

Proof-texting *Capital* via the 'short-circuit': a religious text¹?

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Hermeneutical preface.

Drawing on Benjamin, Agamben² expresses the central importance and function of citation:

Just as through citation a secret meeting takes place between past generations and ours, so too between the writing of the past and present a similar kind of meeting transpires; citations function as go-betweens in this encounter.

Zizek's notion of the short-circuit, its 'secret meeting' occurs in this interchange. A major text and or author is 'short-circuited' by reading via:

a 'minor' author, text or conceptual apparatus...If the minor reference is well chosen, such a procedure can lead to insights which completely shatter and undermine our common perceptions.³

It is also important, in such a reading strategy, to remember that for Benjamin, "to quote involves the interruption of its context"⁴. What follows is a deliberate short-circuiting of *Capital*, reading it as a religious text, seeking the proof-texts and

annotating responses. The proof-texted passages, in their interruption and then their annotation by me as 'minor author' do have the intention of offering a type of secret meeting and short-circuit. What follows is therefore a proof-texted, annotative reading, a short-circuiting of Marx's *Capital*.

Unread Bible and Unread Capital?

It is my suspicion that two of the great, unread books, are the *Bible* and *Capital*. When I say 'unread' I do not mean in the sense that the reading of them does not take place as an actuality – of course they have readers. Rather, my suspicion is that they are *un*-read in the sense that most readers of both the *Bible* and *Capital* read very selectively and have tended not to read either text in full nor in a detailed, slow and close reading. Such an engagement is not surprising, for both texts are substantial, running to many hundreds of pages, and hundreds of thousands of words, covering many topics and involving within them, many different genres. This is more obvious in the case of the *Bible* but *Capital* is, on reading it slowly and carefully, not really a singular book of a single narrative and focus. It is composed of what could be seen as eight books: 'Commodities and Money'; 'The Transformation of Money into Capital'; 'The Production of Absolute Surplus Value'; 'The Production of Relative Surplus Value'; 'The Production of Absolute and of Relative Surplus-Value'; 'Wages'; 'The Accumulation of Capital' and, 'The So-Called Primitive Accumulation'. These parts – or books – contain within them designated chapters and sections that mean when we talk of *Capital* we are, in effect, talking of a single-authored series of books that have been accumulated into a single, normative text. Any close reading of the table of contents for *Capital* makes clear just what variety and detail is contained within.

There are of course *Capital* scholars just as there are Biblical scholars, both of whom undertake detailed, close readings of the individual texts – and parts within – seeking to interpret and illuminate what is contained within and behind the words. But I suggest that in both cases, a far more common engagement has been a very selective reading of the text that is really a type of proof-texting: a Biblical faith or a Marxist identity that is supported by the return again and again to particular texts, passages and statements that form the basis of any ongoing claim to be a person of the book – the book of the *Bible* or the book of *Capital*. This is not surprising for both the *Bible* and *Capital* are very uneven reads, containing within them many passages of detail that most readers ignore or skip quickly over. For we read such texts with

the expectation that we will gain illumination from the words and when we strike passages that do not seem productive we skip on to those that meet our individual or communal need. We leave the close, detailed reading to those who commit their lives to such a task; we, instead supplement a snap-shot, individualist reading with a proof-texting of favourite passages and examples that we tend to return to again and again that become the basis of our own private biblical faith or *Capital*. This is why orthodoxy is always in a struggle with orthopraxis – whether it is Christianity or Marxism – in particular once either text becomes the property of the individual reader who creates their own, singular hermeneutical reading.

It is not too much to say that both the Bible and *Capital* suffer from the Protestant turn in western culture – even if *Capital* is, in many ways, a creation of such a turn. For in the case of both the *Bible* and *Capital*, the individual reader with their individual text becomes their own hermeneutical circle, reading again and again what they want to, how they want to and seeking their own understanding out of a combination of the expectation of revelation moderated by their own individual sense of being a rational reader.

When I sat down to properly, thoroughly read *Capital*, I soon gained the sense that most Marxists – and most who claim some sort of affiliation with Marxism – have not really read *Capital*, nor thought about what it is they are really reading⁵. This may be an audacious statement, but I come to *Capital* from a background in Theology and Religious Studies and I am aware that most Christians – and those who affiliate themselves in some way with Christianity – approach the *Bible* in exactly the same way. Both Christians and Marxists tend to have a faith that exists as a series of statements, phrases, proof-texts and examples drawn from the text that are then coedited in particular forms of orthopraxis by their particular communities. I would suggest that both Christians and Marxists tend to over-read particular sections and passages and under-read or most often ignore other sections of their respective texts. Both faiths therefore exist as a type of proof-text faith, a type of ideological mix-tape compiled by the reader and endorsed by their community. These mix-tapes of revelation and insight are individual compilations, within their communities of reception, that tend to be drawn from a common play-list that attempts to enforce orthodoxy and orthopraxis. Therefore, just as there is no singular biblical community or readership, there is no singular *Capital* community or readership; rather we need to talk of communities of reception that have, within them, idiosyncratic individual readers and reception that can stay within the particular community as long as they do not deviate in their reading reception nor interpretation.

Such a reading of *Capital* is not new, for Engels in his editor's preface to *Capital* from 1886 observes:

Das Kapital is often called, on the Continent, the Bible of the working-class [because]...the conclusions arrived at in this work are daily becoming more and more the fundamental principles of the great working class movement [that]... more and more recognises, in these conclusions, the most adequate expression of its condition and of its aspirations.⁶

If we ask what sort of *Bible* is *Capital* then two answers immediately arise: it is a materialist, secular bible – and it is a single author bible. Yet it is also, I wish to argue, a religious text that operates as a *religare* (the binding together) of a people (the Marxist and by extension, the working class) because it enables *relegere* (the re-reading) of class and Political Economy. As Marx makes clear in his “Author's preface to the First Edition”, *Capital* is the *relegere* of capitalist production, written with the aim of creating the *religare* of those who live and suffer under it. *Capital* is a religious text that also acts as a prophetic one, in the sense of the prophet who stood to the side of society and sought to call it to account, noting:

Alongside the modern evils, a whole series of inherited evils oppress us, arising from the passive survival of antiquated modes of production, with their inevitable train of social and political anachronisms. We suffer not only from the living, but from the dead. *Le mort saisit le vif!*

Marx's *Capital* is a work of prophetic judgement, a critical intervention in the midst of what is experienced as the incompleteness of capitalist production.⁸ Of course capitalism, like any new belief or system is a continuation – and an impure continuation – of what went before, and so it is always incomplete. Just as Christendom was not pure Christianity so is capitalist production and society incomplete and impure. Yet to seek for either a pure capitalist production or a pure Christendom or Christianity is to misunderstand what we find ourselves in the midst of: a belief system that we impose upon ourselves and others (that also today takes the form of identity politics with its own calls for singular purity). Marx takes a different view, in that he contends that “the evolution of the economic formation of society is ... a process of natural history”⁹ wherein political economy is that which replaces theology as the foundation of both church and state, with the claim that the

"English Established Church" is far more likely to pardon an attack on its theology than on its income, for the church has itself succumbed to political economy as a part of that process of natural history. This natural history is drawn from Hegel, but as is well-documented, as the oppositional inversion of Hegelian dialectics, and as such, I would argue, Marx's dialectics is a type of secular theology, a materialist theology, an inverted gnosis seeking to "discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell."¹⁰ We shall return to the gnostic drive of *Capital* later in our discussion, but I wish to conclude this section by noting how Marx ends his Author's Preface to the Second Edition, for in this it is strikingly clear that while *Capital* is the work of a prophet, it is also a religious text of apocalyptic expectation, proclaiming the "universal crisis" that "is once again approaching, although as yet in its preliminary stage"; a universal crisis that he warns will erupt via "the universality of its theatre and the intensity of its actions."¹¹

So, what does it mean to read *Capital* today? How can we read it as a religious text given the expectation that did not eventuate? How can we read it from within capitalism that has not collapsed as part of a dialectic expectation? For Slavoj Žižek, the delayed return of the messiah, the experience of living in 'the time that remains' is similar to the self-reflexivity engendered in communist Eastern Europe by the continual waiting for the trains that never arrived. The ever-delayed messiah, like the long awaited but never arriving train, means, "people started to look around and take note of the inherent materiality of their surroundings."¹² Therefore the messianic attitude can result in secularization. In fact, we could go further in stating boldly that the messianic attitude demands the rupture of secularization, whereby grace is that which is expressed in the rupture of the necessitated turn to the *saeculum* - that is the world of shared experiences.³

What therefore is a secularized *Capital*? To proceed we must first be able to identify the elements that make *Capital* a religious text – and to do so I want to undertake an engagement with a series of proof-texted passages. For just as the *Bible* reader selects passages to shore up their faith, so perhaps may the reader of *Capital* in an attempt to seek an understanding of why what was meant to have occurred by now, has not. In doing so, we may be able to understand the faith of the time that remains, a faith that, as Žižek identifies, involves a turn to the inherent materiality of our surroundings; in this case the surroundings of capitalist production.

Proof-text One.

Our first text concerns the fetishism of commodities:

A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties ...[for] so soon as it steps forth as a commodity it is changed into something transcendent.¹²

As Marx then proceeds to observe, in relation to his example of wood transformed into the commodity of a table: "The mystical character of commodities does not originate, therefore in their use-value."¹³ It is Marx's use of particular terms that is of note here, for the reference to metaphysics, theology and mysticism, in tandem with the recourse to the transcendent status of the commodity all serve to create a sense that something has occurred that only Marx, in his role as prophetic seer, can illuminate. Yet in doing so, something fascinating happens. For Marx does not seek to rationalise or secularize his statement, rather he prefers to keep it as a type of religious experience that only he, in the manner of the theologian, can properly explain. And yet a far simpler explanation is possible: a commodity is neither mystical nor indeed does it operate as a fetish. What happens is far more in line with what we can term the religion of the commodity: *we* 'change' the commodity by *our* belief into being more than what it is; that is by enforcing (*religare*) the re-reading (*relegere*) of the commodity. In short, we use the commodity to make something out of it, but respond to it as being more than the sum of its constituent parts. Wood is chosen, fashioned, and assembled into that which we call a table. On the one hand, I can see it is wood assembled in a particular way but, so assembled for a particular use, I rename it as table. What I do not do is, in the main, even think of "the social character of man's labour"¹⁴ involved in its assemblage; unless it is perhaps of a particular design, craftsmanship and aesthetic and monetary value.

But this is not the same as the claim of the fetish and neither is it simply a recourse to Baudrillardian hyper-reality; we are perhaps more in the realms of Bourdieusian taste. However, all these responses, in their focus on the commodity itself, fail to take proper notice of what is the real religious entity, which is the market itself that commodities circulate within. It is the market that gives the commodities their religious identity, not that the market is the circulation of religious or fetishistic commodities. For it is the market that we believe in, it is the market that is the belief

system that commodities exist and circulate within: a belief, a religion – as both *religare* and *relegere* – that we create and perpetuate. So, commodities are secular – they exist in the world of shared experience – but our response to them varies as to whether we choose to ascribe particular value and meaning to particular commodities. You may have a table that I assign no value to and that I would never choose for a variety of reasons: wood, style, craftsmanship, aesthetics, design, size; on the other hand, I may have a table that someone else desires – for these very same reasons. Yet, as shown, there is no common response to any commodity, and so no common transcendence or mystical character. In short, in the religion of the market, we all worship at different shrines. And this is the secret of the religion of capitalism, it allows the protestantization of the commodity. This is why we create and perpetuate the religion of capitalism, for it gives us protestant choice and identity. It is not the commodity in itself, but that we have the *choice* of commodity that allows participation, on seemingly our own terms, within the *religare* of the market. The choice of commodity allows the *relegere* (the re-reading) of the self and a double *religare* of firstly a binding together with those others who also worship at the shrine of that commodity, and a greater *religare* within the religion of protestant choice we call the market, or in truth, capitalism. That is, we are part of capitalism because we wish to be because of what we believe it offers us: the choice of identity and a community to belong to – the religion of things. This, Marx identifies later on in *Capital*, noting:

As, in religion, man is governed by the products of his own brain, so in capitalist production, he is governed by the products of his own hand.¹⁵

But here, as previously, Marx misunderstands what is happening in the religion of both praxis *and* belief that is capitalist production; for in capitalist production – as in traditional religion – we are *still* governed by the products of our own brain. There is no body-mind split in capitalism whereby the products we make are those of a body independent of a brain. The products of capitalism are products of our brain, made by us, directly by hand or now most commonly, by those productions of our brain, the machine and technology we make to make things: that is, commodities to make commodities; commodities that in all cases are the products of our brain. Just as religion is a materialist creation, so is capitalism and both the commodities that circulate within it and the commodities that allow its circulation. In short, it is products of our brain, all the way down.

Proof-text Two

The second proof-text speaks directly to this issue of circulation. Marx uses the example where linen is exchanged for money which is exchanged for a *Bible*. In all of this, money is that which does not drop out of circulation, whereas the commodity (in this case linen and the *Bible*) does; not only does the linen first fall from circulation with money taking its place, but “Then the Bible falls out of circulation and again money takes its place.”¹⁶

What was, understandably, not noticed by Marx is that with *Capital* he sought exactly the same outcome; but not the taking of the place of the *Bible* by money, but rather the taking of the place of the Bible by *Capital*. And for Marxists, to all intents and purposes, *Capital* did so. But it did so as the bible of the religion of *Capital*, that to which we turn to understand the world of capitalism that we find ourselves within. It is one of the rich ironies that those who live as capitalists believe that they have no need for the bible of capitalism, which is *Capital*. It is rather those discontented with the world of capital, who turn to the bible of *Capital* seeking a *relegere* (re-reading) that will create a *religare* (binding together). But then, is this not like the *Bible* itself? If one is satisfied with the world as it is, there is no need for religion, no need for the *Bible*; for as I have come to understand, religion is perhaps best described as the claim of an alternative. What we have seen, over the Twentieth Century and into the Twenty-First, is the failure of the claim of the alternative to capitalism of Marxism, and therefore, perhaps, the failure of the bible of *Capital*. Yes, money has taken the place of the *Bible*, but the *Bible* has also taken the place of *Capital*.¹⁷ For I can live with capitalism and the *Bible* in a way I cannot live with capitalism and *Capital*; for, to return to Zizek's insight, we are now living in the time that remains of *Capital*, a delayed return of that which was expected and hoped for – for when it did occur it was overcome and rejected. What I see, looking around, is the inherent materiality of capitalist production and so I secularize it: seeing it as the world of shared human experience. Here we note that Zizek's example was first applied to the societies and system that attempted to create and impose an alternative to capitalist production, an alternative that failed. So, our question is, why is the religion of capitalism stronger than the religion of Marxism?

Proof text Three.

My third text, addresses the central identity provided by capitalist production and the circulation of capital:

As the conscious representative of this movement, the possessor of money becomes a capitalist. His person, or rather his pocket, is the point from which the money starts and to which it returns...and it is only in so far as the appropriation of ever more and more wealth in the abstract becomes the sole motive of his operations, that he functions as a capitalist, that is, as capital personified and endowed with consciousness and a will.¹⁸

There is perhaps no more centrally religious text – and allusion – in *Capital* than this. All of those with a theological ear will hear the allusion, for is this not the claim of *Imago Dei* remade into what can but only be *Imago Capital*?

This in itself is the creation narrative of *Capital*: capital creates capitalists who are but made in the image of capital or more specifically, the image of the capital which is desired. If we consider *Imago Dei*, it is not that we look like God, it is that we possess the qualities of God and exist in relationship to God. Indeed, if we read properly the biblical story of the Fall, the exile from the garden occurs because being created creatures, *Imago Dei*, we lacked but two qualities of God: knowledge of good and evil, and eternal life. Having tasted of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, only one quality now separated humanity from God – and lest humanity ate from the fruit of the tree of eternal life, they were banished from the garden. In Marx's creation story of existence of value that results in the circulation of capital, the fall is the addition of surplus-value:

Because it is value, it has acquired the occult quality of being able to add value to itself. It brings forth living offspring, or at the least, lays golden eggs.¹⁹

This occurs in a double temptation: that of money and that of commodities, for unless money “takes the form of some commodity, it does not become capital.”²⁰ The fall narrative for Marx is the entry of money and commodities into the world; a fall narrative that causes the creation of that negative creation, *Imago Capital*, a fall into a lesser form of humanity who exists in reference to that which denies our common humanity. For the capitalist does not live in reference to fellow humanity, they exist

only in reference to commodities that “are in faith and truth money...a wonderful means whereby out of money to make money.”²¹

In Marx's version of capital creation, all is money. Some may suggest that all is value, but that is a metaphysical claim. In this materialist world, it is from money we come and to money we are returned, it is within the circulation of money that we are born, die and from which we gain our meaning. This is the theology of *Capital*.

Proof-Text Four.

Our fourth text is what can be described as the central belief, perhaps the central creed of *Capital*:

The capitalist form... presupposes from first to last, the free wage-labourer, who sells his labour power to capital.²²

Marx has earlier referenced “metaphysical subtleties” and here, in a similar fashion, is laid out both the ontology and the teleology of capitalist production.

We, as free wage-labourers, exist to sell our labour power to capital: this is the basis of our being, and our purpose and meaning. This we can understand in reference to *Proof-Text Three*: this is the central meaning of *Imago Capital*. The distinction is that capital, by the use of the market, makes us believe that this is our free-will, our choice. The market suggests to us that we have agency; for our labour power is not taken, it is not stolen, nor is it a gift we give to capital. No, it is because in the market we sell our labour power that we believe, as supposed free wage-labourers, that we are in control of the exchange and of the identity that exists pre-exchange and exists post-exchange. It is here that Marx's *Capital* assumes the role of prophetic text that seeks to awaken us to the truth we have denied: we are not free wage-labourers, and the selling of our labour power to capital does nothing but enslave us. The market is not free, the market is a prison we are trapped within. We are unable to see this because of our unacknowledged identity as *Imago Capital*. I am here reminded of Marx's famous statement from *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (1844) that “the criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism”²³. For as *Capital* exposes, capitalism is itself a religion that has its creeds, priests, institutions and beliefs. Only if we can criticize traditional religion can we understand how to begin to criticize this new religion of capitalism.

Proof-Text Five

It is here we turn to what can be termed the secularization of capitalist production that occurs via “the new modern science of technology.” For just as the rise of science secularized the world of Christendom, so too has modern science secularized this alternative faith of capital:

Modern Industry rent the veil that concealed from men their own social process of production, and that turned the various spontaneously divided branches of production into so many riddles, not only to outsiders, but even to the initiated.²⁴

There are three ways to read this text. The first is that with Modern Industry, capitalist production becomes secularized; that is, it becomes the world of shared human experience. The second is that with Modern Industry, capitalist production becomes disenchanting; not profaned but rather made mundane. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, Modern Industry acts as the expression of enlightenment upon the world of the religion of capitalist production; enabling all to see clearly what actually is – and is not. Or at least, this is the central hope of Marx’s *Capital*.

Now while this has occurred, the way in which it has eventuated is not that which sits as central hope in *Capital*. For while modern industry does rent the veil; the response to this took three broad forms. The first was that, even though we could now see our own participation within the social processes of production, we still decide to continue as before. Knowledge did not necessarily result in change. Capitalist production continues – and in fact increases and expands in certain areas under modern industry. The second was that there were those who took the renting of the veil and the new knowledge that ensued as the basis for a call to overturn the system. These enlightened, disenchanting, secularized workers, took up the call of Marx’s *Capital* – in varying degrees and forms – and sought change; at its extreme, in the form of revolution. But it is the third response that is perhaps the most salutary for us, re-reading *Capital* on its 150th anniversary. For the world of Modern Industry continues and has been returned to by those who at one time embraced its opposition and the system that attempted to challenge capitalist production. The challenge is that the renting of veil, in enabling us to clearly see our own social process of production, did not in the main turn us from capitalist production. Of course, we can say this occurs because of the continuation of false consciousness,

because of the continuation of the opiate of masses and the creation of new ones; but the challenge to all readers of *Capital* 150 years on, is why has this alternative religion, why has this alternative bible, failed?

Perhaps the clue can be found in considering the challenge laid down regarding the revolutionary potential of capitalism by Joseph Schumpeter's *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (1942). Schumpeter observes, in an expression of capitalism as "an evolutionary process",²⁵ that "this process of Creative Destruction is the essential fact about capitalism. It is what capitalism consists in and what every capitalist concern has got to live in."²⁶ This is what Schumpeter terms "the perennial gale"²⁷. In short, there is an evolutionary process of creative destruction within capitalism that has enabled it to change and modify with the revolutionary potential of technology and Modern Industry. More than that, capitalism is destructive unto itself, in that capitalism is able to change, adapt and expand in ways that are as creative as they are destructive. In fact, it is not too much to say that the ultimate act of creative destruction has been that of capitalism against socialism and communism whereby we have seen not only the destruction of the socialist and Marxist states, but also the embracing of new forms of capitalism by those ex-socialist and or Marxist states – and the integration of capitalism into the socialist states of China and Vietnam. Is *Capital* the bible of the religion that has failed; or at the very least a religion that has shrunk to a small collection of the faithful who find themselves in a profane world of capitalism where their faith in Marxism is dismissed as of no consequence? What does this mean for *Capital* as a text, as the text of an alternative to capitalism? For on the one hand its critiques of capitalist production still hold, but has the creative destruction of capitalism enabled the dismissal of *Capital* and all it stands for?

Proof-Text Six

So how does the problem of *Capital* today fit within our sixth proof-text? We have briefly discussed this quote earlier as part of the discussion on Proof-text One, but I wish to again engage with it as its own Proof-text because of the issue it raises:

...as in religion, man is governed by the products of his own brain, so in capitalist production, he is governed by the products of his own hand²⁸?

Here is perhaps the central issue, for as we have been stressing, capitalist production does not sit as the body part of the Cartesian body-mind dualism. Capitalist production is first and foremost the product of man's brain, as is *Capital* and Marx's critique. All we do and exist within as society, structures, technologies and systems is the product of our own brain, it just takes different forms in the world. What concerns us is the way one product of our brain (capitalist production and the attendant system of capitalism) has managed to succeed over another (*Capital* and the alternative socialist and communist systems). Why do we believe in capitalism in a way we no longer do in socialism or communism? Why has *Capital* been so quickly consigned if not to dust-bin of history, at the very least to the dusty shelves in a little visited corner of the library? Is part of the problem *Capital* itself, in that a 'definitive text' of critique exists in such a substantial version that it is increasingly unread? Yet when the book was more widely and deeply read there came also to be an alternative system and politics that supported it. Is the problem that we have, in effect, a bible without a religion, a bible without a church; are Marxists in effect the political equivalent of post-church secular Christians? The only difference being the substantial one that the church and Christianity continues in a way Marxist and socialist societies do not. So, is *Capital* now nothing more than the text of a religion that has failed, a creed that lost almost all its adherents, a prophetic work that few if any wish to still read, let alone hear?

Yet perhaps it is still as a prophetic work that we should re-read *Capital*: as a prophetic work of critique, not as the text of an alternative system. The failure of socialism, the failure of Marxism should not be taken as a failure of *Capital* – any more than the failure of Christendom, or indeed the repeated failures of Christianity and its institutions and members should be taken as a failure of the *Bible*. In short, what is done in response to a text should not necessarily condemn the text itself to failure.

A hermeneutical response of the religion of Capital

What makes *Capital* a particular type of religious text is the manner in which it now operates as a *relegere* (a re-reading) but no longer as a *religare* (a binding together). But does this actually free *Capital* for a new role as prophetic *religare* in the 21st century? If we read *Capital* today, as the critique of the system that we still live within, the question then becomes one of why have we failed to heed its warnings? Perhaps its answer lies at the very beginning of *Capital* where Marx states:

A commodity is, in the first place, an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another.²⁹

If we think of the last 100 years then capitalism, as a commodity, has satisfied human wants in the way that socialism or Marxism, as ideology or in its forms of embodiment in a state, have failed to consistently do so. Capitalism, as the religion of the commodity has survived and thrived in a way that the counter-religion of Marxism has not. The answer to why this is so is provided in that statement by Marx: because commodities satisfy human wants of some sort or another. In the same way, God has refused to die for most of the world because as a commodity, God has properties (in itself and in the religion, institutions, communities and commodities of that God) that have satisfied human wants of some sort or other. *Capital* exists today as the text of the critique of those wants and the critique of the way those wants are satisfied; but has proved unable to provide a long-term alternative to the system of capitalist production of commodities that creates both wants and the commodities that satisfy those wants. Here we need to return to Schumpeter, for the secret of the success of capitalism is that it is a system that manages to both create and creatively destroy human wants and so acts as a *religare* of commodities via the *relegere* of human life as focused on wants and commodities. In short, capitalism is a belief that we live within because it creates the foundation for its own continuation. Central to this is our belief in exchange value, for we believe in exchange value, it is not created outside of humanity. The creation of markets is our attempt to create both an orthodoxy of exchange value and an orthopraxis of exchange value. Markets are therefore a version of both the *religare* (the binding together) and the *relegere* (the re-reading) of capitalist production. The basis of what we can term the materialist theology of *Capital* is identified by Marx whereby "objects of utility" that are at the same time "depositories of values" are able to "manifest themselves... as commodities".³⁰ For in *Capital* Marx identifies what can be termed a type of theology of value: a presence made manifest that is, to a degree, gnostic; that is "the value that lies hidden behind"³¹ exchange value.

It is in his discussion of value that Marx exposes what can be taken to be the gnosis of *Capital*, whereupon he talks of "the whole mystery of the form of value"³² that he then seeks to make known; wherein value is itself taken to be an existing belief. The argument becomes a type of circular mystery whereupon (in reference to Marx's similar notation) what we determine = exchange value → what we believe the

value =. Value is therefore expressed as reference to its equivalence, which is nothing more nor less than what we want to believe it is – and can convert others to likewise believing. Such is the basis of Marx's example of linen and the coat. Capitalist production is in the end an act of creation *and* what we believe the creation signifies. Value made manifest, in capitalist production is nothing more nor less than the creation of value by human belief made manifest. So, Marx is correct in his scathing assessment of value made manifest as similar to the way in which "the sheep's nature of the Christian is shown in his resemblance to the Lamb of God".³³ Yet both Christianity and capitalism have outlasted socialism and Marxism, so the value made manifest in both is, for some reason, by Marx's logic, commodities and values that satisfy human wants in ways that the system proposed by *Capital* could not.

As we read our way through *Capital* we should note the continued use of variations to the term 'manifest' used by Marx. This central concern with manifestation is something Marx struggles to properly explain, yet his notion of manifestation holds distinct metaphysical and more so, religious categories. This is linked to his central concern with exposing "the secret of the expression of value"³⁴ which is for him the equivalent of a mystery, a gnosis which is nothing more nor less than the creation of value as a belief by humanity. For the manifestation – either use value or exchange value – is itself nothing more nor less than what we decide to believe it is so and then believe it is so. Manifestation is nothing but belief and this continues into the expanded relative form of value that creates and perpetuates the mirror of value whereby so much linen = a coat = or so much tea or = so much coffee and so on and so on; and we must add, so much human labour. And here perhaps is the nub in a world of globalised labour, for if we are honest, we do not believe that human labour is equal across all locations of production, for if we truly did we would curtail our purchasing of all that is not indicative of a universal human value of labour. The mirror of value is therefore not a singular mirror but rather a series of distorted ones whereby we choose to live in a world of funhouse mirrors wherein all value is seemingly so distorted that we believe there is no singular mirror of value. The analogy may seem somewhat tortured, but the central challenge is one that stretches back to Marx. The manifestation of the expression of value serves *our* wants and needs as consumers, not the wants and needs of globalised human labour that produces it for us. And because it serves our wants and needs, *we believe in what the commodity, as manifested value, satisfies for us*. By believing in capitalism I can have concern for globalised human labour, perhaps seek out some locally made or some ethical trade goods, but in the end, my wants and needs will,

post-1989 in particular, trump the needs of globalised human labour. This is the triumph of the religion of capitalism – and the failure of the alternative religions of socialism and Marxism. In the end, capitalism has enacted a creative destruction upon us all, a creative destruction that is ongoing, precisely because the destruction is believed by us to be creative in what it offers to us in the form of wants and needs. I must believe it is so, or my wants and needs themselves are thrown into question and with that my ontology and teleology (though few of course would choose to express it in such a fashion).

The failures of socialism, Marxism and the communist project – and the failure of *Capital* – is therefore the failure to perpetuate an alternative ontology and teleology, the failure to provide an alternative *religare* and *relegere* that could survive the collapse of the states and systems that claimed (increasingly wrongly it must be stated) to make manifest an alternative. So as identified by Marx, we find ourselves in what can be termed the situation whereby what was *Imago Dei* as the measure of human value has been replaced by what we can term *Imago Capital*, that is “*the universal measure of value*”.³⁵ For as Marx identifies, to function as a capitalist is to be “capital personified and endowed with a consciousness and a will”³⁶; but I would add, to function within capitalism, without recourse to an alternative, is also to be *Imago Capital* by default. We might not all be capitalists, but we exist within the universal measure of capital that frames our consciousness and will and increasingly, it seems, our options and possible alternatives. For this framing of the universal measure of value extends even to that which speaks of an alternative. In Marx’s analogy, there is a circulation of linen-money-Bible-money and what is crucial for our argument is that the Bible is not the end of the circulation of commodities but is subsumed into it – as a commodity that satisfies human wants and needs; but in its selling, the Bible is secularized by capital as just another commodity and human production. Capital is therefore the *religare* and *relegere* that secularizes all commodities and wants and needs, even as it fetishizes them or allows others to claim a sacred value and identity. For linen = bible or = \$x or = y volume of alcohol or = z amount of food and so on and so on. Yet what is perhaps most interesting is that in a chain of metamorphoses the *Bible* today not worth much at all – as any visit to the Amazon site will make clear. The commodity of the Bible as exchange value is therefore quite different to its commodity value as satisfying human wants and needs. Likewise *Capital*, in a chain of metamorphoses as exchange value, is similarly not worth much at all today either but perhaps even less as commodity value in satisfying human wants and needs.

What we are left with in *Capital*, as I have continuously stated, is nothing more nor less than a prophetic challenge to the continuing system of capitalist production. The problem is not the text, but what we do with it. It is the problem of the homiletics and the hermeneutics of *Capital* in a way that speaks into the world of today, not expecting mass conversions but rather the preaching to the community who exist within the dark ages of the ascendancy of capitalist production, seeking a renaissance of sorts that may also lead to the reformation of *Capital*.

¹ I note there is voluminous writing both on Marx and religion, and *Capital* and religion. This essay is a modest contribution to such work, seeking neither to be a literature survey, nor an argument with or drawing on what has been already written. Rather it is an idiosyncratic reading, approaching *Capital* as a religious text, drawing on the short circuit methodology laid out by Žižek.

² Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains. A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans* trans. Patricia Daly (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p.139.

³ Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The perverse core of Christianity* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003), Series foreword.

⁴ Walter Benjamin, "What is Epic Theatre?" (1968:151), quoted in Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, p.139.

⁵ I, of course, exclude the authors who participate in this issue - and readers may self-exclude from my critique as they wish. However, I stand by my observation within the wider milieu of the engagement with *Capital*.

⁶ Frederick Engels, "Editors Preface" in Karl Marx, *Capital* (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth editions Limited, 2013), p.5.

⁷ Karl Marx, "Author's Preface" in Karl Marx, *Capital* (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth editions Limited, 2013) p. 8. [hereafter *Capital*].

⁸ Karl Marx, "Author's Preface", *Capital*, p. 8.

⁹ Karl Marx, "Author's Preface", *Capital*, p. 9.

¹⁰ Karl Marx, "Author's Preface to Second Edition" *Capital*, p. 16.

¹¹ Karl Marx, "Author's Preface to Second Edition" *Capital*, p. 16. In this case, the object of Marx's prophetic scorn and warning in 1873 is "the mushroom-upstarts, of the new, holy Prusso-German empire."

¹² Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute Or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (London: Verso, 2000), p.42.

¹³ See Gabriel Vahanian, 'Theology and the Secular' in C. Crockett (ed.) *Secular Theology: American Radical Theological Thought*, (London: Routledge, 2001) pp. 10-25.

¹⁴ Karl Marx, *Capital*, p. 46.

¹⁵ Karl Marx, *Capital*, p. 46.

¹⁶ Karl Marx, *Capital*, p. 47.

¹⁷ Karl Marx, *Capital*, p.432.

¹⁸ Karl Marx, *Capital*, p.76.

- ¹⁷ I note that another argument could be made that the Koran has also taken the place of *Capital* – but that is for another essay.
- ¹⁸ Karl Marx, *Capital*, pp.102-103.
- ¹⁹ Karl Marx, *Capital*, p.103.
- ²⁰ Karl Marx, *Capital*, p.103.
- ²¹ Karl Marx, *Capital*, p.104.
- ²² Karl Marx, *Capital*, p.232.
- ²³ Karl Marx, (1844) "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*. Introduction" in Robert C. Tucker (ed), *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1972), p.11.
- ²⁴ Karl Marx, *Capital*, p.337.
- ²⁵ Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (London: Routledge, 5th edition) p.82.
- ²⁶ Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (London: Routledge, 5th edition) p.83.
- ²⁷ Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (London: Routledge, 5th edition) p.84.
- ²⁸ Karl Marx, *Capital*, p.432.
- ²⁹ Karl Marx, *Capital*, p.17.
- ³⁰ Karl Marx, *Capital*, p.26.
- ³¹ Karl Marx, *Capital*, p.27.
- ³² Karl Marx, *Capital*, p.27.
- ³³ Karl Marx, *Capital*, p.30.
- ³⁴ Karl Marx, *Capital*, p.37.
- ³⁵ Karl Marx, *Capital*, p.62. [*Italics* in original].
- ³⁶ Karl Marx, *Capital*, p.103.