

2017

Review of *The Money Cult: Capitalism, Christianity, and the Unmaking of the American Dream*. Chris Lehmann. Reviewed by Daniel Liechty.

Daniel Liechty
Illinois State University, dliecht@ilstu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation

Liechty, Daniel (2017) "Review of *The Money Cult: Capitalism, Christianity, and the Unmaking of the American Dream*. Chris Lehmann. Reviewed by Daniel Liechty.," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 44: Iss. 2, Article 13.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.4104>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol44/iss2/13>

This Book Review is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



discussion among those working in criminology, criminal justice, sociology, and social work, as well as the educated public who have a strong concern for social justice and social equality.

Qianwei Zhao
University of Southern California

Chris Lehmann, *The Money Cult: Capitalism, Christianity, and the Unmaking of the American Dream*. Melville House (2016), 398 pages, \$28.95 (hardcover).

Even many relatively sophisticated observers of American society were left in a state of rather shocked disbelief by the election of Donald Trump to the highest office in the land. How could this happen, and who are these people, the Trump voters? How could we have missed what had apparently been going on right under our noses for decades? There is a growing list of books now aimed at exploring this 'other America,' and a number of these are highly recommended. Although Chris Lehmann wrote this book prior to the rise of Donald Trump as a political phenomenon, it is nonetheless an important contribution to this current reading list. Trump drew some 80% of the vote among conservative, evangelical American Protestants, and Lehmann's book endeavors to provide a thorough historical reading of American Protestants in relation to their views on money and the general capitalist economy.

As would be expected in a treatise focusing on capitalism and American Protestantism, Lehmann is often playing his interpretations off Max Weber's seminal essay, "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism." In that work, Weber suggested that by upholding virtues of the importance of secular work, enterprise, trade and self-sufficiency, the Protestant ethic created the social ethos in which capitalism would thrive. Protestantism originated, of course, in central and northern European territories, whose economies of wealth production Weber contrasted with the Catholic lands to the south. However, the paradigm example of Weber's thesis is that of the Puritan states in America. Although the original Puritan settlers were

ambiguous about wealth accumulation, it was not long before we see a general embrace of wealth as a clear sign of God's favor.

Weber, however, also predicted that the rationalizing, 'this-worldly' orientation of capitalism would eventually crowd out the importance of religious devotion altogether, resulting in an increasingly secular society in which religion played a steadily diminishing role. That aspect of Weber's predictions was well born out in Europe. But it has not been born out well at all in America, which has seen one wave of religious revivalism after another inundating the meager threads of nascent secularism that do appear. Here the originality of Lehmann's work shines. He takes as his thesis the observation that, far from capitalism leading to the erosion of religion, in America we see the capitalist market itself being sanctified and incorporated into religion. In fact, this incorporation of capitalism into American (especially Protestant) religion is so total and complete that Lehmann characterizes the entire social institution as 'The Money Cult.'

Although this characterization of American religion may make some of us uncomfortable, Lehmann does an amazing job of driving the point home, page after page, for nearly 400 pages. Given that he is a journalist, and not a sociologist, historian or religious scholar, one can only be impressed with the depth of his reading among figures of the Great Awakening, the Second Awakening, and the subsequent prominent revivalist ministers and media preachers of the 'Prosperity Gospel' up to and including the present. Through all of this, he discerns a clear thread of conviction that overtly states or simply assumes that God wants people to be rich and wealthy in the material sense, that such material wealth is a direct result of faithfulness to God, and conversely, those who are not achieving material abundance have only themselves to blame for their poverty. American religion not only reflects a capitalist ethos, but as Lehmann demonstrates repeatedly, American religion very often paves the way through the thickets of potentially resistant areas of culture for the eventual capitalist incorporation and commodification of the social ethos. The American prosperity gospel drives the truck for capitalism, in other words.

Lehmann justifies the 'cult' aspect of his characterization by depicting the American gospel as one of 'magical thinking' in

regards to the pervasive and ongoing faith that by hard work and cleverness, the individual can totally transform himself and his nature into whatever is desired, and equates wealth with spiritual values. This found perhaps most acute expression in the New Thought movement, but New Thought is but a distillation of that which is found throughout the religious culture, especially the Protestant culture. Lehmann labels this extreme dynamic individualism as an example of modern Gnostic faith, and in his telling, this is virtually the foundation of American religion in general.

There is too much in this book to cover in a short review, but it is worth looking at two points made, one ironic and one tragic. The ironic point is that the extremely individualist, capitalist social ethic is easily recognized as Social Darwinism. Thus at the same time contemporary evangelical Protestants have taken the lead in fighting against the teaching of Darwinism in the public schools, they represent some of the most pure types of Social Darwinist advocacy in areas of social and economic policy.

The tragic aspect is that this American religious Gnosticism made a certain kind of sense in the situation in which it arose, namely, the industrial revolution and time of great economic expansionism. In decades when jobs are plenty and national corporations large and small are focused on building and selling hard commodities, one might sympathize with the preachers exhorting their congregants to get out there, apply yourself, work hard, save and invest – don't expect others to do for you, God wants you to do for yourself! But we have now moved significantly, if not completely, into a post-industrial economy. Great wealth is not made in this economy by building things, but by strip-mining the public wealth already created by others, privatizing large segments of public wealth and then selling it back to the public who uses it. In a highly financialized economy of hedge funds, off-shore banking and international corporations zipping capital around the world at the pace of lightening, the hard working individual is much more likely to find their little nest egg built up from years of frugal savings to be targets for the financial sharks than anything else.

In this situation, which would otherwise be ripe for a strongly morally and religiously based criticism of the economy, the extremes of wealth accumulation and drastic inequality between

the super-rich and everyone else, the Money Cult ministers find they have nothing credible to offer of social significance, and at best are left continuing to point toward individual, personal flaws such as alcoholism and laziness as the root causes of peoples growing sense that there is something fundamentally wrong with our system. Just as we find ourselves in dire need of the Social Gospel once proclaimed from American pulpits as a vibrant voice in forming progressive social and economic policy, the air has been taken out of the sails and our Money Cult ship is left to drift aimlessly.

*Daniel Liechty
Illinois State University*