

GOD AS THE SOURCE OF WEALTH

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There are no primal (or so-called “primitive”) societies which fail to celebrate their material blessings. When the animals are plentiful; when the tubers grow fat in the ground, or the maize tall and strong in the field; when the women are pregnant, and the men vital in war or negotiation, a small people has the elbow-room to be confident. It is a guarantee of self-respect if one has beasts and harvests good enough to meet one’s round of obligations, or answer the needs of a feast, and it is the fruit of a group’s identity that its members delight, shame, or frighten, out-bargain, or satisfy, its natural competitors.

Wealth in primal society is group wealth. There are undeniably individuals, families, or castes more noticeably well-off, and “primitive capitalism” can indeed exist, so that, among the Tolai of New Britain, for example, it is harder for a native rope to pass through the eye of a bone needle than for a poor man – a man who has failed to accumulate shell-money – to enter the paradise of spirits.¹ A “big man”, however, to take the straightforward New Guinea-highland expression for leadership as axial, is only big if he is generous, if his wealth is accessible to willing debtors, or his prestige enhanced by magnanimity. A little society, with allowance for selfish littleness of spirit, especially in its management and institutions, would easily fall prey to discord and extinction by unneighbourly enemies.

Wealth in primal societies is not a purely human achievement. It is rejoiced in, not only because the labourers or looters have ably carried out their tasks, but also because the gods and ancestors have been supportive, or at least permissive. If so much of the ritual or magic documented in modern ethnographies has been in pursuit of fecundity, this is because *homo economicus*, in traditional society, sees himself as the recipient of extra-human magnanimities, and he is grateful to more than himself or his fellows. “Man” is

¹ Cf., e.g., C. G. ToVaninara, “Tambu: Traditional Sacred Wealth”, in Norman C. Habel, ed., *Powers, Plumes and Piglets: Phenomena of Melanesian Religion*, Bedford Park SA: Australian Association for the Study of Religions, 1979, pp. 33ff; Trude Scarlett Epstein, *Capitalism, Primitive, and Modern: Some Aspects of Tolai Economic Growth*, Canberra ACT: Australian National University Press, 1968.

“the toolmaker”, as Kenneth Oakley reminds us,² but primal men and women are far less the manufacturers than they are the husbanders, and their abundance – in litters and harvests – seems generated for them rather than by them. Thus, reciprocities cannot stop short at bargains and mutual offering between the living, but issue in vital relationships with deities and the dead.

The historian of religion will immediately recognise that such beliefs in the supra-human bases of material prosperity have been of fundamental importance at the dawn of so-called civilisation, and hence have left an indelible effect on the documented, or greater, traditions, not only on the host of small and less-familiar cultures around the world today. “O Agni”, runs an ancient Indian Vedic hymn, “bring us wealth secure, vast wealth in horses and kine.”³ “Praise the Lord”, sings the psalmist of the Bible, because the generous godfearer has “wealth and riches . . . in his house”.⁴ As the Caesar Maximin has it inscribed (in one of the last official apologies for paganism before the first Christian Roman Emperor Constantine), “who can be so senseless . . . as not to perceive that it is by the benevolent care of the gods that the earth does not refuse the seeds committed to it, nor disappoint the cultivators?”⁵ Individual greed, and lack of liberality, were certainly disdained – an excess and imbalance, according to the ancient Greek Theognis, or deserving the judgment of God, as Job avers⁶ – but material blessings, seen to involve the group, or a whole ethnos, were the welcome results of heavenly grace. It is this sense of divine goodness, of God’s role as the ultimate author of prosperity, which has been inherited by the world’s most populous religions, including Islam and Christianity. The early Indian Brahmins, the Buddha, the Christ, and the Prophet Muhammad may have been admired for their “right livelihood”, admittedly, but, among the multitude who came following after them, wealth was a nation’s pride, and the faithful must needs lift their prayers to God for ever having “turned dearth and scarcity into . . . plenty” and “bounty”.⁷

² Kenneth P. Oakley, *Man the Toolmaker*, London UK: British Museum, 1956.

³ *Rg-Veda*, [Publication details cannot be identified], X:156, 153, cf. 1, 140, 13; VI:1, 11-13; VIII:23, 27ff, 39, 10.

⁴ Psalm 112:3; cf. 119:14; yet, by contrast, 37:16, 49:6, etc.

⁵ In Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastica Historia Diui Eusebii*, [Publication details cannot be identified], IX, xiii, 8.

⁶ Theognis, [Publication details cannot be identified], 129-130, 145-150, Job 20:15, 36:19 NEB.

⁷ The allusions are to “Thanksgivings for Plenty”, in *The Book of Common Prayer* (1662).

The question now arises as to whether we have all entered into a techno-dominated age, in which such “history is bunk” – into Henry Ford’s presaged tomorrow-land of mass-produced “Cargo”.⁸ An answer can no longer be expected from the debate between modernists and conservatives, between those holding that the world has “come of age” (and must forget its old-hat prayers to the bearded Provider-in-the-sky) and those still happily giving thanks to the One who blesses us with banks of patented, hybridised seeds, and reams of computer print-outs. No. The issue can only be addressed properly if we take into account the new dimensions to prosperity and wealth since the second Industrial Revolution (1880s on). Karl Marx rightly perceived the implications of factory-produced commodities, both for the worker (who no longer saw the fruit of his labour), and for the world (since capital could batter down every bastion of socio-economic traditionalism).⁹ Yet he had no idea of the extraordinary processes of mass production to come, nor how the new “fetishes” – the tins, bottles, utensils, cigarettes, radios, shorts, and singlets – would litter the global village as a man-propelled surrogate for wind-blown spores.

The “democratisation of treasure”, of course, is incomplete. There are cargo-hungry countries, which know a minimum of real hunger, and genuinely-hungry countries, which still want much more Cargo than packets or tins of processed food. In the midst of riches, moreover, there are enclaves of the third world. The material kingdom of heaven has come to some, and not to others; indeed, it could even be said that those peoples who are without look to the ones who possess as the new gods. Which of the old gods was expected to bestow such riches and harness such power? Could the Greek god Hermes have devised a giant supermarket, and Zeus (or even Yahweh!) thrown a thunderbolt as impressive as the atom bomb at Hiroshima? Yet the ways of the new gods are as typically unpredictable and inscrutable as the old; one always wishes

⁸ In this paper, “cargo” means European-style goods (which are now internationally marketed and mass-produced, however, by such non-Western offshoots of colonial enterprise as Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Japan). “Cargo” bears an upper case C when a symbolic value or surplus meaning over and above the goods themselves is being denoted. For the quotation, Henry Ford, from the witness box, in the “Ford vs. Chicago Tribune” libel suit, July, 1919; cf. Henry Ford, and Samuel Crowther, *The Great Today and Greater Future*, 3rd edn, Sydney NSW: Cornstalk, 1926.

⁹ I allude here to Karl Marx, and Frederick Engels, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in C. Wright Mills, ed., *The Marxists*, New York NY: Dell Publishing, 1962, p.50.

more from them than they are prepared to offer, and they do not solve the problem of evil.

I exaggerate to make the point: for those whose consciousness remains rootedly primal (and I think here specifically of the tribesmen and peasants in Africa, South Asia, Latin America, and the Pacific), Cargo comes as blessing, along with rain and good harvests – as a gift of the divine or the spirit-world. And, despite all the incongruities one may encounter, the sensitive phenomenologist will hopefully deter us from deriding the “naïve and knowing” souls of pre-modernity, who try making religious sense of the new consumerism.¹⁰ A multiplicity of images may arise before our eyes here. The latest addition to the Hindu pantheon in India is Santoshi Mata, the by-now 20-year-old Cargo deity to whom one prays for refrigerators and transistors; in the Kyoto supermarkets of Japan, around the corner from the whole range of soya sauces and tinned bean shoots, one is just as likely to find a traditional shamanness, who will consult your dead relatives and consider your future fortune for a fee; it is typical in Abu Dhabi on the Persian Gulf for the faithful to bow towards Mecca, or dance at marriage feasts wearing Western-style sports jackets over their white *galabiyya*; the African Ogun, an age-old Yoruba *orisha*, or deity of iron in Nigeria, has become the special god of motor vehicles, as important for their acquisition as their safety; while, in Melanesia, women have died of blood poisoning for wearing opened tin cans as priceless armlets, and the ceremonial dancers have replaced some of their decorative feathers for coloured cardboard.¹¹

It is with the so-called “cargo cults” of Melanesia, of course, that we find the hope and despair of non-industrial consciousness in its sharpest focus. In the highlands of Papua New Guinea and Irian Jaya, in fact, indigenous “stone-age” peoples have first encountered and fled from the whites as beings from outer

¹⁰ The quoted phrase is from the impressionist painter Camille Pissarro.

¹¹ On India and Japan, I rely on the oral testimonies of (the late) Professor A. L. Basham (Australian National University) and Dr A. Snodgrass (University of Sydney), respectively. On Abu Dhabi, e.g., “Middle East”, Four Corners, October 6, 1973, (PNR-940) ABC Television. On Ogun, Noel Quinton King, *Religions of Africa: a Pilgrimage into Traditional Religions*, New York NY: Harper & Row, 1970, p. 21. On Melanesia, see Garry W. Trompf, “Doesn’t Colonialism Make You Mad?”, in Sione Latukefu, ed., *Papua New Guinea: a Century of Colonial Impact: 1884-1984*, Boroko PNG: National Research Institute, 1989, coupled with “Field notes Wahgi”, Port Moresby, 1976.

space, for as von Daniken-like astronauts, geologists have dropped into a jungle clearing by helicopter and hewn out specimens with tools mysteriously harder than rock, like “moonrakers”.¹² Such extraordinary and very particular situations provide a useful paradigm for recognising the general truth that, in certain, hitherto more obscure, corners of the world, “primitives” and “moderns” have only recently discovered each other, at a time when humanity has attained to the very pinnacles of technological achievement. Accordingly, and not without good reason, peoples who have long looked to their deities and spirits for material survival now turn to the God of the missionaries as Lord of the new wealth. They have even expected Jesus to return with calicoes, bags of rice, and motorbikes, to perfect the material salvation for which their societies have so constantly striven.¹³ Those of us who have seen (or been taught!) that commodities are prepared in factories, and not by prayers and magic, will smile knowingly, and perhaps sense the poignancy of it all; yet, who is to dispute that these new beliefs are sincerely held? And who disprove, as the Sepik philosopher, Bernard Narokobi, wonders, that God and the ancestors are indeed at work, at least preparing the ingredients of the cargo under the ground?¹⁴

In the cargo cult, and the cargo thinking of primal societies, however, the denizens of the first world (and even much of the second) will be able to see an image of their weaknesses – if they try. Today’s successful urban dwellers have become used to a standard of living beyond the wildest dreams of their distant ancestors. Yet, as they look around their kitchens, filled, as they are, increasingly, with stainless steel and whirling mix-mastery, of their living-rooms, lined with fine porcelain and stereo systems, all of which appendages are not the produce of their hands, they are left without psychological surety as to where plastic, artificial, inessentials sit in relation to the perennial search for deeper meanings. This is why the “cargo cult” is usually so alien and absurd to the white, or to the rich; for them mass-produced commodities, along with the money used to procure them, present themselves, above all, as tokens of

¹² Oral testimony from the geologist, Dr Peter Lowenstein, after his 1975 expedition to the Southern Highlands of Papua New Guinea. Cf. Erich von Daniken, *Chariots of the Gods?: Unsolved Mysteries of the Past*, Michael Heron, tran., New York NY: Putnam, 1970.

¹³ Cf. G. Shepperson, “Nyasaland and the Millennium”, in Sylvia L. Thrupp, ed., *Millennial Dreams in Action*, New York NY: Schocken Books, 1970, p. 157.

¹⁴ Bernard M. Narokobi, “Who Shall Take up Peli’s Challenge?: a Philosophical Contribution to the Understanding of Cargo Cults”, in Theodor Ahrens, ed., *The Church and Adjustment Movements, Point* (1/1974), pp. 93ff.

worldliness, and not of spiritual integration. One cannot deny that the first world, with its religious pluralism, has witnessed many and varied attempts at hallowing its indigestible wealth, and technological extravaganza, with varying degrees of sanctity. The neo-Calvinist assumption that wealth is a sign of God's reward for the saved is still prevalent, even if He offers such unlikely prizes as double-door garages and blue-tiled swimming pools. The Western gospel of success still sows the seeds of Chryslers, catamarans, and Crystal Cathedrals.¹⁵ Towards the bottom end of the social scale, I have come across those young Western followers of Japan's new religion Namu-Myoho-Renge-Kyo, who sit before their altars chanting Om for the purpose of procuring the television set, and other appliances they simply cannot afford.¹⁶ And I marvel at that bejewelled, starry-eyed, black American Reverend "Ike", who, from New York's old Loew's picture palace, preaches the gospel of "green power" to depressed Americans, who apparently need the motivation to make lots of money.¹⁷ As for the national level, affluence can be a heaven-sent instrument of leadership – of somehow taking the rest of humanity with you to the moon (even though most of the earth does not have a decent water supply), or of heeding the crusade against godless communism (with a built-up of arms, which never seems to account for the massive and growing contingents of godfearers on the inside of the Iron Curtain).

The relative discrepancies between the possessors and the dispossessed in the contemporary world are so great, however, the revolutionary jump from old, pre-20th-century standards of individual, group, and national wealth is such an enormous one, and the whole symbology of the prosperity in the hands of richer nations, multi-nationals, and even private individuals, so foreign to the archetypes of symbiosis from the past, that it is now no longer justifiable, nor advisable, to celebrate and render thanks to God as the source of wealth. Perhaps one should qualify this as an assertion, accounting for the spiritual

¹⁵ For background, Moses Rischin, ed., *The American Gospel of Success: Individualism and Beyond*, Chicago IL: Quadrangle Books, 1965; James J. Clark, and Robert H. Woodward, eds, *Success in America*, Belmont CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1966; Lawrence Chenoweth, *The American Dream of Success: the Search for the Self in the 20th Century*, North Scituate MA: Duxbury Press, 1974.

¹⁶ Garry W. Trompf, *Fieldnotes in Santa Cruz, California*, [Publishing details cannot be identified], 1975.

¹⁷ See esp. Garry W. Trompf, *Religion and Money: Some Aspects*, Charles Strong Lecture, Bedford Park SA: Australian Association for the Study of Religions, 1980, pp.10ff.

struggles of the undeveloped, underprivileged, and the truly generous, but it can hardly be qualified as a warning. Even were the latter-day wealth to be distributed more evenly among classes and peoples, which, at the moment, looks far from possible, the further internationalisation of consumerism would simply complete its rampant sabotage of the world's cultural diversity, and tend to enslave us all in a hollow stereotype. Some members of humankind have exceeded their *moira* (fate) and become like the gods, with more power to determine the fates of others than ever the *Erinyes* had.¹⁸ Such is the *hybris* (offence), however, that perhaps only the Great War, which the new wealth bears within its own womb, will bring about its due *nemesis* (revenge).¹⁹ For modern wealth, even at its best, is a very mixed blessing; in general, as Winston Churchill said of war, a “necessary evil”; and at worst, the harbinger of great disaster.

If the secularists intend to use this wedge we drive between God and wealth as a lever to sanction an untrammelled materialism, then let them be assured that I have no intention myself of dispensing with God, our only safeguard against impulsive selfishness, and the ablest subverter of mammon. Consider, in any case, how, within long-term history of humankind, the contemporary pursuit of boom and luxury, even if now in apparent detachment from a recognisable religious system, may, in fact, be the covert resurgence of the primal prosperity cults which more mature faiths once set out to curb. However, it is not only ostensibly “non-religious” dreams of opulence which should make us wary, but still more recent developments, in which cargoism or a “cargo cult” mentality is transplanted from its more understandable third-world matrix into the heartlands of *consumerismo* themselves.

With Korea's Sun Myung Moon preaching in the United States of America, for example, we have a man who is preaching that science should be

¹⁸ In archaic Greek religion, *moira* was life's portion or lot decreed for the individual, and in Homer's *Iliad*, xxiv, 49, etc., we find the goddess of Fate and Death by that name. The *Erinyes* are avenging deities or *numina*, who punish evildoers, e.g., enactors of homicide, Homer, *Iliad*, ix, 571.

¹⁹ *Hybris* in Greek religion and ethics was wanton violence, insolence, and sheer arrogance, showing no regard for the human position or *moira*. See esp. Herodotus, *Historiae*, viii, 77, and, in general, Robert Payne, *Hubris: a Study of Pride*, New York NY: Harper Brothers, 1960. *Nemesis*, especially in Attic tragedy, is the Greek goddess of retribution; cf. also Herodotus, *Historiae*.

developed to the utmost degree. If, in the minds of various Melanesians (whose cosmoi have admittedly been confined by their atomised societies), God or Jesus will not come to them empty-handed at the last, Sun Moon cannot imagine the Messiah returning, except to a “natural world” “subdued . . . through highly-developed science”, and “an extremely pleasant social environment on earth”.²⁰ A millennialism coupled with such “cargo cult science”, to borrow Richard Feynman’s phrase,²¹ embraces the El Dorado of the 20th century too unquestioningly. It accepts, with perfect consistency, the war we all should never want, born, as that great conflict will be (should we be unable to avoid it), out of economic inequalities, and the high-level technocracy which perpetuates them. Sun Moon hardly forgets to remind us about generosity, yet he celebrates God as the source of wealth, as one who can well afford to, while his followers bask in the sumptuousness of the milieu he creates, cherishing it as a foretaste of the kingdom on earth, itself.²² His system of thought produces just the kind of theology in which *both* third-world *dreamers* of great American-like opulence, *and* the energy-consuming, money-driven, first-world *realisers* of the cargo dream, can turn up at the same party – the same extravagant banquet that leaves the sore-ridden Lazarus at the gate (cf. Luke 16:19-20). Unfortunately, Sun Moon is not eating this expensive cake alone.²³

There is a warning, written out of the events of the 20th century, however, that only the poor deserve blessing, and the rich are to fall under judgment for having indulged in their consolations. God is the bestower of good gifts, both material and spiritual, this much I will affirm positively (and leave open for further amplification), yet I would suggest a new negative theology for our time, that God is no longer the source of wealth, and, I suspect, does not want to be. Along the same train of thought, dumping God for wealth, because the two do

²⁰ Sun Myung Moon, *The Divine Principle*, Washington DC: Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity, 1973, p. 102, cf. pp. 104, 424, 530.

²¹ R. P. Feynman, “Cargo Cult Science”, in *Engineering and Science* 37-7 (1974), pp. 10ff.

²² Moon, *The Divine Principle*, esp. chapter 3, sect. 4, cf., Sun Myung Moon, *Unification Thought*, Tong Il Sahsang, tran., New York NY: Unification Thought Institute, 1973, esp. p. 79, on a more metaphysical plane. I also rely on field notes among the Unificationists on Maui Island, Hawaii, 1981.

²³ I discuss other examples of American “cargoist” theology in Garry W. Trompf, “The Cargo and the Millennium on both sides of the Pacific”, in Garry W. Trompf, ed., *The Cargo and the Millennium: Trans-Oceanic Comparisons and Connections (Religion and Society)*, The Hague (forthcoming), [now published as *Cargo Cults and Millenarian Movements: Transoceanic Comparisons or New Religious Movements*, Berlin: Mouton De Gruyter, 1990], chapter 1.

not go together is, I suspect, changing the “true weakness” of one God for the false strength of another (cf. 1 Cor 1:25), yet we all learn, at one time or another, that even the hardest diamond only lasts as long as each mortal frame, and very easily falls from its deceptively stable setting down the kitchen sink.²⁴

This is the bitter pill of the gospel, which the luckier “white man” has to swallow if he would avert both hells of nuclear holocaust and spiritual desolation. Now, if there are Melanesians who are asking, “Who then *can* be saved?” (because it is largely the whites who have pioneered the spreading of the gospel, and because it is natural for a Melanesian to see the *kaikat*²⁵ of religion in *visible* and material well-being), they might have to pose some new questions, and try some new theology. All things are possible (cf. Mark 10:26-27).

The challenge of this paper could well amount to this, in fact, that it is preferable for Melanesians to swallow the same bitter pill as preventive medicine (as if they have not been given enough to swallow!). And bitter this pill would be, for no developing country likes conscience-stricken souls from its old colonial “master race” telling it that it should not be tempted by the manifold fruits of capital. But, I perceive that the warning against Western acquisitiveness, greed, injustice, economic individualism, and the love of money has already been sounded by black, indigenous theologians themselves, who have sensed how the gospel still compels, in spite, and not because, of the astounding material advantages of its expatriate ambassadors.²⁶ What these thinkers would make of my manifesto, mind you, that God does not want to be the source of a wealth that exceeds even what the Biblical poets and apocalypticists imagined to be in His divine treasury, I would dearly like to

²⁴ See also Matt 6:19, 20, 33, etc., Luke 6:21, 24, 1 Tim 6:10, James 5:1ff, etc.

²⁵ That is, as “results”, not just food; cf. Gernot Fugmann, “Salvation Expressed in a Melanesian Context”, in James Knight, ed., *Christ in Melanesia: Exploring Theological Issues*, Point (1&2/1977), pp. 122ff (for background).

²⁶ Note esp. John Momis, “The Christian Vision of a New Society”, in Garry W. Trompf, ed., *The Gospel is not Western: Black Theologies for the Southwest Pacific*, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1987, chapter 16, cf. John Momis, “Values for Involvement: Theology and Politics”, in John D’Arcy May, ed., *Living Theology in Melanesia: a Reader*, Point 8 (1985), pp. 78ff. Cf. also Utula Samana, “Thoughts of a Melanesian Christian Socialist”, in Garry W. Trompf, *The Gospel is not Western: Black Theologies for the Southwest Pacific*, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1987, chapter 17, etc.

know.²⁷ It is not only myself, as a solitary, searching soul, which happens to throw down the gauntlet; it is the challenge of the 20th century.

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²⁷ Cf., e.g., Ps 17:14, 135:7, 1 Enoch 17:1, etc.

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