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# Protection Racket Theology

*Revd Dick Wolff for Temple Cowley URC*

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In the days before coinage, societies ran on credit just as much as they do today, but just without money. Like a LETS scheme.

The merchant provides you with, say, manufactured leather goods and you pay him with your harvest produce – when your harvest is gathered in. *Until* the harvest you live on credit. ‘Stuff for stuff’. If you couldn’t pay your tab when harvest time came (because perhaps it was a poor harvest), then your credit bill got paid off with the collateral – whatever you’d offered as security. So you’d have to pay by offering a parcel of land, or maybe your daughter. You’d either pay, or the creditor’s bailiffs would seize them.

But you wouldn’t pay off your debt with one of your oxen, or by letting him take your wife. The last of the Ten Commandments, as we heard, is “do not covet your neighbour’s wife, or oxen”. This is *not* about fancying an adulterous fling with your neighbour’s wife – adultery is already prohibited in the seventh commandment. It’s about not seizing possession of your neighbour’s wife or oxen *in settlement of your debts*. (Notice that taking your neighbour’s daughter as a concubine or son as a slave isn’t forbidden!)

But *why are* you forbidden from seizing your debtor’s wife or oxen? Because without a wife your neighbour will not be able to have children – you’re cutting off his future. Without an ox he won’t be able to plough. Take these things and you’ll be denying him fundamental rights. This last commandment is about protecting a debtor’s most basic rights.

So the currency was grain, olive oil, animals, land. Actual money didn’t appear for thousands of years after human civilisation started. Theoretically we could live without money even today.

Actual money – coinage – was largely invented in order to pay armies. Which is why the question to Jesus about paying Cæsar’s tax was so sensitive. (*see* Mark 12:13-17)

In Jesus’s day, the powerful and mighty – the emperors and commanders of armies – also declared that you owed a debt to *them*. How? What benefit had you had from them? What service had they provided that you needed to pay for?

The answer is that they'd done you a favour by not killing you or enslaving you when they overran your country, and so, in order that they could pay their armies, they made you pay them money as a token of your deep gratitude to them for not killing you. For letting you live. It was basically a protection racket :

“We pay our soldiers in coins so they can pay you for their rations. (Obviously, they can't pay you in harvest produce because they don't stay anywhere long enough to grow anything). And you must pay us some of those coins back in tax so they can continue to 'protect' you.”

Except that the level of tax was high enough to keep you close enough to the poverty line that you had to keep your nose to the grindstone, feeding the emperor's armies as well as yourself. That's what tax was largely used for – there was no social services or benefit system in those days! That was down to the 'Big Society'. *Any coinage you had was largely for paying Cæsar's armies. That's why tax collectors were despised.*

Most transactions were cashless. Do you remember the parable where Jesus talks about the shrewd but incompetent estate manager who cancelled debts of grain and olive oil in order to win friends before he was sacked? (Luke 16 : 1 - 13) The basic currency there – it's clear – is harvest produce.

The Jerusalem Temple had developed its own version of this Roman protection racket, except in the name of God, not the emperor. In order to fund the large army of priests (who, like soldiers, were unproductive – not producing anything useful) the Temple System ran a sort of protection racket for God . . . God as a sort of mafia boss. “God's been very gracious and has allowed you to survive. He's spared you. We expect you to show how grateful you are for your existence by paying up. Then maybe God will let us all survive for another year.” No wonder Jesus drove the traders out of the Temple.

In mediæval Catholic Christianity, similarly, you could buy God's continuing protection with money. That's how the great cathedrals

in Rome were built – and it shows how enormously far the Roman church has changed that the present Pope, Francis, has called money the “devil’s dung”.

The Reformers from whom the URC is descended were appalled at the Roman church’s money racket, but they didn’t ditch the idea that God needed buying off. In fact, they reinforced it! We’ve grown up (many of us) with this ‘protection racket theology’.

In the most extreme Calvinist theology of our Reformed heritage we should grovel, sinners that we are, before the mighty Lord God to whom we owe our very life; who has every right to obliterate us unworthy sinners, miserable subjects who should show their continual grovelling gratitude to the Great Emperor in the sky simply for allowing us to survive. Especially during Lent, we might say the following prayer of confession :

*We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done; and there is no health in us. But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us, miserable offenders. Spare thou those that are penitent.*

But the twist our faith ancestors put on it was this mystery : we should be eternally grateful for the God-emperor’s “inestimable mercies” in that he has sent his son Jesus to pay off our debt – in his own blood.

The whole frame of thinking here – the whole metaphor – is a financial one based on the protection rackets of emperors and great Temples. God as the great Mafia boss in the sky, running a protection racket that demands payment in blood for the privilege of being allowed to live. Even if we aren’t deeply grateful to the heavenly boss – the great Godfather in the sky – for allowing us to survive, we daren’t admit it, let alone show it.

In Calabria in southern Italy I’m told you will sometimes find notices up in restaurants that say that everyone must pay for their own meal – people are not allowed to buy a meal for someone else. Sound strange? It’s because this is the way a mafiosi starts out – he buys a nice meal for someone who can’t really afford to

eat properly. But neither can they *repay* the gift, so from that moment they are in the mafiosi's debt. He's begun to get them under his control. The modern word for this is 'grooming' and that is exactly how the sexual predators of those vulnerable young girls here in Oxford operated – they started with flattery and gifts.

Many of us have grown up with this 'theology of indebtedness', this 'protection racket theology'. Some churches have traded on it to the extent that they have 'groomed' people and exerted dominating influence over them.

Where does this 'protection racket theology' of unpayable debt come from? Does it come from Jesus?

I don't think so. I think it comes from our experience of the money system. We've projected our financial thinking on to God.

But Jesus declares that God is not a mafia boss or emperor. God is 'Dad', not the 'Godfather'. As Jesus says in one of his parables :

*Which one of you fathers would give your hungry child a snake if the child asked for a fish? Which one of you would give your child a scorpion if the child asked for an egg? As bad as you are, you still know how to give good gifts to your children.*

*Luke 11 : 11 - 13*

God, our parent, demands no tribute; no payment for the privilege of his allowing us to stay alive. No protection money to ward off his gangsters/priests. (Remember the priests *were* powerful – they could ruin you). That kind of mafia talk doesn't seem to make sense to Jesus.

*Look how magnificently he clothes the wild flowers of the field – far finer than Solomon with all his wealth*

*Luke 12 : 27*

And the flowers don't have to work to produce a surplus to pay off their debts, simply for the privilege of existing.

If life is a gift, then it really *is* a gift. There *is* no debt that needs paying off. There *is* no obligation. We are given life – we didn't have a say in the matter, after all – and we can make of it what we will. We can curse the day we were born and make everyone around us miserable; we can give thanks to God every moment for the wonderful gift of life, and share the gift of life by bringing joy and hope to people around us; or we can shrug our shoulders and look after Number One, 'making the best of it'.

Does that mean that Jesus's giving of himself to death on the cross was pointless, then? That there was no salvation to be won?

Not at all. But the point is almost the opposite of the classic Evangelical message. Who *is* it that demands the sacrifice? Whose protection racket are we under? Not God's! It's the *Temple* that demands sacrifice. It's the *Emperor*. It's *their* 'protection racket' money system designed to pay for their armies (and their armies of priests) keeping them in power. *That's* what demands the sacrifice in settlement of debts.

And Jesus stands up to it, absolutely. He refuses, in the name of God – his 'dad', not the 'Great Godfather in the Sky' (whom he knows . . .), he refuses to play the game, to be cowed. The great 'mafia boss' in the Temple, and the Roman emperor's bully boy in the Jerusalem garrison demand payment in blood, and God in Christ looks them in the eye – *and pays it*. But he reminds Pilate that he only has any authority to make demands of him or anyone in this world because God has allowed him to have it. Implied in that is the question Jesus goes on to suggest – "are you using that authority in the way that the Almighty God would want you to? *That is the truth I've come to bear witness to.*"

Three days later, Matthew tells us they are trying to buy off the guards who report that Jesus seems to have risen. So – Jesus wasn't graciously given life by the Emperor or the Temple. All *they* deal in is death. He is given life by a more gracious power – God himself.

We've grown up in a religion which (like most religion, actually) uses the language of us owing a debt to God – a debt so great we could never pay it, but a debt such that if we don't pay it we'll go to hell, the eternal debtors' prison. Protection racket theology.

But then, added into that is a story that makes a mockery of it, undermines it. The story of Jesus who graciously pays off our debt with his life. But we've also been taught to believe that Jesus acting is God acting – so when Jesus surrenders his life this is God *settling his own debt* through the blood of his son. As Paul writes : “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself” (2 Cor 5:19).

*Christ forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross.*

*Colossians 2 : 14 (NIV)*

But the older I get the more this thinking seems so peculiar, so awkward, and such a round-the-houses way of saying something much simpler : that ultimately debt is an illusion and *it is the annihilation of debt that is truly divine*. God deals only in gift – genuinely free gift, not some divine protection racket. That stands in such stark contradiction of just about every aspect of the way our world runs that it is shocking.