Craig Martin


*Capitalizing Religion* may be summarized as a critique of so-called individual religion, that is, religion allegedly shaped by the individualist mentality in our time. More specifically, in the book, individual religion refers to New Age spirituality. A typical statement in this field is a “spiritual” self-determination frequently accompanied by dissociation from institutional religion. This position is summarized in the book as SBNR, short for the common statement, “I am spiritual but not religious,” which is standard within the New Age current. Like a number of other scholars, the author is worried about the wider social effects of individualistic spirituality.

The argumentation is chiefly inspired by the Marxist conception of religion as rooted in social and economic conditions and serving the interests of the rich and privileged. It echoes this classic Marxist view, first, in displaying little or no sympathy for scholarly approaches that take the actors’ orientations as a point of departure, and, second, in its denunciation of individual religion, which, according to Martin, is under-investigated and untheorized. Accordingly, his text wrestles with sociological classics and well-known contemporary scholars. Basically, his contribution boils down to the argument that individualistic spirituality “obscures how individuals are constituted by their communities” (p. 6), and, further, that it stimulates consumerism and capitalist values and impairs the understanding of economic power structures.

Among the critics of the marriage between late capitalism and religion, Jeremy Carrette and Richard King’s *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* (2005) should be emphasized. It argues that the ongoing psychological privatization of religion within dominant economic structures represents a silent “takeover” of religion by the world of business, with the result that social ethics and political concerns are undermined. The influence of this work is evident in *Capitalizing Religion*. Martin’s critique is at least as acute, adopting as analytical instruments the Marxist pejorative category of ideology and the metaphor of religion as a drug. Marx pointed to the nineteenth-century working class as the victims of simultaneously comforting and obfuscating religion. Martin argues that the middle class is the social stratum most affected by today’s spirituality rhetoric. The reason is that middle-class people are more prone to think that success or failure depends on the choices of the individual and tend to disregard the impact of social and economic structures. Not only New Age spirituality, but also the scholarly interpretation of it as giving more room for free choice, individualism, and autonomy than traditional, organized
religion, is contested by the author. He regards this interpretation as an emic reflection of the SBNR discourse expressing the ideology of individualism.

The book is divided into two main parts; the first is theoretical and traces the genealogy of individual religion within scholarship. Here, Martin draws on a number of scholars in order to elucidate how the distinction between individual and institutional religion has become established in religious studies. Émile Durkheim’s theory of binary oppositions, such as mechanical solidarity/organic solidarity, less free will/more free will, closer to matter/closer to spirit, is emphasized as an important legacy, determining much theorizing on modern religion, including SBNR spirituality. William James is heavily criticized by the author for overestimating individual religious experience and devaluing institutional religion. In part two, Martin resorts to popular novels and self-help books in order to demonstrate how individualistic spirituality promotes political quietism, consumerism, increased productivity, and individualism—all of them significant elements in capitalist economy.

An abstract world of theory, discourse, ideology, obfuscation, and distortion is established in the text. Actor perspectives are absent. It is not the decisions made by economic actors that are blamed by Martin, but the capitalist system. A leap of this kind is manifested in the personal narrative about the author’s father. The story sketches the loss he suffered when the U.S.-based automobile industry was ousted and a new comparable job was outside his reach in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. In his troubles, the father found some solace in reading self-help literature that encouraged positive thinking. Rather than appreciating the solace, the son sees a man duped by capitalist mythmaking. The appropriate criticism of the capitalist system is a job performed by the book, and here the story about his father functions as a personal anchorage for the opiate of the bourgeoisie-thesis, legitimating the indignant tone of voice that characterizes the writing. The strategy that reduces the father to a double victim—of capitalist economy and positive thinking—is even noticeable in the one-sided approach to complex social issues. Are, for instance, the excesses and cynicism manifested by contemporary capitalist industries only due to system properties, as the author seems to think, or should they as much be explained by the lack of political regulations? Is consumerism the same as mindless, immoral consumerism? Is SBNR religion more in keeping with capitalist thinking than other religious varieties? Also, the book invites questions about the validity of ignoring people’s articulated reasons for turning to individualistic spirituality. The author does not reflect on actors’ beliefs or practices in any way that goes beyond his own ideology-revealing campaign, and scholars who have tried to conceptualize and describe the field in more neutral or sympathetic ways are taken to task. To argue, however, as Martin