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WHO CAN WRITE A book like this one? I guess only someone who has worked for a long time in interdisciplinary, intercultural, and interreligious ways. Paul Chung has already brought into dialogue Martin Luther with Buddhism, Karl Barth with religious pluralism, as well as Asian *minjung* theology with Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism—in order to construct an “Irregular Theology.” Now he masters the social, economic, historical, and cultural complexities of capitalism in the context of today’s crises. What is his special contribution to the broad debate on this subject spurred by the nearly complete collapse of the financial system in the years since 2007?

Most of the authors writing on the crisis limit themselves to its economic and political dimensions. Some look only at the subprime credit crisis, which triggered the larger financial crisis, and ask how mistakes like this can be avoided. Others, like the Stiglitz Commission of Experts of the President of the UN General Assembly, go a step further, developing “Reforms of the International Monetary and Financial System” on the basis of “Principles for a New Financial Architecture.” Still others add the political dimension, including the analysis of institutions like the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, or the WTO. Some even look at the issue of empire or at the social and ecological implications of the crisis.

Very few scholars see that all of Western civilization faces a deep crisis, or rather a host of crises. What is the reason for the crises confronting us—not only regarding finance and economy, but food shortage for nearly one billion inhabitants of the earth in spite of adequate production; the death of more than thirty million people annually from hunger; depletion of fossil fuels; climate change and its devastating consequences; the dramatic dying off of species, etc.? Obviously these crises are interconnected at a deep structural and cultural level. And this level is deeply rooted in history. Therefore, it is a special value of this book that it reveals the roots of the present situation, tracing it back to the origins of capitalism—not only as an economic-political system, but also as a culture. Economically

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and politically, Professor Chung unfolds precisely the different phases of capitalism—mercantile, industrial, and financial capitalism, linked each time to hegemonic powers (Spain, The Netherlands, Britain, and the United States) and to ideological justifications (mercantilism, liberalism, neo-liberalism). Culturally he analyzes the philosophers who have developed the concepts and categories to grasp what was happening in economy, politics, science, and technology, with a feedback effect on real history by forging attitudes, behaviors, and strategies. To mention just a few names of special importance, he considers Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, G. W. F. Hegel, Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Jürgen Habermas.

It is already a sign of courage to discuss the problems we are facing under the name of capitalism. When I was looking for a publisher for my book *Alternatives to Global Capitalism—Drawn from Biblical History, Designed for Political Action* in the mid-1990s, I did not find one in the United States. Orbis Books, for example, answered: “There is no market for this in the US.” By the way, this is true for the official church structures in Germany up to this day. What does this mean? We are facing a taboo here against pointing at the religious character of capitalism. Already Walter Benjamin pointed out that capitalism is a religion. He did this on the basis of Karl Marx’s analysis of the fetishism of the commodity, money, and capital. As a matter of fact, Marx wrote his main work, *Capital*, as a critique of the “earthly gods” governing the lives of humans and the earth, guiding them towards their destruction. This takes up the biblical insight that idols request human sacrifices. So also Jesus stopped the sacrifice business in the temple, the central bank of the province of Judea at the time (cf. Mark 11:15–19).

It is not overstepping the mandate of theology when Paul Chung critically reviews the political economy from the perspective of religion. On the contrary, it is part of the reductionist thinking of modernity to suppress the spiritual aspect of reality by splitting it off into a private sphere of arbitrary decision. There is always some faith governing the perception of reality and social structures and praxis. Therefore, we must always ask, who or what functions as god in a given society? And in whose interest? Neglecting this question, the whole rationality of modernity until today shows its ugly face of utter irrationality. Franz Hinkelammert, the Latin American liberation theologian and economist, puts this into an image: we compete among each other to be the one who can best sharpen the saw with which we cut the branch on which we are sitting. The destructive character of modernity is at the same time suicidal. We hail maximum

economic growth, measured in monetary terms, although we know that in doing so we are depleting the earth's resources, suffocating in waste, and heating up the climate to the extent that islands and whole regions are drowned, the weather produces disasters, deserts expand (with all the consequences of forced migration), etc. And why must the economy grow? It must grow exclusively because capital must be accumulated. Capital by definition is an asset that must be invested for maximum profit, and this must be reinvested for the same abstract purpose, reinvested again and again and again—endlessly and limitlessly.

Breaking this vicious cycle requires that the religious, absolutist, legalistic character of capitalism be challenged on its own ground. It is the law that kills, as the Apostle Paul summarizes his critical theological analysis in the context of the Roman Empire. Jesus had already addressed this issue by pointing out that our relation to God implies breaking the law of absolute debt repayment because it kills. “And forgive us our debts [beyond our capacity to pay back] as we also have forgiven our debtors [the debts beyond their capacity to repay]” (Matt 6:12). Repayment of debt is the absolute law of the property-money economy. It enslaves and ultimately kills when a person or a family cannot repay a debt—for example, because of a poor harvest. In the Roman Empire this law is linked to the divinization of the emperor. This god was most totally worshiped in the form of money, which bore the image of the emperor, as the book of Revelation points out (13:17). It was not as late as Adam Smith that the market, in theistic terms, was regarded as the “invisible hand” of the system. Making the capitalist market the god of today kills visibly. The deaths are called “collateral damage.”

Therefore, theology has to deal with this life-and-death issue. Paul Chung does it by choosing the biblical perspective “from below.” God Yahweh reveals God's self as the liberator of slaves (Exodus 3ff.). The prophets take the same approach by fundamentally challenging political and economic powers. Jesus proclaims good news for the poor by putting the domination-free, humane and just reign of God against the imperial system at all levels—putting his life on the line. The Apostle Paul summarizes this perspective by writing in his first letter to the Corinthians:

Has not God made mad the wisdom of this world system? . . . Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is mad according to the categories of the world system to shame the wise; God chose what is weak according to the categories of the world

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system to shame the strong; God chose the plebeians and the despised according to the categories of the world system, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are . . .”

This passage is of great significance for the understanding of the present situation and for the method to critically approach it. Paul is probably the first one to analyze that wisdom can be madness. No one doubts that Greece and Rome belonged to the “developed countries” of that historical period. Up to this day, Greek philosophy and Roman law are referred to as the roots of Western civilization. But today we see clearly that this civilization has become systemically destructive and suicidal. Why? It stands for the compulsory law that the rich must become richer and the powerful more powerful despite the costs to the whole community of humanity and to the earth. This kind of rationality is turning out to be madness, absurd irrationality.

So it is reasonable to look for a god other than the capitalist market with its utilitarian rationality and imperial power. What is commonly regarded as irrational—faith in the God of love and relationality—turns out to be the most rational behavior—if life in the double sense of survival and fulfillment is to be taken as the final criterion. All kinds of faith? No, “faith” also can be kidnapped by madness, as all kinds of fundamentalisms demonstrate these days—spearheaded by the religious right in the United States and everywhere nurturing imperialism (and consequently producing its mirror image in the form of murder-suicide terrorism). Therefore, we need the critique of religion as the basis for bringing the saving power of faith to bear upon politics, economics, and culture. This saving power can only blossom when we realize that in a global society, we can only survive together. The “other” becomes the criterion for my own survival. This is beautifully reflected in Levinas’s translation of Jesus’ summary of faith, in the tradition of Martin Buber: “Love God [the God of love and relationality] with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor—he/she *is yourself*” (Luke 10:27). This means that, because you can only survive together with your neighbor in a global world, you have to realize this personally and to struggle for a culture and for political and economic structures that foster this living together with each other and the earth. The criterion for this is, of course, that the poorest and weakest may live. So the hermeneutics from below is the only reasonable rationality, called divine wisdom.

It is here where Paul Chung’s wealth of knowledge concerning religions comes in: the empathy of Buddhism, the life-honoring dialectics

of Daoism, the community perspective of Confucianism. Yet he does not engage in abstract, neutral interreligious “dialogue” here. The criterion is again life-enhancing praxis—that is, all religions are looked at from the perspective of the underside of history, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, one of his main theological teachers, formulated it. In this way his *minjung* theology is truly liberation theology, geared at emancipation from the captivity of Western imperial theology and mission, mirroring a life-killing civilization. The totalizing of the laws of the capitalist market, penetrating all spheres of life, made modernity deeply ambiguous. Even its emancipative traditions must be liberated by critically exposing it to more holistic worldviews. This book brings us nearer to a new interreligious culture of life, so badly needed by us endangered humans and by the earth.

Ulrich Duchrow
Professor of Systematic Theology
University of Heidelberg

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