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A REVIEW ARTICLE
HOW SHOULD CHRISTIANS RESPOND TO THE
WEALTH AND PROSPERITY OF THE PRESENT AGE?

John H. Armstrong

*THE VIRTUE OF PROSPERITY: FINDING VALUES IN AN
AGE OF TECHNO-AFFLUENCE*

Dinesh D'Souza

New York: The Free Press (2000)

284 pages, cloth, \$26.00

The new economy, with its ever-expanding technologies, is a fact of life in the new millennium. As a direct result of this economic boom the United States has produced the first mass affluent class in world history. Most of the readers of this publication have experienced, directly or otherwise, the actual benefits of this affluence. Our economy has already produced a boon cycle longer than any in American history, proving to the world, that free market capitalism truly works, regardless of what the critics think. But has this affluence succeeded only in bringing about our ultimate destruction as a culture? These are the kinds of questions Christian leaders need to ask. Questions such as: What impact will this amazing affluence have upon our spiritual and moral foundations, both long and short term? More particularly, how should the church respond to the massive use of technology, especially computer-driven technology? And what about the bio-ethical developments that are related to this same technological revolution, which raise a thousand questions for all people

who still care about such issues? What will happen to our families, our schools, and for that matter, our local congregations, in this new economy? Is spiritual renewal still a real hope for American churches in the face of this rising tide of what Dinesh D'Souza, a former Reagan White House policy analyst, aptly calls "techno-affluence?" Doesn't this tide portend that the cause of Christ will suffer even further setback in our culture?

D'Souza writes a fast-moving, engaging, and immensely readable book that I found hard to put down. He conducted over one hundred personal interviews, seeking to understand both the histories of this new affluence as well as the people who created it. He paints helpful portraits of the major movers and shakers, men such as Steve Jobs, Eric Schmidt, George Gilder, Bill Gates, and Ted Turner. He considers the critical comments of those who have written ominous warnings about this new affluence, including scholars and clergy, as well as ordinary workers and political social pundits. He shows how historic political allegiances are shifting as both the left and right, at least as we traditionally conceive them, are coming together in ways that now celebrate the new technology of the past two decades. The bottom line is this—D'Souza believes we are living through a time when a transition bigger than the Industrial Revolution is taking place. This revolution, he predicts, will change the whole world, at least, as we have known it, within one generation. If he is right, and my best guess is that he is, then church leaders better be prepared, both mentally and spiritually, to face a radically different cultural future. (I think it is safe to say that relatively few Christian leaders were prepared for the Industrial Revolution, especially in Europe. The present techno-revolution is happening so quickly, and few Christian leaders seem to even talk about it, that one must wonder if we will respond to it the way we did the Industrial Revolution?)

It has long been the American dream that prosperity will generally better the human condition. Christians have often had a difficult time with this assumption, knowing as they do the dire warnings of their Lord regarding the dangers of amassing wealth. But is prosperity something we should actually welcome or cautiously resist? Are the improvements (and some question if we should even use this word) that techno-biology offers us, say in health and a longer life span for example, desirable or undesirable? Is the liberation from drudgery desirable or not? Do computers and cell phones really improve our lives, or have they become corrosive influences of evil that will ultimately be our undoing on the larger scale of life and culture?

D'Souza believes the answer to these questions ultimately depends upon how we understand the questions themselves, especially the ethical ones which lie behind the technological ones. As a Roman Catholic immigrant from India, D'Souza has been deeply involved in domestic issues for several decades. His Christian perspective comes through particularly in the aptly-named chapter, "The Eye of the Needle." He begins this chapter by noting that:

Wealth and success may buy you freedom and make your life easier, but in the process of acquiring them must you sell out your principles, and lose your soul? Rich societies have extended longevity and comfort for their citizens, but haven't they also complicated—and corrupted—life so that people in poorer, simpler societies may actually live more wholesome and happier lives (110)?

What follows is a very good critique of the history and philosophy of capitalism, from both the left and the right. The author even interviewed several evangelicals, with some interesting results. Their struggle with wealth and capitalism is carefully represented here. He shows an

unusually clear knowledge of the teachings of Jesus in this area, as well as a sound understanding of the consequences of Christian thought and practice through Western history. The conclusion D'Souza reaches is "that the happy life is not simply a life filled with good things; happiness also requires a life that is meaningful" (134).

But something has *profoundly* changed in America with the rise of techno-affluence. D'Souza adroitly explains this change in chapter 7. He begins by quoting from a letter of John Adams to Thomas Jefferson. The question posed by one of founding fathers is faced squarely by D'Souza. Adams wrote:

Will you tell me how to prevent riches from becoming the effects of temperance and industry? Will you tell me how to prevent riches from producing luxury? Will you tell me how to prevent luxury from producing effeminacy, intoxication, extravagance, vice and folly (135)?

That is the question for all who are concerned about nature, family, and community. D'Souza is surely right when he says the loss of these core values, and the absence of a deeply held moral framework associated with them, preceded the rise of modern techno-affluence. Cyberspace cannot restore community. It will not bring back the love of the good and the place of family. But it does not *necessarily* spell the end of such either. D'Souza concludes:

But there is reason to be optimistic. . . . [A]ffluence and the Internet will liberate more and more people from a life chained to their jobs, and they will be free to migrate to villages or form communities where they can enjoy lasting associations (160).

Chapter 7 demonstrates, further, why capitalism works. D'Souza correctly challenges the heart of sociologist Max Weber's controversial thesis that capitalism developed in the Protestant West because of John Calvin's doctrine of predestination. Weber argued that the Protestant work ethic, which flowed from the doctrine of proving that one was elect of God, created our free markets and thus the modern system of capitalism. D'Souza deftly asks:

What evidence did Weber produce that millions of ordinary Protestants so totally misunderstood the basics of their faith that they confused their bank balances with their prospects for inclusion in the heavenly kingdom? In truth, he produced none.

But Weber's question remains a good one. Many members of the Party of Yeah [i.e., those who celebrate and strongly affirm the techno-affluent society and its accoutrements] tend to assume that the premises of capitalism and technology

. . . are universal human aspirations and, as such, have provided the guiding impetus for all societies at all times. It comes as something of a shock for partisans of this view to discover that the great thinkers of the ancient world, not only in the West but also in other cultures, were virtually unanimous in spurning the technological innovator and regarding the trader as a lowlife and a scum (166).

The unifying principle of the ancient world was *not* affluence, but virtue. Earlier Christian thinkers, including Augustine and Aquinas, all agreed. While no single thinker agreed precisely on which virtue was most important, all agreed that the goal of a truly good society must be virtue. Because of this conception the ancients "assigned a low position to trade and technology" (170). Saint Jerome stat-

ed the common Christian view rather bluntly when he wrote, "All riches proceed from sin. No one can gain without another man losing" (170). D'Souza, demonstrating the wide scope of his own research and thought, cites the French Reformed thinker Jacques Ellul in this same regard. In *The Technological Society* Ellul offered another compelling reason why the ancients rejected technology—they saw themselves as living in harmony with nature, not as modern "environmentalists" think of it exactly, but rather as something "magical" in the sense that nature possessed true life. This is why most ancient cultures spoke of "mother nature" in the way they did. D'Souza concludes, "It is virtually inconceivable that people who lived in this enchanted world, who saw nature in this way, would conceive of and launch a scientific and technological project to comprehend, control, and manipulate nature for human ends" (171-72).

So what happened to bring about the massive cultural change in the way we view technology? Was the impetus for this change evil, sub-Christian, or even anti-Christian? D'Souza's conclusion regarding this culture altering change, and it was a truly massive social change, is quite simple. He believes it came about during the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries and explains it this way:

There are good reasons why the ancien régime was replaced by the techno-capitalist society in the Western World. What happened, in effect, was a moral revolution, *a remaking of common sense, so that one set of values was replaced by another and what used to be considered the vilest heresy eventually came to seem acceptable, even good* (emphasis mine, 172-73).

D'Souza suggests this change came between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries, particularly in Europe. The reasons he gives are: (1) The Black Plague, which killed one

third of the population. (2) The Reformation, which brought widespread wars of religion and the social breakup of whole empires and people groups. (3) This resulted in political chaos, which caused thinkers to envision a new way of organizing society. These new thinkers wanted a society that was *workable*. They based their view upon "meeting human needs and wants rather than elevating human aspirations to a higher level" (174). Science, especially natural science, would give humans the chance to live longer and love better. Samuel Johnson expressed this change quite aptly when he wrote: "There are few ways in which a man is so innocently occupied than in getting money" (174).

Europe thus came to construct a new kind of society, one based upon trade and technology. This new society, they hoped, would end all religious conflict, eliminate material scarcity, check disease, and bring about order and peace between peoples. It, of course, did nothing of the kind. All one needs is a brisk breeze from the twentieth century to clearly show the failure of this dream. What it did accomplish, however, was an end to the ancient world and its consistent way of thinking about life and order.

The flowering of these growing social developments came to fruition in America. This is where D'Souza's conclusions will most surely bother some evangelicals. The fact is that his instincts and explanations at this point are surely more right than wrong. The founding fathers of this nation desired to privatize religion, at least in one crucial sense. They did this by not establishing a "right" religion for all the people. They saw clearly that "the separation of church and state" meant that the government would favor no particular religion over another. D'Souza pokes at some commonly believed errors by writing:

I regret having to bring bad news to religious people who

have been raised to think of the founders as deeply pious men who sought to establish a Christian society. The founders were not deeply pious men, and they sought no such thing. Thomas Jefferson was probably more anticlerical than most, but the founders would have agreed with his view of the Declaration of Independence as "the signal of arousing men to burst the chains under which monkish ignorance and superstition had persuaded them to bind themselves." If society is peaceful and prosperous, Jefferson said, who cares what people believe about the afterlife? "It does no injury for my neighbor to say there are 20 gods or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg" (183).

The effect of this shift was that a religious peace was secured, but at the loss of what D'Souza calls "a shared conviction of participating in a transcendent order" (183). This does not mean, however, that the founders had no belief regarding "God-given rights" and the difference between humans and other forms of life. This conviction is clearly reflected in the Declaration of Independence, where the opening phrase states that, "We hold these truths to be self-evident." For the purpose of D'Souza's primary concern we can reduce his argument to this one important statement: "The founders believed in equality of rights, but they did not believe in equality of outcomes. Indeed, it is hardly an exaggeration to say that, in their view, equality of rights provides the moral justification for inequality of outcomes" (185). He is unquestionably correct in this view.

The result of this experiment in religion and society is clear. We now have a highly commercial, technological society that seeks not only material gain but moral progress. This progress is not conceived of in terms of a singular creedal religious form but in terms of *human rights* and *human responsibilities*. The public square must not be vacated by religious folk in this vision. They were not to

insist on one way, and only one way, for guiding the nation morally and politically but they were not to vacate the life of the nation to whatever vision came down the road. Public life, as well as private morality, must necessarily be challenged and tempered. This, in my own view, is precisely why Christians have failed to end abortion legally in the past twenty-eight years of effort. We took the path, in the early 1970s, of fighting a *directly* political battle with *political weapons* clothed with flimsy moral arguments. This was a much easier path than one which required us to establish a moral high ground with the vast numbers of people who still agreed, at the time, that abortion was a moral choice equivalent to the murder of a living human person. Instead of appealing to the hearts and consciences of people we appealed to our government and our legislators. The majority was on our side at the time this debate ensued. Now, the tables have turned. President Bush, a pro-life advocate, understands this problem well. This is why he has plainly stated that this carnage can only be legally ended when *enough* informed citizens cry out against it, much as they did during the civil rights era of the 1960s. This alone will change the laws and end abortion in an open society like our own. For this to happen the church must "persuade," not coerce. It must reason with people, not attack them.

D'Souza concludes that the principles that established this nation are the same principles that strengthened and built our present advance in commerce and technology. He reasons that we have built the most just and prosperous society in human history. Multitudes of evangelicals will initially react against this interpretation, believing that at no time has our society been so bankrupt morally as at the present moment. (Though I concur that we are clearly a morally bankrupt people, this is not the *whole* story. We still have large platoons of good and decent people in this nation. I

am convinced that D'Souza is fundamentally correct in the big picture. Surely there must be some kind of dialectic at work in this larger picture of things. We must remember that even in the accounts of nations recorded in the Old Testament, except of course Israel, which had a covenantal status, God did not wipe out peoples willy-nilly or quickly. Carefully ponder what D'Souza actually says:

If the principles of commerce and technology, on which America is founded, are in some ways less noble than those of the ancient world, they are also more realistic and more practical. Moreover, they have produced not just material but also moral progress: the abolition of slavery, the elevation of countless people from poverty to comfort, the relief of suffering produced by disease, humanitarian campaigns against torture and famine all over the world, and a widely shared conception of human rights, human freedom, and human dignity. As a consequence, the United States can, in terms of material or moral excellence, hold its own against any contemporary society, even any ancient society. If it falls short, it is not by the standard of ancient practice, only by the standard of ancient principle. Thus I conclude that while the United States may not be the best conceivable society, it is probably the best society that now exists or has ever existed (186-87).

But D'Souza's insights and conclusions about this matter do not end here. He concludes that though we have attained the greatest wealth and the greatest opportunity for justice of any society, at least to this point in human history and thus, in the words of the founding fathers, we are now ready "to pursue happiness" we have no clear conception of what the good actually is or how we can attain it.

The prosperity of the last two decades has brought millions of American families to the end of the Lockean road. They

have triumphed against necessity; they are, by any historical standard, rich. So they are ready to pursue happiness, but this is where the problem begins: they don't know where to find it. If they turn to the early modern thinkers, and to the founders, for guidance, what they will find is nothing. On this crucial and relevant question, which concerns the content of the good life in a capitalist society, the founders and their intellectual mentors were silent (187).

So, where will our people find happiness in the midst of such amazing prosperity? Where will we find the moral glue to hold life together that will allow this great growth in commerce and technology to advance and become an even greater blessing to the entire world? It is precisely here that the truly providentialist historian, of which I am one, must argue that true revival has salvaged our society on several previous occasions. The Second Great Awakening comes to mind readily. Precisely at a time when the American experiment was about to fall under the moral weight of a debauched people God intervened to rescue the fortunes of a nation by renewing the faith and hope of his own people. Drug use soared at the end of the eighteenth century, alcoholism was rampant, families were breaking apart in record numbers, and crime was at an all time high. Then God came and refreshed his people, spilling blessing from the revived church upon a young nation and thus giving it a renewed moral foundation deeply rooted in the Christian faith. The church did not take over the state nor did it coerce the state to submit to the law of God. The church became, once again, vital and living. A revived church resulted in changes in the wider society that were astounding.

The problems that presently surround wealth and technology clearly need moral solutions. These solutions will not come from simply opposing the wealth or attacking the advances of technology. We must do better. We can do

better. The Christian church can produce people who are ready to face this challenge. We need thoughtful, educated, spiritually-minded contributors to the public square of the United States. We also need a reformational-revival in the Christian church before the judgment of God spills over into the entire culture. If God's people will not answer the call for "finding values in an age of techno-affluence" (D'Souza's subtitle) then who will? The moment before us is one in which we must not let this opportunity pass without engaging the true powers in the unseen realm. These powers impact the way people think and the way they live. We must speak to our culture with insightful and fresh power. Most of all we must teach the church and pray for her recovery from moral and spiritual exhaustion. For the church to speak again with real authority we must comprehend the power of this vast new wealth which could be used for great good or unparalleled evil.

Author

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