

Commercial Empire and the Selling of the Soul

By Jim Tarbell

A discussion with the Mendocino Coast Unitarian Universalists. 11AM Sunday, April 25, 2004, Mendocino Recreation Center

Hi, It's great to be here although it is a bit unusual for me. I'm not your usual church-goer. I am particularly new to the concept of spirituality and may need your help here as we go along.

I'm here because I recently co-authored a book titled *Imperial Overstretch* which deals with the costs of what I call the global commercial empire, which we see looming around us today. One of the costs we talk about briefly in this book is the huge spiritual toll carried by humanity during the spread of this empire over the past 400 years.

Our thesis is that the commercial empire is driven by market principles that have no spiritual or ethical component. So the upshot is that the policies pursued by the empire have no spiritual dimension and in fact cause a huge spiritual burden. This is a democracy. We are responsible for the policies of our government. As a result, the events we see happening today like _____ that are an outcome of American foreign policy weigh heavily on our souls. They are in fact in the accounting parlance of capitalist thinking, a cost to our lives, our happiness and our wellbeing.

So what I am going to talk about today is where this amoral commercial empire came from and the spiritual loss it has created in our lives and how we can reunite with a spirit that is dealing with that loss.

Now we have been touting this talk as dealing with consumerism, which is of course a driving force behind the commercial empire. But as I got into researching and thinking about the spiritual costs of the empire I went way beyond consumerism and back into history to what we have lost and as an upside, to what we can gain back. I went back to the 1600s when this amoral empire first began and discovered that people at the time realized that their spiritual connection to the world was being destroyed. Not only did they know it, but they spoke out and what they said is very relevant to what is happening today.

To take myself back 350 years, I used this book, *The Covenant Crucified: Quakers and the Rise of Capitalism* by Douglas Gwyn, is a Quaker scholar who has written half a dozen books.

Now this was a time when a lot of denominations were questioning the growing imperial order including the Unitarians and Baptists and others. But I use the Quakers because their observations were particularly relevant to the growth of consumerism and the commercial empire. Their experience offers an enlightening vision of the spiritual loss the people of England experienced as the merchants and landed aristocracy grabbed control of politics and religion.

This all happened in the time period that Bob Funk, who spoke here last month, called the beginning of the second axial age. He concentrated on the rise of science to define the beginning of that age; I will concentrate on the rise of capitalism and consumerism.

It was an incredibly tumultuous time for humanity. The reformation had broken the iron grip that the church had on all of life. Whereas throughout the middle ages land had largely been available for the public good, in the 1600s landowners began enclosing their property for their own private good which totally disrupted the traditional self sufficient rural lifestyle of the peasants and drove them into the cities in search of work. There they had to sell themselves as wage laborers. Now I know that we do not normally think of working at a job as selling ourselves, but essentially that is what we are doing and back in the 1600s if you came from a long line of self sufficient peasants, it must have really seemed like what you were doing.

Interestingly, this was right at the time when the first business corporations were chartered in England and Holland. These machine-like business organizations, which hired people as if they were cogs in a machine, spearheaded the creation of the global commercial empire by using private military forces to create a huge trading empire extending into the East Indies and the New World.

The power of personal initiative forged a big part in the rise of science and capitalism and fostered a battleground in both the political and the spiritual world. It became so contentious that by 1640 England erupted into a civil war that lasted for essentially 40 years. It began with a controversy between the monarchy and the parliament, which led the parliament to raise what, became known as the New Model Army, a sensationally successful entity. Based on merit rather than inherited titles, this army quickly defeated the monarchy and beheaded the king. Under the leadership of Oliver Cromwell the New Model Army became a true revolutionary political force with elements that advocated not only the end of the monarchy and the aristocratic House of Lords, but universal male suffrage and most interesting the elimination of private property. They embraced communally owned land, resources and means of production.

This last part was a little much for the landed aristocracy and merchants who controlled the Parliament, however, and they demanded that Cromwell purge the army of the radicals. Which he did. This destroyed the revolutionary dreams of the newly liberated English people and led to massive unrest. It was out of this turmoil that the Quakers appeared.

Quakers' used a universal covenant to connect themselves to an inner god and to the sacredness of all life, and to rail against the social injustice, alienation and trivialization created by fashion, consumption and the rise of capitalism. This universal covenant made a person or soul part of the greater web of nature rather than a commodified resource. For as Gwyn points out "the individualizing tendencies of capitalist venture and wage labor gradually eroded traditional relationships with the earth, within families and local communities."

The Quakers pointed out that goods as well as humans were becoming commodities. According to Gwyn they realized that "The emerging capitalist contract promised material ease and great profit to those willing to stifle the witness of the universal covenant," which is a concept that goes back to biblical times. Gwyn goes on to point out that instead of promoting this universal covenant the capitalists created a 'covenant with the World' where everything is for sale according to the values of the market, where divine judgement and guidance are not allowed.

As I say, the Quaker appraisal of the situation is very relevant today. They said things like: "trading has become a trap, to captivate men in deceitful dealings and vain customs and

fashions, to serve the adulterous eye and vanity. In this trap the just become a prey to the insatiable, the obsessively self-interested. Vainglorious clothing and amusements “have lost the man of the heart through vanity.” Consumerism “destroys the creation.” Flattering merchandisers “cheat poor country people. “What traps there are in laws, which should protect the simple.”

Quakers even suggested that lawyers and judges, like the Quaker preachers should serve without pay. They reasoned that since the lawyers and judges were making the new laws under the developing capitalist order, they would be more likely to serve the common good if they served without pay, for otherwise they would serve the good of whoever was paying them.

Quakers saw that all processes of the state apparatus, educational institutions and religious organization were succumbing gradually to the logic and imperatives of the market, and that accounting had become the norm. They realized that the Puritans had set up a moral accounting system wherein personal accounting determined if they were going to be saved. The relationship with God and the church became more contractual than covenantal and depended on “calculation” rather than on “trust.” How many times did you go to church? How much did you give? The church became the marketplace of the soul. Redemption became commodified and as true religious seekers saw those less spiritually true receiving redemption before them they became outraged and alienated from the new order. They knew that people were selling their souls.

So, they developed their own covenant that God is within us all, so that they did not have depend on the King or Parliament or the army to manifest the return of God. They had God within their own souls and held a covenant with a universalizing power to bring all mankind together.

These concepts, however, outraged the newly formed economic, political and religious leaders and at one point they arrested and Parliament spent weeks convicting a Quaker of Horrid Blasphemy. They then publicly flogged the poor guy and made him a spectacle for all to see. But the public flogging of the pious Quaker caused such outrage that Cromwell instituted the first move toward separating church and state.

But as Gwyn points out this separation of church and state, which we all see as an essential good, created an undiscussed side effect. Gwyn says, “The recontainment of Christian faith into the private sphere was absolutely vital if capitalism was to operate without serious moral constraint...England’s rise to world dominance, built upon militarism, imperialism, colonial slavery, and ruthless exploitation of domestic labor demanded this liberal settlement of politics and religion.” In 1680 after forty years of political and economic turmoil the peace that descended henceforth upon English society was a separate peace, made among the economic, political and religious ruling classes and imposed upon a wider populace that was generally too mystified, confused and weary of social unrest to object. The capitalist covenant rigorously sequestered spirituality within personal experience and banished divine intervention from social and political history.

God became harnessed and exploited as personal succor in an increasingly harsh world.

And then came the United States, the first nation to ever truly separate the state from any moral restraints. And as much as we have ballyhooed the great enlightenment concepts of

equality and opportunity, which were espoused throughout the American Revolution, the reality of US government policy has been that we have followed an amoral imperial foreign policy from the beginning. Examples abound that from its earliest years that the United States Government has always been bent on expansion and control to create a commercial empire. The American Revolution can be seen as an action to allow George Washington and his cronies to become rich off the sale of Ohio River Valley land. Then twenty years later Congress cited commercial reasons to authorize the Lewis and Clark Expedition. Thus began a policy of expansion totally devoid of moral restraint, leading to the genocide of the Native American population and the theft of their land. Then once the American government had thoroughly conquered everything up to the Pacific shores they kept going. Local author Jonathan Shepard has pointed out that the first overtly American imperial crusade; the Spanish/American War in 1898 was promoted by the commercial sugar barons and led to our occupation of the Philippines. That experience involved us in a war where we killed up to a million Filipinos over a ten-year period. Such policies and actions carried out in the name of the American people have created within our souls an incredible betrayal of any moral or ethical standards of universal love

And then it went on. In fact the US had begun. During World War One the US government created an incredibly effective propaganda campaign which sold the war as the War to end all Wars and Save Democracy. Once our leaders realized they could sell that, they realized that they could sell anything, and during the 1920s, consumerism took off: toothpaste, deodorant, who knew all of the things we needed. As the modern marketplace makes evident, whatever sells is okay, sex, violence, child slavery, and on and on, regardless of the human or spiritual cost. If you really want to know this history which is largely a product of the American public relations and advertising industry you should read John Stauber and Sheldon Rampton's book, *Toxic Sludge is Good for You*.

Of course the consumption helped drive the empire. Throughout the 1900s the US military intervened multiple times throughout the Western Hemisphere, taking over governments and killing thousands of people in the quest for resources and markets. Smedley Butler, the Marine Corps general who led many of these interventions freely admits that he was a racketeer for Wall Street.

And then after World War Two we expanded our amoral foreign policy around the globe from Iran to Guatemala and Vietnam and of course to the Persian Gulf and Iraq

In our book we note that the US vacillates in how it operates the empire. Either it takes a unilateral approach where it uses war to impose its commercial objectives or it takes a multilateral approach where it uses international institutions like the World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund to promote its imperial goals.

But now, I have noticed that something else is happening. The universal covenant is making a comeback. People from all over the world are connecting to confront this empire. People who have been victimized by the empire and suffered the unbearable losses imposed by the empire are connecting with Americans and Europeans whose souls were sold by the commercial and imperial policies of the past 400 years. Americans, Moslems, Europeans,

Africans, people from all over the world are communicating and sharing a covenant that says all life is sacred. The empire has got to stop.

So during the multilateral stage of imperial enforcement, this international movement has come together like it did in Seattle in 1999 to oppose the World Trade Organization. Then when the policy moves into the unilateral phase, like it is these days, this covenantal movement becomes a worldwide anti-war movement like we saw on February 15 of last year where millions of people mobilized around the world against the Iraqi war.

This is not just here in this country. Thanks to the Internet and meetings like the World Social Forum, Latin American peasants are communicating with African farmers about the same types of concerns that the Quakers had. They note that as market capitalism spreads across the globe, money is power. As Gwyn points out, the capitalist process of commodification demands the objectification, analysis and reduction of all things to exchangeable elements with market value.” The peasants’ spiritual connection with the earth and all life is being destroyed and they do not like it

So the world is coming together to reclaim the spirituality that says all things are sacred. We are all connected; we are all part of life. If you have ever been to the massive protests in San Francisco or Seattle, perhaps you have felt that incredible spiritual connectedness that wafts through the air. It is an unbelievable experience and it is growing around the world.

So it is appropriate that I am bringing this message to the Unitarian Universalists, who also profess a universal covenant celebrating all of life. I thank you for that and I thank you for having me here today and I would love to hear your comments on all of this.