell our story to the young who think they have nothing to learn from us. She challenges us to see the "invisible youth" by looking at young people as they really are and loving them as such. Perhaps, she notes, youth would welcome from us a vision of who, in God's sight, they really are, in a sharing of stories that illumine and heal.

May these lectures inspire you and equip you to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ to the young.

Faithfully yours,

Amy Scott Vaughn  
Director of Leadership Development  
Institute for Youth Ministry

## **2001 Lectures**

Thomas M. Beaudoin  
Celebrity Deathmatch: The Church Versus Capitalism?  
After Purity: Contesting Theocapitalism

Marva J. Dawn  
Technological Devices or Engagement in Practices?  
The "Humiliation" of the Word or Its Restoration?

Richard R. Osmer  
Riding the Raft: Ministry with Youth in an Age of Permanent White Water  
A Checklist for the Journey: Biblical Foundations of Ministry with Youth

Katherine Paterson  
I Love to Tell the Story  
The Invisible Youth



## Celebrity Deathmatch: The Church Versus Capitalism?

The theme for these lectures is “Preaching the Gospel in a Wired World.” But even if we presume a basic agreement on what the “gospel” is—surely a difficult presumption if Christian history is any guide—the meaning of a “wired world” is not self-evident. In an attempt to interpret what this increasingly ubiquitous phrase means, I shall draw together filaments from Naomi Klein’s recent book *No Logo*. A “wired world” includes...

*A global marketing of a global middle-class teen life.* Teens who will, in the descriptive and prescriptive words of one ad agency’s study of over twenty-thousand teens in over forty-five countries, “get up in the morning, put on their Levi’s and Nikes, grab their caps, backpacks, and Sony personal CD players, and head for school.” According to this study, this wired world is connected most significantly by television, especially MTV, which is watched by eighty-five percent of those surveyed.<sup>1</sup> Klein observes that “global teens watch so much MTV per day that the only equivalent shared cultural experience among adults occurs during an outbreak of war when all eyes are focused on the same CNN images.”<sup>2</sup>

*A world of international “synergy” and “branding,”* creating “cross-promotional brand-based experiences that combine buying with elements of media, entertainment, and professional sports to create an *integrated branded loop*...a self-sustaining lifestyle web.”<sup>3</sup>

A world of international corporate power, wherein a captain of industry, Rupert Murdoch, can cut the BBC from an Asian package of cable services because of Chinese authorities’ objections to a show about Mao Tse-tung. A world where Murdoch’s HarperCollins drops a book critical of Chinese human-rights abuses, apparently to protect Murdoch’s satellite

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television business in Asia.<sup>4</sup> A world where many of our products, especially our branded ones, come from Indonesia, China, Taiwan, South Korea, Mexico, Vietnam, the Philippines, and elsewhere. A world in which transnational corporations control one third of the world's assets.<sup>5</sup>

This is the wired world on which I want to focus: the world wired together by global brands, transcontinental media, an increasingly world wide web of labor, of images, of consumer media capitalist mediated connections. For better and for worse, this is our "new economy" of salvation.

What relation should the Church take up with this wired world? If the Church would be prophetic, is it not a matter, ultimately, of an either/or—either the Church that proclaims the gospel or the wired world of global capitalism? Must those committed to solidarity with younger generations not choose between two contenders? How can both contenders for the allegiance of youth pretend to permanently tolerate the other's power?

If the Church would be prophetic, can it not recognize itself as the last counter-power to global capitalism? How can *we* be the church for younger generations and not allow the Church to enter into a mortal combat with consumer capitalism?

I have chosen "Celebrity Deathmatch" as a potential metaphor for this possible confrontation. This popular MTV show pits celebrities against each other in a claymation-styled fight. The opponents (such as Lauryn Hill versus Shania Twain, Prince Charles versus The Artist Formerly Known as Prince, Don Johnson versus Boy George) typically engage in hyper-violent tactics in their mission to eliminate each other. "Deathmatch" graphically pictures absurd acts of mayhem perpetrated by the clay celebrities: they slice and dice each other with chain saws and bare fists, tie each other literally in knots, and laughingly brutalize each other in all manner of excess (within the limits of mainstream cable television). The show playfully references and ironizes a cluster of aspects of middle-class values: parental concern over media violence, the farcical hypermasculine and seemingly aggressively heterosexual cult of professional wrestling, the ritual glorification and cannibalizing of American celebrities. The show is duplicitous: it offers the pleasure of consuming all of these media experiences precisely by way of excessive parody of some of the most characteristic features of American youth/media culture.

Can the Church be prophetic inspiration for younger generations if it does not consciously step inside the ring and engage consumer capitalism in a Celebrity Deathmatch? An adequate answer requires a theology of this wired world, and the relation of this wired world to the Church in the *present*. The beginning of such a theology is the task of this lecture.

It is a commonplace to note the consumer character of the lives of all Americans, including young adults. At the same time, what this means often lacks specificity, if not rigor, and is hostage to a certain moralizing interpretation. This moralizing expresses a humid mixture of condescension, guilt, and envy by pastors and academic theologians vis-à-vis the way that most people who we teach or to whom we minister really live in everyday life. This moralizing interpretation, on the one hand, and a celebration of consumer capitalism, on the other, are the Scylla and Charybdis of a theology of consumer capitalism.

There are indications that many young adults live deeply immersed within what I want to very provisionally refer to as consumer media capitalism—a fusion of consumer capitalism and an extensive media culture. This immersion is a major theme of the book *Generation on Hold* by James Côté and Anton Allahar. They argue that consumer capitalism appropriates “practices that already exist” among youth, turning them to anti-intellectual ends that are exploitive of youth labor. From all sides, from sports to popular media, they argue, youth are immersed in a symbolic order that seems to endorse personal freedom yet ideologically educates for endorsement of consumer norms. For example, “if [youth] think that...music, which criticizes the system, provides an outlet for their discontent and brings them satisfaction, that is fine. As long as their protests go nowhere, they are left alone; recording companies produce and sell their records, and everyone is happy.”<sup>6</sup> They argue that consumer capitalism allows for the “meanings” that young adults attribute to their culture to glitter in endless variety, even “spiritual” variety, as long as young adults’ actual *behavior* does not fundamentally upset the economic order. Thus consumer culture is fused and confused with young adults’ freedom to find meaning within their young adult cultures.

Freedom, tolerance, and consumption are bound together also in William Finnegan’s *Cold New World*, an analysis of his time with lower class young adults in four areas of the United States. He became convinced of the power of mass culture over all classes of Americans. Despite the disparities in daily life in the young Mexican Americans, African Americans, and European Americans he studied, he concluded that they all shared a common culture that he refers to as “liberal consumerism,” a “tepid faith” in the fundamental goodness of individual consumption.<sup>7</sup> In each place he found a “savage tension between postindustrial capitalism’s imperatives and the claims of family and community,” leading young people to develop their own ways of “cross-cutting and satirizing the nonstop sales pitch that is the white noise of their lives.”<sup>8</sup>

A widespread willingness to take on debt, or the simple necessity of it for “survival,” is often cited as one prime characteristic of contemporary capitalist society among scholars. Some of the data on young adults in this regard is striking. “The average monthly unpaid credit card balance for people between twenty-five and thirty-four is \$2,726—more than ten percent above the national average,” according to financial market research firm PSI Global. And further, American Consumer credit service, a nonprofit that helps people negotiate lower interest rates and monthly payments to creditors, reports GenXers account for forty-three percent of its clients, who carry an average debt load of \$22,000.<sup>9</sup>

While such elements of young adult economic life as use of disposable income, brand loyalty, and debt accumulation are frequently mentioned in interpretations of consumer capitalist society, there is a remarkable conflict of interpretations about how these elements are related to each other, and what the fundamental dynamics are of our consumer society itself—even whether there is such a thing as a “consumer society.” Interpretations of consumer capitalist society of potential use to theology have come from economics, psychology, anthropology, sociology, and other disciplines. Adjudicating this conflict is beyond the scope of this lecture. In order to keep theology humble, however, it does bear noting economists Ben Fine and Ellen Leopold’s conclusion that the very concept of a consumer society, in most academic usage, “lacks a coherent analytical content [and] a reasonably precise definition with an associated explanatory role...In fact, precise and meaningful definitions of consumer society are...as rare as the use of the term is common.”<sup>10</sup>

Aware of their warning, I propose to think about only one dimension of consumer media capitalism—that is, its functioning as an economic *strategy*. By referring to consumer media capitalism as a *strategic* reality, I am using a distinction from Michel de Certeau, who distinguishes between strategies and tactics in his brilliant interpretation of everyday life. A strategy is a structural organization of reality, usually mediated by institutions, with the power to structure physical space, shape imagination, mold bodies, order expectations, and set the terms of cultural conversation and debate. A city’s gridded urban plan, a university’s or hospital’s hierarchy, a corporation’s ad campaign, an airport’s design, a book’s layout: all function as strategies designed to organize popular movement, thought, values, or spending patterns, so as to render the cultural order benign toward the needs of the strategist. A strategy is “the calculus of force-relationships which becomes possible when a subject of will and power (a proprietor, an enterprise, a city,

a scientific institution) can be isolated from an ‘environment.’”<sup>11</sup>

Tactics, by contrast, are what people in everyday life actually *do* with these strategies: what they make of them; how they turn them to ends different than those intended by strategists; how they use them in ways unplanned, unmeasured, and even unmeasurable; how people exercise the margin of freedom that they do have to practice *arts de faire* so as to get through the innumerable hurdles of everyday life. Tactics are “ways of operating” in everyday life that have a logic expressed not in being thought but by being lived, “a way of thinking invested in a way of acting.”<sup>12</sup> The resources of strategy are manipulated for enjoyment, getting by, making do in accord not with a theory or a rule but with the needs of the situation at hand. Everyday reading turns out to be a matter of “poaching” meaning from a text; everyday walking turns out to be a redefinition of the way city planners define public space. A tactic is a “calculus which cannot count on a ‘proper’ (a spatial or institutional localization)...[and] because it does not have a place, a tactic depends on time—it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized ‘on the wing.’”<sup>13</sup> Tactics are the everyday “internal manipulations of a system.”<sup>14</sup>

Strategies may appropriate tactics for their own purposes. For example, a popular turn to thrift store shopping that bears anticonsumerist meanings for young adults may be turned by a clothing manufacturer into the production of retro fashion styles. Or a band whose music expresses a forceful rejection of middle-class Christianity may allow its music to be produced and distributed by a record label with investments or political alliances that undermine the political efficacy of the music’s original values. Or the styles and opinions of young African American men in the inner cities may be appropriated by tennis shoe companies such as Nike.<sup>15</sup> Tactics may use materials of strategies against the interests of the strategizers. For example, a young Catholic woman interrupts Roman strategy when she uses the techniques of discernment traditionally associated with an all-male priesthood in order to manifest to herself and others her own calling to the Roman Catholic priesthood; or when a global coffee chain employee takes advantage of an inattentive boss to give out free coffee to his friends as penance for his company running local coffee shops out of business; or when a consultant to the U.S. military uses part of her remuneration to fund causes that undermine contemporary U.S. military policy in Latin America.

Having introduced this distinction (and this is not the place to offer a full critique of this work of de Certeau), I shall elaborate the following thesis: *consumer media capitalism functions strategically as an anonymous*

*spiritual discipline on something like the terms of the strategic functioning of classic spiritual disciplines.* If this proposal is adequate, we may then refer to consumer media capitalism as theocapitalism, an economic strategy attempting to secure its ends in and through religio-spiritual discourses or practices. I want to offer here two examples of what I mean, first with regard to the way in which spiritual disciplines and consumer media capitalism influence imagination, and second with regard to the way in which they deploy their own theologies of culture. This thesis remains tentative and exploratory. I hope to elaborate it through continued research in my construction of a fundamental theology of everyday life.

It seems that one essential element of many historic spiritual disciplines, from the Benedictine *Rule* to the Ignatian *Exercises*, is their strategic operation by way of an attempted formation of the imagination that is more or less unique to that discipline. Is this not one major effect of undergoing the *Exercises* and learning to talk with the Biblical figures, with the Jesuits, or practicing *lectio* and learning to ruminate on Biblical words, with the Benedictines? This is not to suggest of course that all imaginative orientations operate with the same content or for the same historical reasons—only that a strong orientation of the imagination under strategies organized by the discipline are central to the practice of classic spiritual disciplines.<sup>16</sup>

An analogous formation of imagination is present in consumer media capitalism. My own experience in ministry with diverse groups of young adults has shown me a striking conformity about images of success and the good material life, and not just in terms of specific goods but specific brands of those goods. Sociological research about consumer society has discovered evidence that Americans in general manifest a common imagination oriented to specific consumer fantasies. According to the sociological research of Susan Fournier and Michael Guiry, consumer fantasies include widespread desires for new and better homes, new cars, and luxury items such as jewelry and designer clothes. (At the same time, their research cautions a theological reading against a simplistic approach in that they found a broadening of the meaning of materialism in consumer fantasies, to include “enhancement of self, family, and society” through consumer goods, a desire for intense and exotic experiences in addition to conspicuous products, and consumer fantasies themselves as pleasurable goods of consumer society.)<sup>17</sup>

John Caughey found in his anthropological research that

Despite some systematic variation in social roles and subcultural affiliations, middle-class Americans seem to share a very similar fantasy life. The recurrent fantasies of my informants fall into

only seven major classes: career success, alternate career success, natural world escape, material wealth, successful violence, sex-romance, and blissful married life, [and] any given fantasy often includes... several of the other topics.<sup>18</sup>

In one typical example, Caughey's research revealed that "fantasy descriptions of ideal houses often sound like commercials, and many can be traced directly to particular media productions..."<sup>19</sup>

The study of twenty-seven thousand teens with which I began this lecture found that "teens who watch MTV videos are much more likely than other teens to wear the teen 'uniform' of jeans, running shoes, and denim jacket...They are also much more likely to own electronics and consume 'teen' items such as candy, sodas, cookies, and fast food. They are much more likely to use a wide range of personal-care products too."<sup>20</sup>

### **Theocapitalism and theology of culture**

But it is not only in influencing the human imagination that theocapitalism operates strategically like a spiritual discipline. It seems to be true of classic spiritual disciplines that another element of their efficacy lies in their power of deploying theologies of culture that are appropriated by believers through the particular practices of the discipline. Take, for example, the ways in which the Ignatian Exercises form exercitants to experience "God in all things." (We can bracket here the question of the various discernments within, the plurality of interpretations of, or the internal coherence of this Ignatian doctrine.) It is enough here to note that the Exercises can and do work variously to open adherents to this experience of "God in all things," an experience that is an instantiation of what could legitimately be named an Ignatian theology of culture. This does not keep us from also admitting that Jesuits or others may and do tactically trope this theology of culture for their own ends. Neither consumer media capitalism nor traditional spiritual disciplines have an absolute and unilateral power to compel.

Theocapitalism, too, strategically deploys a theology of culture, and it is this on which I shall focus for the remainder of the lecture. One advantage of attempting to articulate it—which must always be a search for implicit traces, strains, and hints, minute details of power and trajectoried meanings—is that such an articulation focuses our questions on the relationship between the religious significance of our lives and the socioeconomic dimensions of our lives, not only to trace their relation but to critically investigate the purposes of their discursive separation.

## Elements of theocapitalism's theology of culture

I shall articulate four elements of theocapitalism's theology of culture. This exercise necessarily proceeds by creative distillation of text, empirical observation, and intuition. In this sense it is unavoidably poetic; however "scientifically" it strives to correlate a theology of culture and an economics of consumerism. This poetic quality does not save such work from needing to be critically tested. It does, however, distance it from a certain theologic-scientific overcaution about going "beyond the facts." I shall offer a short description of each element, followed by a brief example from contemporary consumer media culture. You may have your own better examples.

The first element is *grace as drama*. By this I mean grace co-identified with intense sensation, with excitement, with an episodic excess, and with titillation. In other words, grace becomes the confusion of authentic experiences of transcendence with ephemeral effects of intensity. Grace is construed as ultimately experiential in a manner absolutely present and fully luminous to the seeker, whether the seeker is eventfully arrested in one's present or calmly reflective on one's past. This way of experiencing grace makes grace productive, clearly identifiable, something approaching a positivism of grace, perhaps even a commodity: a thing.

Among many examples, one may note the iconographic media image of the football player in the end zone down on one knee in prayer thanking God for the grace bestowed in the dramatic touchdown. The ritual has taken on a solemnity that has made it one of the few features of public religious display that are not mocked, parodied, or ironized regularly in the media. As if to authenticate the gesture, even resolutely evangelical players apparently have been known to finish their touchdown prayers with the sign of the cross.

This theology of grace-in-culture may well be interlinked with a larger culture of excess manifest in material practices and media culture. The film *Magnolia* may serve as an example of the latter. It seems to be an excessive meditation on excess as experience and trope of postmodernity. Tides of excess flood the screen: the excessive masculinity of Tom Cruise's character; the excessive guilt and chasm separating him from his dying father in his father's final hours; the excessive bursting of the proprieties of cinematic form by having all the characters sing along with the soundtrack what viewers may take as the excessively plain truth or the "moral" of the movie; the excessive action of God in raining down frogs upon a city already excessively warned of a plague (itself an excessive punishment), the excessive use of religious billboards. *Magnolia* ironizes excess by an excessive excess of excesses, each with a potentially religious name. It is interesting to note in

this regard that a turn to the disclosive power of the excessive has also been one recurring element in postmodern theory.<sup>21</sup>

I wonder whether this grace as drama is not bound materially and ideally to the irreplaceable demand for quantifiable economic growth within late consumer capitalism. Such a demand, in theory and practice seemingly insatiable and infinite, makes it difficult to tell the difference between paced growth and excessive, burning-out-of-control growth. In the formulation of Juliet Schor, “the market imperative is bigger, better more.... The rising standard is a national icon, firmly rooted in the political discourse. For those who don’t want to change what they have and are comfortable with a static lifestyle, the market offers limited choices. It is geared to newer and more expensive products. It is perpetually upshifting...relentlessly unidirectional, always ascending.”<sup>22</sup>

The second element is a *domesticating tolerance*, a tolerance that invites one to suspend judgment about the winners and losers within a culture. This sort of tolerance is linked to suspicion and irreverence, the religious importance of which I have elsewhere argued for,<sup>23</sup> but fosters a general lack of a strong suspicion toward and irreverence regarding theocapitalism itself.

William Finnegan observed this element even amidst the poor American youth who populate the pages of his book *Cold New World*. He wrote of a young man who lived in New Haven, Connecticut,

If [he] is impervious to fundamentalism (Christian, Islamic, or black nationalist), it is because his own religion, his ideology—consumer individualism, imbibed since childhood from commercial television—is itself profoundly rooted. Of course, consumerism and lifelong poverty make a painful combination. So any source of fast money—such as dealing drugs—that might offer some relief gets seen, naturally, in the slanting light of economic man’s moral relativism. *It is a question of belief systems.*<sup>24</sup>

In the present terms, it is also a question of theologies of culture.

This domesticating tolerance works through three mini-strategies: a politics of functionalism, a rhetoric of efficiency, and a hermeneutics of plasticity.

With regard to a politics of functionalism: Every product or cultural event must in the end serve the function of another purchase, another act of consumption.

With regard to a rhetoric of efficiency: It is a matter of giving the

appearance that nothing in the end must be wasted—time, money, or materials.

With regard to a hermeneutics of plasticity: Theocapitalism reinforces a theology of culture that fosters an ability to “dignify” a diversity of interpretations, even religious ones, of its products, without being threatened by these interpretations. Ann Powers has recently argued in the *New York Times* that the success of the rock group Creed shows the difficulty that any particular faith has of becoming a market success: “faith is still a strong force for change. But that faith need not only be self-righteous. It could as easily be pagan, radical and anarchistic. It can take as many forms as the culture industry allows.”<sup>25</sup>

One sees this plastic hermeneutic at work when advertising co-opts any competing framework that might threaten theocapitalism, redeploying it in the process with the dubious dignity afforded all possibly subversive hermeneutics: as a means of strategic advance under cover of liberal, pluralist values—advertising that advances its cause by way of religious inclusiveness, of affirming women, or of multiculturalism.

The third element is a theocapitalist relationship to oneself and so to others. The consumer takes up a relation to him- or herself in which the *truth of oneself is to be found in a constant movement through commodities*. This results in an excessive self-consciousness, making the body both glorified and renounced.

Personal development means constant change that is a movement through commodities. The authors of *Dancing in the Dark* illustrate this when they suggest that often in media culture, life is pictured as “a perpetual unsolvable identity crisis[,] portray[ing] human existence as an unending process of adapting to the latest...clothes, cars, music...”<sup>26</sup>

Participating in this style of personal development requires a certain style of self-consciousness. The self must be continually aware of its commodity-mediated presentation to others, such that an investment in “positive” and visible qualities of the self are determinative of the truth of self-identity.<sup>27</sup> “Our lives become our own creation, through *buying*.”<sup>28</sup> “That we are what we have is perhaps the most basic and powerful fact of consumer behavior.”<sup>29</sup>

This self-consciousness is perhaps most apparent in the role of the body in this relationship to oneself. Many in the privileged classes live with at least a mild anxiety regarding the body’s paradoxical tending toward becoming both nothing and everything. There is evidence of a correlation between enmeshment in discourses regarding successful Western consumption and

preoccupation with the body. In other words, between class location or aspiration, and overattention to the body. Without attempting to sort out the very complicated gender, racial, ethnic, cultural, and class issues here, I note two data. First, Helen Malson summarizes research in her book *The Thin Woman* that finds

“eating attitudes” in young Hispanic American women [have been] correlated with “acculturation” to American culture... Thus, the spread of “eating disorders” to all socio-economic and ethnic groups might be understood in terms of an increasing dissemination of Western cultural ideals of female beauty/thinness and dieting.<sup>30</sup>

Second, the *New York Times* recently reported a rise in eating disorders among young Chinese women, particularly educated middle and upper middle class teenage girls, who are now growing up in the conflictual Chinese capitalist body economy of glossy magazines, fast food, bodily transformation, and “self-improvement.” A “new notion of beauty” has taken hold for some of these women. As weight loss centers are springing up at surprising rates,

many see the preoccupation with thinness as a sign of China’s economic progress. The emergence of eating disorders is certainly a macabre milestone of sorts, indicating there is generally now enough to eat in a country where tens of millions starved in the famine of the early 1960s after the disastrous agricultural experiments of the Great Leap Forward.<sup>31</sup>

This paradox of the body is rendered strikingly in Mark C. Taylor’s description of “supermodel” Kate Moss:

A latter-day ascetic worshipping a God that no longer appears, [she] transforms herself into skin and bones—nothing but skin and bones. Hers is an inner “beauty” that is finally indistinguishable from death.<sup>32</sup>

Why does the body under this anonymous discipline respond with a turn to a slimmed down, even deathly visage? Although this is not the place for a thorough inquiry into this question, Naomi Klein makes an interesting observation about late global capitalism that seems to be at the same time about the disciplining of bodies. When global corporations associate economic success with outsourcing, downsizing, and distancing from commodity production and when these corporations in general dissociate themselves

from earthbound issues like workers, wages, unions, and factories in favor of the construction of an ethereal brand-image, then global corporations in the current economic order are competing in a contest, wherein “whoever owns the least, has the fewest employees on the payroll and produces the most powerful images, as opposed to products, wins the race.” She calls this, interestingly, a “race toward weightlessness.”<sup>33</sup>

A select group of corporations...attempt[s] to free itself from the corporeal world of commodities, manufacturing and products to exist on another plane. Anyone can manufacture a product, they reason...Such menial tasks, therefore, can and should be farmed out to contractors and subcontractors whose only concern is filling the order on time and under budget...Headquarters, meanwhile, is free to focus on the real business at hand—creating a corporate mythology powerful enough to infuse meaning into these raw objects just by signing its name.<sup>34</sup>

Note the religious subtext here. Corporeal bodies (particularly the lesser members) are essentially disposable or at most a necessary evil to be dealt with as minimally as possible, with surgical gloves and masks, and only occasionally. “Transcendent meaning machines” practice “corporate transcendence,”<sup>35</sup> separating the brand as ideal experience or lifestyle from the commodity and its earthly associations, which seems to have an analogue in corporeal transcendence, a constitutive discomfort with living in the body—either by making it disappear or (in ours, the most obese country in the world) by stuffing it unhealthily.

Similar to Klein’s critique of “transcendent meaning machines,” Taylor connects the postmodern obsession with the body as a form of reaction and resistance to the felt dematerialization of virtual culture:

When reality becomes virtual, the body disappears. This does not mean, of course, that materiality completely vanishes...But as the webs in which we are caught become ether nets, the realities with which we deal become more and more ethereal... Many people who regard modernization and postmodernization as a fall rather than an advance attempt to resist the march of history by recovering the body. When the body appears to be endangered, it becomes an obsession. This is one of the primary reasons that tattooing (as well as piercing and scarification) has become so widespread during this particular historical and cultural period. *Tattooing represents the effort to mark the*

*body at the very moment it is disappearing.*<sup>36</sup>

The fourth element is the *denial of historicity in general and the particularity of specific histories*. Theocapitalism's theology of culture proceeds by way of attempting to structure a certain timelessness into its strategies of perpetuation. A politics of forgetting is related to this denial: a denial or learned forgetting of my complicity and of the past itself. My complicity in the larger economy, the history of this economy, my power and powerlessness within it, and the history that has produced such power and powerlessness. My complicity in my own personal economy. In the distance we experience between the commodities we consume and how they are produced, retailed, and advertised. Theology may even recognize some of its hoary tradition in images of divine aseity on the part of the consumer—or is it on the part of the producer? Who does theocapitalism gift with being the most unmoved by society and history, or at least of laboring under such an illusion?

Catherine Roach has argued that various forms of popular culture, such as comic strips and car commercials, promote fantasies of aseity on the part of consumers. Her psychoanalytic reading proposes that human ambivalence toward nature, in part a feeling of guilt over our complicity in its destruction, results in popular images that promise consumers aseity if they purchase this Nissan car or this tub of Chiffon butter. The consumer will take on God's quality of self-origination and radical independence; the consumer will thwart nature by becoming autonomous from it in the use of this product.<sup>37</sup>

The recent Power Mac G4 Cube computer exemplifies several of these characteristics, including denial of historicity and of waste. Herbert Muschamp wrote of this computer:

With the Apple Power Cube, we see through a glass, darkly, but on the Internet we shall see each other virtually face to face. In advertisements, the Cube is presented as the embodiment of omnipotence and omniscience, an entity whose name we almost dare not utter. The inner and outer enclosures create an ecotone [a liminal space where two environments overlap] of color, a silver shade generated by the laying of clear plastic over white.

“Silver makes everything disappear,” Andy Warhol remarked apropos the décor of his 47th street studio. The tone of the G4 nudges this technology-packed device toward *immateriality*. So does the silence of its fan-less operation. Perhaps this is not, after all, a machine, but a *box of emptiness*, a chunk of force-field that has been captured from the event-horizon of a black

hole and returned to earth, where its power to warp time, space and gravity has been harnessed to serve consumer needs.

The Cube plays off against the infinite variety of forms in which other computers come packaged, and the ceaseless abundance of images that materialize on its *dematerialized* flat screen. The Cube is a rounded-off Platonic solid. Its speakers play the music of the spheres. On the screen—a veil of pixels—everything is changing, morphing, mutating, pointillistic. *The Cube transcends change.*<sup>38</sup>

Theocapitalism's theology of culture spins a tightly woven economy of denial on which rests its aseitistic speculation. Denial, for example, is a central feature of Juliet Schor's argument about consumer society. "Americans live with high levels of denial about their spending patterns."<sup>39</sup> This denial is most evident in our relationship to our credit cards and our refusal to pay attention to what we spend money *for*. Denial, she argues, also eases the discomfort we feel when confronted with the criticisms of greed in our religious traditions: "Not looking *too* hard helps keep that inner conflict tolerable."<sup>40</sup> What we see here is again a denial of history: this time in the guise of a denial of our concrete personal histories of consumption. (The one exception she notes about this denial is where parents' spending on children is concerned.<sup>41</sup> History, it seems, is only affirmed in the space where it may have the least immediate application. After all, children have a much shorter history to remember, and one largely governed by the influence of others.)

A tight web of denial: of the origins of our products,<sup>42</sup> of their transition through systems of provision, of the effects of their production on everyone but their end user, as if theocapitalism were populated by a universe of orphaned commodities, not only separated from their parents in production but without navels, never having been born from any concrete situation of human toil, blood, flesh. And so this denial of history denies our history of accountability or responsibility: particularly to the common good. There is evidence that an inverse relation exists between investment in private consumption and investment in public goods.<sup>43</sup>

To summarize: such a theocapitalist theology of the body as I suggest above depends on *practices* of closely bound denials—(1) a denial of my obligation to my now-global neighbor, (2) a denial of my economic identity (as mentioned above), (3) a denial of my bodiliness (in excessive self-consciousness about or overcontrol of my body) or my neighbor's bodiliness (through my participation in their low wages, poor food, and dangerous

working conditions),<sup>44</sup> (4) a denial of the producer's ability to see the end state of their products;<sup>45</sup> (5) a denial of my denial. In this virtual asceticism—a life of advancement through renunciation—we are the postmodern monks of global capitalism.

This theology of culture is one maneuver of the theocapitalist strategy to orient imagination, belief, value, and practice in the direction of the success of consumer capitalism. There are at least two aspects absent from this discussion. The first is an analysis and unraveling of significant gaps in this theology that unwork what the overall strategy attempts to work; an exploration of its inner tensions. Second is the role of individuals and communities of consumers in contesting and refashioning this theology of culture: everyday tactics. Though I will not consider these two aspects here, they remain our bulwark against a moralizing interpretation.

And yet it would be incomplete to carry on such an interpretation of theocapitalism by focusing solely on its theology of culture deployed in “the world.” The postmodern problematic giving itself for theological thought today is that every theology of secular culture is always already a theology of the culture that *is* the church. That is to say, every theology of consumer media capitalism is also, potentially, a theology of Western Christianity's present. Following such a line of inquiry implies that Christianity, the Christian “tradition,” or a set of seemingly *sui generis* Christian “values” or “practices” cannot be set in opposition to an economic system in general or consumer media capitalism in particular, as one totality against another. It is more productive to think of “the Church” and “the economy” in more radically sociohistorical terms, as bearing the characteristics of continually shifting, inherently unsteady contested historical formations of econo-spirito-political materials whose identities, as historical, are continually shifting, and which organize our experience in “church” and “culture” and *into* the categories of “church” and “culture.” This is not to *reduce* either to these terms, but rather to problematize these terms at the heart of theological work on them. Thinking in this way helps us to identify “consumer” formations that may be present in “church” *and* in “world.”

I would like to briefly suggest some elements of theocapitalism's theology of culture with respect to the Church. In other words, these are church practices and theologies that do not contest theocapitalism and may indeed support it. I shall focus only on the presence of domesticating tolerance.

This domesticating tolerance is manifest in our “don't ask, don't tell” tithing practice. This is the Christian practice of asking for a percentage of churchgoers' income, without raising the question where that income came

from. Was it earned as a result of exploited labor, of morally questionable investments, of tax evasion? Most churches create a silent compromise with their members once the collection plate is passed: We won't ask you, you won't tell us, and both of us will meet our budgetary needs. As Galbraith remarked of the absolution functioning in the economic boom of the late nineteenth century, it was assumed that one "need [not] reflect, uncomfortably, on the methods by which growth had been achieved and wealth acquired."<sup>46</sup>

We also see this domesticating tolerance manifest in exploitation of church workers, who are assumed to be the ultimate maximizers of their own utility while often serving in severely underpaid roles—a model of work that tolerates the worst of theocapitalism's labor-exploiting tendencies. And we see it in a lack of questioning about where church resources are produced or manufactured (for example, the coffee in the ubiquitous church coffee pots, often grown and harvested by farmers whose first-world employers refuse to conform to fair trade standards). Domesticating tolerance in this regard is a willingness to let consumption be divorced from production: "live and let live."

There are two reasons for the church's ineffectiveness on this issue: first, we do not examine the way consumer media capitalism "capitalizes" on religious and spiritual needs, the way it functions as a spiritual discipline. And second, we deny the extent to which the church itself, in its theology and ministry, is shaped by the social and historical materials that form the grid of intelligibility in which theocapitalism becomes a strategic discipline.

And so to return to the question with which I began this lecture: Is the Church today in a celebrity deathmatch against consumer media capitalism? One "yes" and two "nos."

—*Yes*, insofar as consumer media capitalism is perhaps the strongest threat to Christian praxis in the west today.

—But *no*, insofar as—like "Celebrity Deathmatch"—the "Church" and the "economy" are both made of clay, the clay of the same cultural materials. Made of the same clay, their arms and legs disattach and recombine and join the other, their materials mix and separate, they clobber each other and also carry each others' clay-borne elements.

—And *no*, insofar as the church and capitalism share in a larger formation that we may designate "theocapitalism."

Now I am dangerously close to a moralizing interpretation. I shall step back from this brink in the second lecture and shift my focus from the strategic spiritual discipline of theocapitalism to a consideration of youthful and churchful tactics to contest this discipline. 

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NOTES

1. Chip Walker, "Can TV Save the Planet?" *American Demographics* (May 1996), p. 42, in Naomi Klein, *No Logo* (New York: Picador, 1999), pp. 119, 120.
2. Klein, *No Logo*, pp. 120-121.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 146, 148.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 172.
5. United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), World Investment Report, 1994, in Klein, *No Logo*, p. 261.
6. James Coté and Anton Allahar, *Generation on Hold: Coming of Age in the Late Twentieth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), p. 142. The reference in this text is to rap music.
7. William Finnegan, *Cold New World: Growing up in a Harder Country* (New York: Random House, 1998), p. xxi.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. xxii-xxiii.
9. Jeanne Sahadi, CNNfn Online, 18 February 2000.
10. Ben Fine and Ellen Leopold, *World of Consumption* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 62.
11. *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. xix.
12. *Ibid.*, p. xv.
13. *Ibid.*, p. xix.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
15. For the latter example, see Klein, *No Logo*, pp. 73, 75.
16. Other elements of a philosophy of spiritual discipline that I aim to take up in future work on capitalism include the ordering of practices, the recognition of a stable authority structure, and taking up a responsible relationship to a tradition.
17. Susan Fournier and Michael Guiry, "An Emerald Green Jaguar," in Leigh McAlister and Michael L. Rothschild, eds., *Advances in Consumer Research*, vol. 20 (Provo, Utah: Association for Consumer Research), pp. 355-57.
18. *Imaginary Social Worlds: A Cultural Approach* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), p. 185.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 176.
20. Klein, *No Logo*, p. 121.
21. For example, see Julia Kristeva's use of "jouissance" in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1986), and Mark C. Taylor on the excessiveness of agape that borders on indifference in *About Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 45.
22. Juliet Schor, *The Overspent American: Why We Want What We Don't Need* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), pp. 98, 104, 145.
23. See Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998).
24. Finnegan, *Cold New World*, p. 59, italics mine.
25. Ann Powers, "Singing to the Converted," *New York Times*, 2 Sept. 2000, pp. A19, A25.
26. Quentin J. Schultze, Roy M. Anker, James D. Bratt, William D. Romanowski, John W. Worst, Lambert Zuidervart, *Dancing in the Dark: Youth, Popular Culture, and the Electronic Media* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), p. 66.
27. See Stephen J. Gould, "Public Self-Consciousness and Consumption Behavior," *Journal of Social*

*Psychology* 128, no. 3, 1988, pp. 393-400.

28. Judith Williamson, *Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising* (London: Boyars, 1987), p.70.

29. Russell Belk, "Possessions and the Extended Self," *Journal of Consumer Research* 15 (September 1988), p. 139.

30. Helen Malson, *The Thin Woman* (New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 93.

31. Elisabeth Rosenthal, "Beijing Journal: China's Chic Waistline: Convex to Concave," *New York Times*, 9 December 1999. [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com).

32. Mark C. Taylor, *Hiding* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 181.

33. Klein, *No Logo*, p. 4.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 22. See the interesting example of this regarding Tommy Hilfiger in *No Logo*, p. 24.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

36. Taylor, *Hiding*, pp.127, 129.

37. "Fantasies of Aseity: Religion and Nature Imagery in American Advertising" (draft of paper presented to 2000 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion). I am grateful to Catherine Roach for providing me an advance draft of her paper. Mark C. Taylor, interestingly, has also implicitly connected cars with aseity, though not through advertisements as in Roach's analysis, but through the experience of driving them. I note a certain congruity between Taylor's and Roach's analysis:

The automobile is, in effect, the incarnation of the structure of self-referentiality that informs both modern and modernist practices of production and reproduction. Automobility is, of course, self-movement. Like an ancient Unmoved Mover who descends from heaven to earth, the automobile is moved by nothing other than itself. The dream of automobility is autonomy. To inhabit the automobile machine is to be integrated within a closed circuit in which all production is auto-production...When automobility becomes a way of life, *machines a habiter* become glass houses whose windshields function like screens of noninteractive TV and nonimmersive cinema. (*Hiding*, pp. 254-255)

38. Herbert Muschamp, "A Happy, Scary New Day for Design," *The New York Times*, 15 October 2000, pp. AR39. All italics mine.

39. Schor, *Overspent*, p. 83.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 84.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 85.

42. "The [physical, economic, and political] barriers around the [Economic Protection Zones in foreign countries] serve to reinforce the idea that what is happening inside is only temporary, or is not really happening at all. This collective denial is particularly important in Communist countries where zones house the most Wild West forms of capitalism this side of Moscow..." (Klein, *No Logo*, p. 207).

43. See Schor, "The New Politics of Consumption" (<http://bostonreview.mit.edu/BR24.3/schor.html>), pp. 4-5: "The new consumerism...siphons off resources that could be used for alternatives to private consumption...When lifestyle norms are upscaled more rapidly than income, private consumption 'crowds out' alternative uses of income."

44. There are many commonalities in American corporate brands' foreign factories: long workdays, employees mostly female and mostly young, harsh management, below-subsistence wages, and low-skill and monotonous work. See Klein, *No Logo*, p. 205.

45. "...for the [brand-name multinationals in free-trade zones] to function smoothly, workers must know little of the marketed lives of the products they produce..." (Klein, *No Logo*, p. 347).

46. John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958), p. 60.