



“Capitalism” and Christianity

What is “Capitalism”?

First, it is a term that was [originally coined by its enemies](#).

Second, it suggests that the phenomenon—or, more precisely, the phenomena—that it denotes composes a *system*, and since the systems of which the human (as opposed to the “natural”) world is comprised are almost always the products of design, “capitalism” appears to refer to but one more such system among others. So, according to its critics, “capitalism” differs, say, from socialism and communism only *in degree*: While the latter “distribute” material goods “equally,” the former “distributes” them “unequally.” Or maybe the difference between “capitalism” and its competitors can be summed up as thus: “the poor” and “the middle class” are the targeted beneficiaries of socialism and communism while “the rich” are intended to benefit most from “capitalism.”



In truth, though, what is casually, but erroneously, referred to as “capitalism” isn’t really a “system” at all. That is, “capitalism” differs *fundamentally* or *in kind* from its rivals.

Socialism and communism—demanding, as they do, a government sufficiently activist to confiscate material resources from some in order to disperse it to others—are *intrinsically* dependent upon some *plan* or other. Within such economies, for the sake of satisfying some predetermined pattern, individuals are either prevented from accumulating property or seriously impeded from doing so. In stark contrast, within those orders commonly characterized as “capitalist,” there is no preconceived ideal to be realized. The absence of a plan is as essential to “capitalism” as the presence of a plan is essential to socialism and communism. The government has a role to play, for sure, and it is a critical one: a stable currency; the enactment and enforcement of laws regarding contracts; the adjudication of conflicts; etc. But perhaps most importantly, the government is obligated to *refrain* from interfering with the individual’s self-chosen (legitimate) pursuits.

Those on the Right fail to realize the extent to which they harm the cause of “capitalism” when they both use *this* term *and* insist upon speaking of “*economic freedom*” or “*economic liberty*.” “Capitalism” is the incidental by-product, as it were, of *civil association*. As the conservative philosopher [Michael Oakeshott](#) observed, civil association is a *moral* association, for its associates are not compelled to invest in the purposes of others but, rather, are free to decide their own engagements. Such an association precludes from the outset the imposition of a grand redistributive scheme upon those who have been coerced to contribute toward it.



Written by [Jack Kerwick, Ph.D.](#) on August 6, 2011

In short, there is no “economic liberty”; there is only liberty.

Christianity and “Capitalism”

Within relatively recent years, as far as the lifespan of Christianity goes, the order of freedom customarily called “capitalism” has been critiqued by some segments of Christendom. The most common criticism assumes the form of an argument from inequality. It’s pretty self-explanatory: “Capitalism” is immoral because it generates glaring material inequalities.

It is important here to make a couple of notes regarding the similarities between this sort of Christian and his secular counterpart who also despises freedom as Americans have traditionally understood it.

First, the two figures are of one mind in affirming a *substantive* or *material* conception of *equality*. That is, Equality — *not* equality — is a cardinal value for him.

Second, neither the Christian nor the secular egalitarian ever dares to contrast Equality with freedom. It is “capitalism,” or maybe “the *market*,” that must appear adversarial from the perspective of Equality. Inasmuch as they refer to threats to Equality, the scheme of this sort of Christian resolutely refuses to accommodate such terms as “freedom” and “liberty,” or even “*economic freedom*,” “*economic liberty*,” or “the *free market*.”

Third, closely related to this last, this sort of Christian, like the secular egalitarian, speaks of “capitalism” as if it were a “system” designed to “distribute” the lion’s share of goods to “the rich” or “the privileged.”

To this argument, I can only say that the Christian who invokes it labors under a profound misunderstanding of his religious tradition. Equality *is* a Christian value, but the equality that Christians have traditionally defended is a *theological*, not a *material*, good. Christians believe that *in the eyes of God*, each and every person, just by reason of having been created in the Divine image, is possessed of an inviolable dignity. To put it simply, there are certain sorts of treatment to which human beings are strictly forbidden from subjecting themselves and others.

Yet theological equality and material equality are conceptually distinct ideas. Neither has anything at all to do with the other. From the first generation of Christians to the present day, the disciples of Jesus Christ have recognized this.

Some may object that Christians are called upon to share their resources with one another and, especially, the needy. While this is undeniably true, it is also irrelevant: the *virtue* of charity — a character disposition of individual moral agents — has nothing to do with the *value* of material equality — a government-imposed distribution of resources.

That this is so is proven by two simple considerations.

First, Jesus said that the whole law boils down to but two commandments: Love the Lord God with every fiber of your being; and love your neighbor as yourself. The relationship between these is clear: If we are to love God we *must* love our neighbor(s). The parable of the Good Samaritan puts it beyond question that our obligation to love our neighbors extends to any and all who are in need of our friendship. However, notice that the Good Samaritan didn’t come to the assistance of the injured Jewish man for the sake of “leveling playing fields” or insuring that Jews and Samaritans receive their “fair share” of society’s goods. In fact, the Samaritan wasn’t even in the least bit motivated by a desire to help “the poor”; rather, he saw a fellow human being *in need* and, moved by compassion, or maybe a sense of justice, came to his aid.



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If the parable of the Good Samaritan can't be depended upon to instruct us on how best to understand the essence of Christian charity, nothing can.

Second, if material inequality is inherently objectionable from a Christian perspective, then the inequality that obtains between millionaires and billionaires, or some billionaires and others, should be objectionable. That we are inclined to laugh at this suggestion puts the lie to the notion that material inequality is intrinsically immoral.

None of this is meant to imply that the Christian shouldn't have any concerns with what we tend to call "capitalism." The desire to be *better than one's competitors* — as opposed to the desire to be the best *that one can be* — is a function of the cardinal Christian sin of pride. A "capitalist," whether a seller or a consumer of goods, like all human beings, is deserving of praise or blame depending on his character dispositions, his intentions and motives. To the extent that the competitive nature of "capitalism" or "the free market" encourages pride, we must regard it, like we should regard everything, with caution.

Even bearing this in mind, however, we must also consider that the order of freedom referred to as "capitalism," though it contains its own dangers, is the only economic "system" suitable for free persons.

In other words, among the various economic systems, it alone is morally tolerable.



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