

Essay Prompt: “For this midterm assignment, imagine that you are home at Spring Break and having dinner with extended family. When your Aunt Sharon asks you what classes you are taking, she naturally she wants to know more about the "Jesus Chicken" course! When you explain to your confused aunt that the name refers to Chick-fil-A, she remarks "I think it's odd to have a business that is Christian." Your conservative Uncle John responds, "Why is it odd? Capitalism is the most Christian economic system, so it makes perfect sense!" Your mother turns to you and asks you to share what you've been learning and to try to mediate the argument.”

### Discussing Jesus over Chicken: Business and Religion at the Dinner Table

The table has gone eerily quiet since Uncle John and Aunt Sharon stated their opinions on Chick-Fil-A. As much as I feel like there is room for interpretation and argument, it is up to me to give my decisive insight – insight that might equally enrage and validate them. But it’s worth a shot. Regretfully delaying my feast of home-cooked foods (finally!), I look up at my Aunt Sharon and Uncle John.

“Well,” I begin, “a lot of businesses have historically been run using Christian values and connecting profitable labor to holiness. But that doesn’t necessarily make Capitalism the most compatible economic system for Christianity.”

“I don't get it,” Uncle John says, probably having doubts about his niece’s liberal arts education. “If they’ve been successful together for so long, like you just said, then what makes you think they’re ‘incompatible?’”

“Just because something has been done traditionally doesn’t make it right,” my Aunt Sharon interjects.

“Okay, it’s not that black and white. Over time, both spiritual leaders and entrepreneurs learned that certain parts of religion and scripture work to create successful business, and others turn out to be conflicting and even detrimental to business. This all comes with its own set of controversies, as the interpretations of scripture and other religious texts have a lot to do with how people manage their companies.”

“For example,” I continue, “Scripture not only does not explicitly support capitalism but actually contains some communalistic and socialist sentiments<sup>1</sup>, instead.”

Aunt Sharon gives my uncle an “I-told-you-so” look. I go on.

“With that in mind, a lot of early Christian ‘businesses’ were actually pretty in line with that communalism idea in Scripture. Communities like the one in Bethlehem<sup>2</sup> were producing goods to support their missionary and religious work, so Christianity came first there. They were strategically focused on maintaining a successful internal independence and economy, but there wasn’t any room for private property inside the community itself. So, in that case, the businesses were inherently Christian but not Capitalistic. In fact, it functioned a lot more like what you’d associate with Communist groups.”

“Bethlehem?” my Uncle asks, “That was before the American Revolution even happened! Once America’s ‘free market’ ideas got started, I’m sure there was a lot more Capitalist influence.”

“You’re right,” I say, “over time Christian groups’ relationships with Capitalism and business have gotten more intertwined – like with the boom of the ‘prosperity gospel’<sup>3</sup> in the late

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 19:21-26 (*The New Oxford Annotated Bible*).

<sup>2</sup> A. G. Roeber, “Religion and Profit: Moravians in Early America,” *Journal of Moravian History* 7, no. 1 (January 1, 2009): 117–18, <https://doi.org/10.2307/41179864>.

<sup>3</sup> Nicole C. Kirk, *Wanamaker’s Temple: The Business of Religion in an Iconic Department Store* (NYU Press, 2023).

19th century. But it wasn't just the two concepts getting better acquainted: it involved massive changes in people's interpretations of Christianity and scripture, and therefore wasn't originally a perfect fit for Capitalism."

Uncle John is kind of glaring at me now, but Aunt Sharon doesn't look too smug, either.

"You associating Capitalism with Christianity," I continue, oblivious to how much I've been monologuing, "does make sense. Over time, and especially during the 20th century, the two were marketed and preached as heavily intertwined. Religious leaders developed messages that said money and profit were good and indicated holiness in people, spreading these messages through new forms of media. In my class we listened to this audio story called '*Acre of Diamonds*<sup>4</sup>,' which reached larger groups of people through audio and visual programming. The idea was that God wanted us to be wealthy and provided us with opportunities right under our noses. Therefore, we should work to be his businessman and partner in our entrepreneurial endeavors."

"That's not what it says in Matthew 19<sup>5</sup>," remarks Aunt Sharon.

"True – they kind of omitted the part about rich people having a harder time getting to heaven, which is not a very Capitalistic concept when you think about it. But as Christian businessmen attained more wealth from their jobs, they worked to change other Christians' mindsets regarding wealth, emphasizing its attainability and the 'evidence' they saw in their own work – like with R.G. LeTourneau<sup>6</sup>."

"Like LeTourneau University?"

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<sup>4</sup> Russell H. Conwell, *Acre of Diamonds*, 1960, <http://fred67.com/files/AcreOfDiamonds.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 19:21-26 (*The New Oxford Annotated Bible*).

<sup>6</sup> Sarah Ruth Hammond, *God's Businessmen: Entrepreneurial Evangelicals in Depression and War* (University of Chicago Press, 2017).

“Yeah! We can see some interconnectedness between industry and Christianity in the fact that the university is both an Evangelical Christian school as well as a technical institute for sciences and businesses. With that being said, I can see the current overlap between business and religion – in *our* culture, anyway. The principles aren’t universal. I can assume other culture’s religions and capitalism have grown to overlap in their own ways, too – and vice versa.”

“I’m getting a headache,” says Aunt Sharon, “See, that’s why I go to Bloomingdale’s and support religiously *unaffiliated* businesses.”

“That’s another thing,” I begin. Aunt Sharon groans. “A lot of Christian practices and history are kind of embedded in our businesses now. Especially with department stores. Like, have you ever heard of Wanamaker’s?”

“Like the building in Philly?” my mom asks.

“Yes. It was originally a huge department store created by a very Christian organizer and entrepreneur, John Wanamaker. The building intentionally incorporated spiritual elements to have customers associate shopping with a religious experience<sup>7</sup>. Businessmen and clergymen alike were working alongside the developments of the Industrial Revolution to have Christianity reach the most people and earn the most money.”

“So department stores are... Christian?”

“Not always inherently, but it happens to be that a lot of them – and their architectural and interior design – have a lot of Christian and spiritual inspiration. In the reading I had about Wanamaker, historian Nicole C. Kirk referred to it as a ‘temple<sup>8</sup>,’ emphasizing its religious and awe-inspiring motifs.”

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<sup>7</sup> Kirk, Wanamaker’s Temple: The Business of Religion in an Iconic Department Store.

<sup>8</sup> Kirk, Wanamaker’s Temple: The Business of Religion in an Iconic Department Store.

“Sounds like they’re praying to the products,” Aunt Sharon remarks.

“I guess, and that in itself raises all sorts of questions regarding if these business decisions accurately reflect the ideals of Christianity<sup>9</sup>. But either way, it’s hard to see this intermingling as odd when it’s everywhere. Like, did you know that ivory soap has a similar origin<sup>10</sup>? It was all about purity and spreading that message to the public until a new ‘need’ grew out of it.”

“But we all *do* need to wash our hands. Cleanliness is next to godliness, you know!,” says Uncle John.

“You definitely have a point,” I say, “but there is a ton of power in what businesses decide to bring into the public consciousness, sometimes in ways so subconsciously that we don’t even realize that it’s happening so strategically. It happens all the time to me when I watch ads on YouTube.”

“That’s not really Christian, though, is it?”

“Well, no. In fact, when entrepreneurs like Wanamaker started putting their ads in the newspaper – he was inspired by the Reverend John Chambers<sup>11</sup>, which was even more controversial as a clergyman – there was some serious backlash. But in marketing, there was a trend in the late 19th century to the early 20th century of targeting Christian audiences by instilling Christian values or ideas in their advertisements. For example, Pears soap got minister Henry Ward Beecher<sup>12</sup> to basically endorse it, referencing the same proverb about cleanliness being next to godliness; this definitely attracted a big portion of Beecher’s following to Pears

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<sup>9</sup> Luke 16:13 (*The New Oxford Annotated Bible*).

<sup>10</sup> Kathryn Lofton, *Consuming Religion* (University of Chicago Press, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> Kirk, Wanamaker’s Temple: The Business of Religion in an Iconic Department Store.

<sup>12</sup> Kathryn Lofton, *Consuming Religion* (University of Chicago Press, 2017).

soap. And then the association between cleanliness and purity gets more intense, and then people began to feel like soap was a must-have, including all of its future add-ons.”

“This sounds like Quaker Oats!” adds my sister, a history major who, in this scenario, probably would’ve backed me up about ten minutes ago.

“Exactly. In these scenarios, it’s people using religion to improve business, using Christianity to fit *inside* Capitalism. But oftentimes it’s the other way around. A lot of clergymen take popular culture and business attitudes to building churches, especially with the growth of Christian Fundamentalism<sup>13</sup>.”

“Well, that’s obvious,” says Aunt Helen.

“I’m sure you’ve seen televangelists and stuff like that, but also with Robert Schuller and his drive-in theater church<sup>14</sup>. This inspired a lot of the megachurches that we see today. For Schuller, it was about incorporating concepts that would differentiate churches from others in the area, attracting the largest groups with the highest donations. In a way, religion was acting as business.”

“I remember hearing about that drive-in church,” says Uncle John. “That was in California, right? Your grandpa thought it was totally inappropriate.”

“I understand that,” I say, “and I think other people felt the same, that maybe it wasn’t really fitting scripture or their form of Christianity.”

The table is silent again. I’ve just said a lot of facts, and, more likely than not, the original argument has gotten a bit lost. I trace back to the root of the discussion.

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<sup>13</sup> Mark T. Mulder and Gerardo Martí, *The Glass Church: Robert H. Schuller, the Crystal Cathedral, and the Strain of Megachurch Ministry* (Rutgers University Press, 2020).

<sup>14</sup> Mulder and Martí, *The Glass Church: Robert H. Schuller, the Crystal Cathedral, and the Strain of Megachurch Ministry*.

“My point is, it’s not unusual to have a Christian business, but Christianity shifts to fit the form of Capitalism more than Capitalism aligns with the ideals of Christianity. These two points are not mutually exclusive. So, in a way, both of you are kind of wrong.”

They laughed.

“I guess we should leave it up to the college student to tell us, huh?” says Uncle John, chuckling.

“Ah, whatever. She may know a bit about history, but she didn’t take time out of her evening to cook you all this chicken. And now it’s getting cold!”

“All right, all right. Let’s eat!” my mom says.

And then we all get back to casual conversation, ignoring the fact that we are eating *chicken* and in that fact lies a certain irony. Next, my sister Rachel starts asking me about what I learned in my anthropology class, and the debates start all over again. But that’s the thing about religion and how it connects to our world and our culture: it’s always up for interpretation, always dancing around the root of innovation.