

God and Money: A New Economic Gospel

By ANN MONROE

The Rev. John C. Haughey is trying to sneak up on the business community. So when he's talking to businessmen, he tries to speak their language. "You don't beat people over the head," he says. "Jesus was a seducer."

Father Haughey came to a cramped, dingy conference room in the heart of New York's financial district recently to talk to Wall Street executives about God and Mammon. He was no wimp. When a money manager asked him if a company should cope with declining revenue by cutting staff, Father Haughey agreed that it should.

"In the long run," he said, "a people-sensitive corporation can only be people-sensitive as long as it's in the black."

But listen carefully. This mild-mannered gray-haired Jesuit, who looks more like the academic he used to be than the Charlotte, N.C., parish priest he is now, is an economic revolutionary. He's trying to turn the accepted truths of popular economic thinking upside down.

We don't need to be more competitive, he says, but less; we need to make room for failure. The notion that everybody can be the best is "self-aggrandizing bilge, a metaphysical impossibility."

Father Haughey himself is, however, something of a success story. Last year, out of frustration, he wrote a book that made him a minor celebrity. "The Holy Use of Money" grew out of his frustration at the Woodstock Institute, a Jesuit think tank at Washington's Georgetown University, where he was studying the relationship between political ethics and faith. The harder he worked, the more irrelevant he felt; he was becoming convinced that the real issues were economic.

"The Holy Use of Money" diagnoses, and proposes a cure for, what Father Haughey sees as the economic disease of

American culture—the attempt to worship God (or, in nonreligious terms, to act on what we describe as our highest values) and money at the same time. Jesus's oft-quoted warning that "You cannot worship God and Mammon" isn't a moral doctrine, he would argue; it's fact. The two can't be held in tension; one will win out. In our culture, the winner is money.

The disease's symptoms include running after things, numbness, and a kind of split consciousness in which even religious people keep God in one box and the rest of life—"reality"—in another. They believe in the sphere of God, but are so busy acting out of "reality"—chasing security, wealth and status—that they haven't got any energy left over to do anything about it.

The remedy, he says, can be found only in a new mythology. The one he proposes runs counter to everything Wall Street and Harvard Business School hold dear.

It didn't go over very big, for example, with former International Telephone & Telegraph Corp. chief executive officer Harold Geneen. The two men sparred at a management conference in Ohio where Father Haughey was an invited gadfly. According to his account, he filled the role nobly, telling Mr. Geneen that there was something wrong with a myth of management that didn't include failure, and that what the country needs is a new myth of downward mobility.

Father Haughey keeps on challenging Christians, on and off Wall Street, to see money not as reward, or protection, or even necessity, but as something quite simple and utilitarian—a means of expressing their love for God. Losing is the way to wisdom, he says, recalling a prayer group he was once in. Its members had only one thing in common: Their varied dreams—of marriage, health, solvency, love, popularity, looks, youth—had all fallen apart, and the dreams' shattering had broken the dreamers.

But with the collapse of the self-generated dreams came wisdom. Now the dreamers could dream a dream they didn't create. "I think that's what Jesus meant by the kingdom of God," he says. "Jesus provides a dream that includes and explains failure. It says the bottom line is people come together under God's care rather than individuals making it under their own self-propulsion."

Father Haughey calls his book a Christology of money because he believes that, at least for Christians, the key to controlling, rather than being controlled by, our economic culture lies in the figure of Jesus. In theological terms, he's talking about conversion. Classic conversion stories usually involve a change of vocation, but Father Haughey isn't urging Christians to leave the business world. He wants them to stick around and change it.

"I'm pimping for economic rights," he says frankly. He wants to seduce Christians in business into his vision of a world where each human being, simply by virtue of being human, is seen as having economic as well as political rights.

Judging by the hour he spent at the Jesuit office, Father Haughey has a long way to go. The audience, though willing to endure hard chairs and a stuffy room, didn't, in the end, quite seem to get the point. A banker offered the financial version of a technological fix: There's nothing wrong with quantifying people. The problem is we don't do it well enough.

But Father Haughey says he made some progress with Mr. Geneen, who at the end of the argument acknowledged it had changed him a tiny bit, adding quickly "but not as much as you want."

Retelling the story, Father Haughey leans forward and adds in a whisper, "I didn't change a bit."

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