

Friedrich Nietzsche's Critique of Christianity and Capitalism

An Interview between Kishore Jayabalan and Joseph E. Gorra

Does Nietzsche offer a worthwhile critique of the corrupting influence of free-market capitalism? In this interview, I explore that question and a response with Kishore Jayabalan, the director of the Acton Institute's Rome office. Any defense of capitalism should take under consideration any such Nietzsche-like critique and consider how it might shape an articulation of the conditions, basis, and outcomes of the free-market in a civil society.

You have been an economist working on various international issues both in the U.S. and in Europe. Given your diverse experience, you've been able to witness in different ways both defenses and the critiques of capitalism that extend beyond just an experience in the U.S. How has your global experience shaped your perspective on various economic realities and a Christian witness therein?

Americans often take for granted how ingrained capitalism is and how it has been in our ways of thinking. Even those Americans who criticize capitalism usually argue within the limits of capitalism itself, i.e., they want to see markets work *better* and *more widely* rather than replace them with some completely new system. People from other countries tend not to share this deep level of support for, almost *faith* in, the market economy, or if they do, it's usually because they are keen students of or frequent visitors to the United States. So the challenge is often to explain to non-Americans how the market economy is not just an "American" idea, and that if one really wants to conquer material deprivation, the market economy is the way to go.

Americans also have an unusually high amount of both religious diversity and religious practice, which can seem to make religion to be a product of the large market of goods and services offered to consumers, or vice versa. I happen to think that many Americans take this matters as simply a *given* and that other countries can readily understand our way of doing things. But this is most certainly not the case. I'm constantly reminded of this on a daily basis, when even some of our most dedicated followers and supporters in Rome indicate that they don't "get" the American way of religion and commerce. While it can be exasperating, it's also refreshing and keeps me on my toes.

A common critique of capitalism attempts to show how it has a corrupting influence. Is that about right? If so, is it traceable to Nietzsche's critique of Christianity? If so, how and why?

Some of the earliest proponents of the division of labor, a concept at the root of the market economy, worried about its effects on the intellectual and moral lives of laborers and sought remedies for it in public education and the arts. Adam Smith was one of these, for example. And anyone who lived through the Industrial Revolution and the mass urbanization that took place could see the social problems that came along with this great transformation.

Many modern thinkers thought that Christianity, and especially the disputes that took place among Christians of different denominations, was a political problem that needed to be overcome. The first great intellectual critique of modernity came from Jean-Jacques Rousseau and continued through the 19th century, culminating with Friedrich Nietzsche, both of whom were also very critical of Christianity. So the situation is a complicated one.

Nietzsche, of course, is famous for his "God is dead" statement and the great crisis of nihilism or meaninglessness that signified for not only him but the entire Western world which has thought of itself as both enlightened and Christian at the time. Nietzsche seemed to think that Christian morality and its emphasis on pity for the weak and suffering were at the root of God's "death" and so he didn't look to any kind of Christian recovery. But he was very perceptive on the negative effects of a "secularized" Christian morality in a democratic society, what we may call "humanitarianism" today.

Perhaps the last 2,000 years have dulled our awareness of just how radical and transformative Christianity has actually been, especially with its humble and largely apolitical beginnings. I'd be pleased if we could begin to seriously appreciate again this radicalness and the equally radical critiques, because the opposite tendency is to simply deny the tensions and wonder what all the fuss is about.

So, is there something right about this critique of the free market, in whole or in part? Or, is it completely unwarranted?

There is much that is right in the various critiques of the market economy and of liberalism in general, especially with regard to misuses of liberty and the leveling tendencies of equality. Concepts such as alienation and the related desire for "community" reveal a real dissatisfaction with modern life, despite all

its freedoms and technological marvels. But we also need to be able to recognize the good that comes along with these developments as well as to think about viable alternatives or ways of living within modernity. We should be thankful that we have become so materially comfortable, for the most part, that we actually have the luxury to consider alternatives, at least in theory. But this also requires us to fight liberalism a bit, to go against the grain.

Is there a way to respond to this critique while still accounting for the good of the free market?

Yes, if we realize that the free market is mainly a reflection of prevailing intellectual and cultural trends. Of course some of these trends are shaped by “market forces” but not always. One can support liberal democracy and free markets without thinking they are the sufficient conditions for our eternal salvation. I would say that so long as we realize that there are alternative ways of accepting the goods of the market and take them for what they are worth, we are less likely to become thoughtless supporters of the status quo.

What can we learn from a Nietzsche-like critique of modernity and of the free market?

Nietzsche is such a radical and demanding critic that just beginning to grapple with his thought is a good beginning. Take, for example, his portrayal of that pathetic product of democratic life known the “last man” (cf. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, prologue, sec. 5). Nietzsche’s main concern is for a rare type of human being, for a certain type of nobility, which is spiritual if not ultimately religious, though certainly not Christian, though he did seem to have great admiration for Pascal.

Nietzsche had absolutely no hope of being understood let alone “successful” in any popular sense, however. His influence had been greatly adulterated by democratic leveling but is still pervasive. So we have to ask who had the last laugh – liberalism or Nietzsche? The more we understand of Nietzsche’s critique, the better we can at least diagnose some of modernity’s defects, not so much in a cranky or obstinate way but in a friendly and constructive manner, and become more self-aware in the process.

As the Director of Istituto Acton (Acton Institute’s Rome office), what are some challenges that your office is attempting to address?

Istituto Acton's main mission is one of outreach to the great number (approximately 15,000) of international students and professors at Rome's pontifical universities. Because many of these students will become religious leaders in their own countries, it is a highly strategic time and place to help them start to think and deal with issues affecting the free society put forward by its supporters and critics. We look at our mission as one of assisting the Church in the formation of these future leaders as they pass through the Roman system.

The biggest challenge is finding issues of common concern among the great diversity of students and professors. Many of them study or teach philosophy or theology, and have little initial interest in economics or politics. Some care about bioethics, others about poverty, while still others are more interested in ecumenism or inter-religious dialogue, etc. Our job is to show them why they need to take politics and economics seriously if they want to understand the world around them and become effective ministers of the Gospel.

Is there some further collaborative work among economists, theologians and philosophers that you would like to see developed, perhaps to serve toward a response of a Nietzsche-like critique?

One of the big problems with modern intellectual life is its high degree of specialization, which Nietzsche himself dissected with devastating effect. All of our conferences and discussion groups in Rome try to bring together various academic disciplines to overcome this "silo" effect that has become so common in universities. The good news is that some of the pontifical universities have shown a great deal of interest in hosting and collaborating with us over the years, and we'd like to be able to continue and increase these in the future. Our office in Rome is still quite small so there's plenty of room for us to grow both in terms of the number of activities and the ultimate impact we have on how religious-minded people engage the world around them.

Kishore Jayabalan is director of Istituto Acton in Rome. He organizes the institute's educational and outreach efforts in Europe. He has worked as an international economist for the Bureau of Labor Statistics, was appointed to the Permanent Observer Mission of the Holy See to the United Nations, and worked for the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace.