

Review of Craig Martin, *Capitalizing Religion: Ideology and the Opiate of the Bourgeoisie*, London: Bloomsbury, 2014

Robert J. Myles, University of Auckland

IN *CAPITALIZING RELIGION*, CRAIG MARTIN ARGUES that the ‘opiate of the bourgeoisie’—that is, contemporary forms of what is typically labelled ‘individual religion’—encourages accommodation of consumer life in late capitalism among the (working) middle classes. Individual religion or spirituality promotes political quietism, deliverance through consumerism, increased productivity through divine endorsements of inequitable labour, and an intensification of the rhetoric of individual responsibility, both moral and economic.

Martin poses his argument in direct opposition to the dominant narrative in Religious Studies that regards the proliferation of ‘individual religion’ as evidence for an increase in individual, private, and autonomous forms of religious belief and practice. By contrast, according to Martin, discourses on individual religion—which sacralise the ideals of self-determination and freedom of choice—are capitalist ideologies that constitute the subject into a false consciousness of individuality and self-determination. As a result, these ideologies function to surrender and anesthetize individuals to the dominant capitalist mode of production. Individual religion constitutes individuals as subjects of capitalism by encouraging consumerism, productivity, and quietism with respect to economic and political structures. Furthermore, the ideology of individualism does not actually make people more individualistic, argues Martin, but rather functions to mask the extent to which individuals are collectively constituted in the first place. In other words, the ideology of individualism obscures how people are constituted by their communities by obfuscating the extent to which subjects in a capitalist system are already determined by social norms and class relations outside of their control.

Part one focuses on religion, capitalism and social theory. In chapter one, Martin discusses the social theory of Durkheim and the ideology of individualism. This chapter in particular is heavy going (especially compared to the rather lucid introduction), but is a necessary stepping-stone for the discussion that follows. In the next chapter, he then lays out a theory of individual religion in late capitalism, before turning in the following chapter to examine how the privileging of experience over institutional forms of religion in contemporary discussions of spirituality functions to reinforce the ideology of capitalism.

In part two of the book, Martin fleshes out the four aspects of his argument in detail with some specific examples. First, he discusses the notion of political quietism that is advocated by individual religion by way of an analysis of Christopher Moore’s novel *Lamb: The Gospel According to Biff, Christ’s Childhood Pal* (2002). Martin suggests that rather than advocating a private and autonomous

religion, Biff's gospel 'legitimizes the right of empires to regulate and oversee taxation, commerce, and social difference' (p. 106). Second, Martin discusses freedom of choice, consumer culture, and Islam. He performs a close reading of Randa Abdel-Fattah's novel *Does My Head Look Big in This?* (2005), which concerns the generational and cultural issues surrounding the protagonist's 'free choice' to wear the hijab. Third, Martin analyses the protestant work ethic in respect of self-help and spirituality manuals. These manuals tend to suggest that if we cannot escape from our place in the capitalist system, we can instead consume ideologies that help us to acclimatize to it. They provide strategies for managing selves through reflexive practices that align the expression of individual autonomy with capitalism. Fourthly, Martin looks at 'individualism' as a capitalist theodicy with respect of popular authors Karen Berg's *God Wears Lipstick: Kabbalah for Women* (2005) and Eckhart Tolle's *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment* (1999). Martin argues that both books advance an individualist ideology that problematically ascribes the cause of suffering to individuals rather than wider social, economic and political structures.

The subtitle of the book, *Ideology and the Opiate of the Bourgeoisie*, provides insight into Martin's stance on the function of religion in a capitalist society. Specifically, Martin follows the classic Marxist conception of religion as an expression of underlying economic, political and social forces. In this sense, reactionary forms of religion often serve as a means of accommodation to and coping with the dominant social structures. Following this, so-called individual religion is linked to the regnant mode of production and also, somewhat predictably, tied to class location. When it comes to individual religion, the ideology of 'freedom of choice' has the effect of obscuring the actual (economic, political, and social) causes that prime our choices in the first place, and, moreover, positively sanction consumer choices by reinforcing the system of consumption. Accordingly, Martin is able to demonstrate, through the astute analysis of contemporary forms of religion in particular, how the overbearing rhetoric of freedom and liberty within the context of liberal capitalism are not, in fact, universal but rather bourgeois constructs.

Martin leaves at least one lingering question unanswered, however: if individual religion is generated by the capitalist mode of production, why does it only take root during the latter half of the twentieth century and not (to the same extent) during earlier periods of capitalism? One answer is that neoliberal ideology now functions as a hegemonic mode of governance and structures virtually every aspect of daily life through the logic of the free market, and in a way slightly different from previous forms of capitalism. A potential weakness of the book is, therefore, Martin's reluctance to engage in a periodization of capitalism and how this produces different configurations of religious expression and belief. For example, while Martin identifies in his introduction some interesting convergences between, on the one hand, Ronald Reagan's vocabulary in distinguishing communism from democracy and, on the other, the language used by some scholars to positively describe individual religion as being about freedom and choice, this convergence is never explicitly tied back to a period of capitalism. Martin only gets as far as noting that the ideology of individual freedom is a technique of liberal governmentality. While neoliberalism is supposedly built upon classical economic and liberal ideals, there is also something distinctive about neoliberalism's march towards intensification, privatization, and rhetoric of personal responsibility that would

appear to provide the perfect contextual setting for many of the arguments put forward in Martin's book.

That said, the book provides a much needed corrective to the discipline of Religious Studies's failure to properly theorize modern individualism. That the notion of 'the individual as a relatively free agent' is itself a product of bourgeois economic, political, and social structures is a simple (almost obvious) point. Nonetheless, most academics (being members of the salaried bourgeoisie themselves) obviously assume the universal normalization of such constructs.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/)