

## Economics

### Discussion

Rejoinder to Jerry Kirkpatrick, “The Connection between Advertising and Objectivist Epistemology” (Spring 2008)

# Advertising, Capitalism, and Christianity

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I am both grateful and honored that Jerry Kirkpatrick bothered to comment on my review of his book, which he quite correctly perceives as “mostly positive” (2008, 354). The less than ideal description being due to a few minor shortcomings that I had pointed out and that he subsequently addressed. While I am more or less satisfied with Kirkpatrick’s response to most of my complaints, I do hold on to the claim that Mises significantly changed his views on religion in his later works and I am also inclined to think that the book might be significantly improved by seriously rethinking or even dropping altogether the section on capitalism and Christianity (Kirkpatrick 2007, 53–54).

First, with regard to Mises’ views, consider the following two quotes:

[Our] evidence leads to the negation of the question asked above: whether it might not be possible to reconcile Christianity with a free social order based on private ownership in the means of production. A living Christianity cannot exist side by side with, and within, Capitalism.<sup>1</sup> (Mises 1922, 421)

There is nothing in any ethical doctrine or in the teachings of any of the creeds based on the Ten Commandments that

could justify the condemnation of an economic system which has multiplied the population and provides the masses in the capitalistic countries with the highest standard of living ever attained in history. . . . It must be reiterated that no reasoning founded on the principles of philosophical ethics or of the Christian creed can reject as fundamentally unjust an economic system that succeeds in improving the material conditions of all people . . . (Mises [1957] 1985, 343)

The former passage comes from *Socialism* (1922) and the latter from *Theory and History*, which was originally published some thirty years later. It seems fair to say that a certain change of attitude is distinctly recognizable: Mises went from rejecting any notion of reconciliation between Christianity and capitalism to openly acknowledging their compatibility. What he viewed as anticapitalist was not Christianity as such—understood as a set of dogmas of faith—but the so-called social teaching of various religious leaders, most notably Catholic popes. It should be stressed, however, that the social doctrine of the Catholic Church expounded in such encyclicals as *Rerum Novarum* (1891), *Quadragesimo anno* (1931), and *Centesimus Annus* (1991) does not purport to address any of the fundamental matters of faith with respect to which pope is to be treated as infallible.

Secondly, my more general impression is that Kirkpatrick's treatment of such an immensely broad and controversial subject as the relation between Christianity and capitalism in a one-sided and unequivocal manner ("capitalism and Christianity hold nothing at all in common" [Kirkpatrick 2007, 53]), based only on Mises' *Socialism*, is detrimental to his otherwise well-written book. It is somewhat surprising that Kirkpatrick does not mention, much less deal with, Max Weber's seminal treatise, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, in which one reads that:

One of the fundamental elements of the spirit of modern capitalism, and not only of that but of all modern culture: rational conduct on the basis of the idea of the calling, was born (. . .) from the spirit of Christian asceticism. (Weber [1930] 2002, 122)

And while one can certainly disagree with Weber's opinion—as for example did Murray Rothbard and more recently does Thomas Woods Jr. who claim that it is Catholicism not Protestantism that ignited the development of capitalism—it would seem appropriate to actually engage in an argument with them. Instead of a well-researched case against Christianity, Kirkpatrick presents it laconically as a “doctrine of self-sacrifice” (2007, 54). Unfortunately, this brief treatment of the subject does not address the crucial question why exactly Jesus' mission on earth should be considered a “sacrifice.” After all, to die for one's beloved ones, is—according to Rand—hardly sacrificing oneself, as Kirkpatrick rightly admonished me. Besides, Christianity—and especially Catholicism—with its strong emphasis on human free will and rationality might be considered an ally rather than a foe in building a case in defense of advertising.

Finally, it seems somewhat unclear why Kirkpatrick should focus only on Christianity. After all, Judaism, from which Christianity originated, is in fact much more abundant in various taboos. Similarly, Islam and Hinduism, which by now taken together already have more adherents than Christianity and are vigorously spreading to the Western world, might be deemed much more anti-capitalist (Hoppe 2004).

In any case, the whole issue deserves a much more detailed treatment without which, I fear, Kirkpatrick's book is likely to discourage at least some potential readers, especially Christians, which seems unfortunate and quite unnecessary from both financial and ideological standpoints.

## Notes

1. See Hülsmann (2007, 442) who translated this paragraph from German and who notes that the later published English translation is less categorical.

## References

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