

Veblen, Veblenian Social Practices, and Prosperity Theology

At the turn of the twentieth century (1910), Veblen published an essay which explored the relationship between Christianity and capitalism by focusing on the interaction between the two institutions as they evolved. Veblen's analysis begins by detailing the evolution of Christianity prior to the age of industrialized capitalism, after which he explores the evolutionary interplay between the two. Just over ten years prior to the publication of this essay (1899), Veblen published the *Theory of the Leisure Class* while over ten years after the publication of the essay (1923), Veblen dissects the sales efforts of Christianity in a note titled "Salesmanship and the Churches." Nearly 100 years later, these three works together explain a modern and distinctly American religious movement – Prosperity Theology.

Prosperity Theology is a modern variation of Pentecostalism that is premised on the belief that a Biblical covenant between the individual believer and God guarantees that believer blessings of health and wealth, provided she demonstrates adequate faith. Accordingly, for those who are less adept at navigating the business world, financial success is still available for those believers who can dedicate themselves with the same frenzied ambition to the spiritual world. This research argues that Prosperity Theology as practiced in the US over the past nearly half century embodies and integrates all three of these works by Veblen and proposes the conceptual term 'Veblenian Social Practice.'

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The relationship between religion and capitalism is intricate, tangled, and difficult to parse. At the turn of the twentieth century (1910), Veblen published an essay which explored the relationship between Christianity and capitalism by focusing on the interaction between the two institutions as they evolved. Veblen's analysis begins by detailing the evolution of Christianity prior to the age of industrialized capitalism, after which he explores the evolutionary interplay between the two. Just over ten years prior to the publication of this essay (1899), Veblen published the *Theory of the Leisure Class* while over ten years after the publication of the essay (1923), Veblen dissects the sales efforts of Christianity in a note titled "Salesmanship and the Churches." Nearly 100 years later, these three works together explain a modern and distinctly American religious movement – Prosperity Theology.

This research argues that Prosperity Theology (interchangeable in this work with the term Prosperity Gospel) as practiced in the US over the past nearly half century embodies and integrates all three of these works by Veblen. The first section outlines Veblen's analysis of the interactive co-evolutions of Christianity and capitalism; an analysis which highlights the difference between the integration of instincts and the adaptation of structural habituations into institutional social practices and briefly outlines the core teachings and social practices of Prosperity Theology as practiced in the US. The following section offers a definition of Veblenian social practices which emerges out of the *Theory of the Leisure Class* and describes three such social practices found in churches which preach the Prosperity Gospel. The penultimate section explores and compares Veblen's exposition of the sales effort within Christianity to the sales efforts in Prosperity Theology and the role of the sales effort in sustaining the social practices of Prosperity Theology before concluding in the final section.

The co-evolutions of Christianity and capitalism

In the beginning...

In 1910, Veblen published "Christian Morals and the Competitive System" in the *International Journal of Ethics*. In this piece, Veblen explored the relationship between Christianity and capitalism in an attempt to reconcile the longstanding coexistence between two institutions which superficially appear counterpoised in their core ideologies and social practices. Although imperfect and incomplete (see Clark 2006), Veblen's explanation of the interactive evolutions of Christianity and capitalism remains instructive – particularly in understanding the modern relationship between the Prosperity Gospel and the latest stage of capitalism.

In Veblen's understanding of Christianity, he notes that the two principles which animate all varieties of the various incarnations of the faith are what he terms as "brotherly love" and "non-resistance (humility)" (1910 171-2). Before embarking on the interactive evolution between Christianity and capitalism, Veblen first explores the mechanisms by which these principles of fraternity and humility came to define, inform, and embody Christian social practices.

According to Veblen, the principle of brotherly love is partly instinctual and partly a continuation of those religious practices out of which Christianity evolved. Humility (non-resistance), on the other hand, is not instinctual but rather is correlated closely (to the point of exclusivity) with the combination of monotheistic culture and a non-theistic state (1910 174). Veblen further points out that at its inception, Christianity was not founded upon nor did it fully embrace humility as it evolved out of older 'cults' and cultures. Instead, in the early days of Christianity, Veblen notes that the lessons of humility held popular appeal and were so warmly welcomed by the would-be congregations that the principle of humility subsequently became infused with the still developing doctrine. The tenet of humility did not find such purchase in populations outside of Roman rule (1910 174). Likewise, the first

Christian missionary proselytization efforts emerged out of populations under Roman rule, suggesting that the institutional milieu had more to do with the adaptation of humility into Christian teachings than its natural fit, origin, or nascent evolution (1910 174-5).

It was among the peoples subject to the Roman rule that Christianity first arose and spread; among the lower orders of the populace especially, who had been beaten to a pulp by the hard-handed, systematic, inexorable power of the imperial city; who had no rights which the Roman master was bound to respect; who were aliens and practically outlaws under the sway of the Caesars; and who had acquired, under high pressure, the conviction that non-resistance (humility) was the chief of virtues if not the whole duty of man. They had learned to render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, and were in a frame of mind to render unto God that which is God's (1910 175).

Veblen further argued that the spread of Christianity should be credited to the spread of the Roman Empire as it was the Empire's subjects - especially those most brutally subjugated - who were the most receptive of audiences and who most easily adapted to the principle of humility:

And in the days when the peoples of Christendom were sharply differentiated into ruling and subject classes, non-resistance was accepted by the lower rather than by the upper classes (1910 175-6).

Even during the medieval period, the Christianity practiced by the upper classes differed from that of the lower classes by virtue of the degree to which humility was incorporated into the practiced doctrine:

The morality of the upper class is in a less degree the morality of nonresistance (humility) and brotherly love, and is in a greater degree the morality of coercive control and kindly tutelage, which are in no degree distinctive traits of Christianity, as contrasted with the other great religious systems (1910 176).

Thus, according to Veblen, the "brotherly love" and "mutual succor" principles of Christianity emerged from ancient, if not instinctual practice and evolved to incorporate the cultural habit of humility during its dissemination throughout the Roman Empire.

Veblen on Christianity and Capitalism

Veblen's historical analysis then turns to the period of initial and accelerating industrialization in an attempt to understand the impact of the institution of Christianity on nascent capitalism. As the cultures and economies of Western Europe transitioned from medieval to commercial society, Veblen postulated that Christianity shaped that part of commercial culture predicated on:

....the principle of fair play, which appears to be the nearest approach to the golden rule that the pecuniary civilization will admit... (Although) There is no reach of ingenuity or of ingenuousness by which ... the regime of fair play, -essentially a regime of emulation, -conduce to the reinforcement of the golden rule (Veblen 1910 182).

Here Veblen argues that the Christian principles of brotherly love and mutual succor influenced burgeoning industrialization and capitalism, although imperfectly and on terms amenable to the flourishing of each. On the other hand, the impact of capitalism on Christianity was to jettison humility:

The ancient Christian principle of humility, renunciation, abnegation, or non-resistance, has been virtually eliminated from the moral scheme of Christendom; nothing better than a sophisticated affectation of it has any extensive currency in modern life (1910 182-3).

It is unsurprising that Veblen would argue the abjuration of humility in Christian practices given his publication ten years earlier on conspicuous consumption, pecuniary emulation, and invidious distinction in *Theory of the Leisure Class*. As witness to the acceleration of

technological advance and material intensification at the turning of the twentieth century, Veblen observed and postulated that the growing mystification in production would sever the connection for consumers between workers and the material objects they produce - the human element in production would be lost. As the objects of consumption became more ahuman, they would likewise become amoral. Had it not already been 'invented' brotherly love and mutual succor would not have emerged or evolved under capitalism of the 20th century (Bartley and Bartley 2017).¹

According to Bartley and Bartley (2017), Veblen very carefully delineated between Christianity as a religion and Christian ethics and morals. Veblen doubted the longevity of the former, but did not see the demise of the Christian religion as revolutionary. Veblen thought the latter underpinned the very foundations of Western Civilization and if Christian morals were to decline, the "elimination would signify a cultural revolution whereby occidental culture would lose its occidental characteristics... (Veblen 1910 169). This is an important distinction because Veblen – who held formal religious institutions in contempt – struck a hopeful note at the end of this essay. In the closing paragraphs, Veblen claims that the principle of brotherly love/mutual succor remains a present and constant influence, albeit malleable and corruptible:

...this habit of thought (brotherly love) has also lost much of its force, or has fallen somewhat into abeyance... Yet this principle is forever reasserting itself in economic matters (1910 183).

Veblen thus strikes an uncharacteristically sanguine note when he argues that brotherly love is instinctual and despite the struggle between the two habits of thought – fraternity versus pecuniary – forecasts that brotherly love should triumph:

Except for a possible reversion to a cultural situation strongly characterized by ideals of emulation and status, the ancient racial bias embodied in the Christian principle of brotherhood should logically continue to gain ground at the expense of the pecuniary morals of competitive business (1910 185).

While Veblen's postulation or hope that brotherly love could survive and tame the pecuniary impulses of capitalism might seem overly optimistic for the 'Bard of Savagery,' (Diggins 1978) it is not uncharacteristic for Veblen to place his hope in our 'better angels.' In his theory of the instinct of the parental bent, for instance, Veblen argues for universality in human nature in the care for beings unable to survive on their own (Tilman 1985). Generally, Veblen was scathingly critical of the institutions of religion and the pomp and ceremony of the ritual therein, but he held the lessons of morality and ethics from Christianity as a positive influence on society, and moreover as instinctual impulses universal to humans (Plotkin and Tilman 2011) Throughout his work, Veblen emphasized the instinctual impulse in all humans to ethical/moral behavior - what Plotkin and Tilman (2011 207) refer to as the "spiritual bent."

Nevertheless, Veblen's seeming defense of the institutions of Christianity as historic nurturers and potential defenders of the instinct of brotherly love against the pecuniary drive in capitalism presents an aberration when juxtaposed against his other work (Leathers 1986). Indeed, Diggins (1978 135) states: "'Christian Morals and the Competitive System' is Veblen's most desperate and inconsistent essay." Veblen's take on religion in "Christian Morals and the Competitive System" ("CM") seems so out-of-step with the rest of his writings that scholars have spent much intellectual effort on attempting to explain the anomaly through events in Veblen's life. Diggins (1978, specifically, chapter 7) suggests that "CM" was Veblen's response to Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), the publication of which bisects the roughly ten years between Veblen's publications of the *TLC* and the "CM" essay. Leathers (1986) and Tilman (1985) both suggest "CM" was due to the influence of novelist Edward Bellamy. Nobel (1958) suggests "CM" was influenced by

Richard Ely and Simon Pattern. Leathers (1986) also points out two historical events in 1907 which might have been influential in Veblen's writing of "CM": the Panic of 1907 and Walter Rauschenbush's book *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, published in 1907.

To be reiterate the distinction made by Bartley and Bartley (2017), Veblen did not endorse the maintenance of organized religion in order to safeguard Christian morality - he was after all, an agnostic/atheist (Leathers 1986/Tilman 1985, respectively). Rather, Veblen appears to have recognized an instinct of altruism in humans that most easily found expression through the brotherly love of Christianity and it was in this instinct that Veblen appears to have hoped would prove a counterbalance to the unrelenting acquisitiveness of capitalism. If we put Veblen's hopeful prognostications in "CM" aside, we see that Veblen's theory of institutional evolutions is entirely consistent - that dominant institutions in society evolve through interaction with each other, through internal mechanisms, and through interactions with immediately proximate less-dominant institutions. The entire corpus of Veblen's work strenuously avoided evolutionary determinism, so he would have fully anticipated the persistence and continued evolution of past religious habituations (Plotkin and Tilman 2011) and ultimately unsurprised by the evolutionary off-shoot of the Prosperity Gospel.

Prosperity Theology in the US

The Prosperity Gospel/Prosperity Theology is a distinctly American invention. By the end of the 19th century, various forms of spiritualism had seized the popular imagination of Americans and from this cauldron of mysticism and transcendentalism which proposed mastery and perfectibility of the self, emerged a religious movement called New Thought. The New Thought movement imagined that the individual's connection to a higher power imbued and infused that individual with the capacity to improve herself and her world. External realities existed but could be shaped and countered through the divine connection and targeted thinking of the individual. At the turn of the twentieth century, renewed enthusiasm for faith healing in evangelical circles inspired New Thought preachers to focus on the mind's power over health. Likewise, a small contingent of clergy in the nascent Pentecostal movement practicing 'faith cure,' began incorporating techniques of New Thought into their theological practice (Bowler 2013; Walton 2012).

Throughout the twentieth century, Pentecostalism and its subset of mind-over-matter practitioners ebbed and waned. In the prosperity of the post-WWII period, and riding a swell of American optimism and exceptionalism, the power of positive thinking once again seized the US imagination. Faith healing experienced a revival and transitioned from proclaiming truth, healing, and prosperity to *commanding* it be done. Over the course of the 1950s, healing promises began to fade (inversely with advances in medicine, such as vaccines) while financial promises grew in emphasis. The experimentalism of the 1960s further encouraged non-traditional approaches to conventional religious practices. Within Christianity, the neo-Charismatic Movement voiced itself - literally. Speaking in tongues and worship in song and on stage spread across the cultural landscape of the US. More than anything, the neo-Charismatic movement flung open the doors of the traditional church and encouraged new expressions of divine connection to worship.

During the 1970s, the by-then recognizable catechism of the 'name-it-and-claim-it' Prosperity Gospel emerged as its teachers/preachers built empires through televised Christian broadcasting. As the 1970s drew to a close and traditional denominations returned to their roots, those swept up in the neo-Charismatic movement found themselves without a denominational home. The Prosperity Gospel churches which eschewed denominational structures, welcomed all strays. By the end of the 1970s, the Prosperity Gospel's message

had been refined to a sharp point: faith is financially measurable (Bowler 2013; Walton 2012).

The Prosperity Gospel is a modern variation of that earlier cross-pollination of Pentecostalism and New Thought.² The Prosperity Gospel maintains the Pentecostal belief that blessing and salvation emerge from a personal, individual relationship with God (Barker 2007). What separates the Prosperity Gospel Christian from the traditional Christian – indeed, from even the modern Pentecostal – is the unassailable belief of the Prosperity Gospel that prosperity is in the works; it is the believers' due. While the traditional Christian might believe that God has a greater plan or that 'all things happen for a reason,' the Prosperity Gospel Christian believes that God has victory planned for her and that to receive it, she must act as though she already has received it (Bowler 2013; Walton 2009). The believer must positively confess her trust and belief in God in order to activate into existence that which she is owed. Failure to receive comes from failure to believe adequately, confess positive belief that one will receive at some point in the near future, or from failure to claim what God has promised (Barker 2007; Bowler 2013; Walton 2009, 2012).

Veblenian social practices

The longevity of any institution is determined by the extent to which individuals remain habituated in the social practices which constitute the integration and interaction between individuals and the respective institution – in other words, institutions with defunct social practices become defunct institutions. Any religious movement as an institution requires faith to sustain it and faith is fragile. Religious movements perpetuate themselves with social practices which engage believers through what we might call Veblenian social practices, or ritualistic habituations.

If we use the *Theory of the Leisure Class* as a framework for how we might specify Veblenian social practices, it becomes clear that three basic conditions must be met. First, a Veblenian social practice must be ritualized in some manner; that is, the practice must be habituated and socially recognized as causal in a binary outcome of some social consequence. The ritualization can be infused with bespoke superstition or supernatural elements, such as religious practices which will determine the afterlife destination of an individual, or the ritualization might simply manifest in a more pedestrian, semiotic representation, such as professional dress code and qualification for a job. The second condition, related to the first, is that a Veblenian social practice, while adaptive, is difficult break – the practice is deeply embedded within the institution and evolves as the institution evolves. Lastly, a Veblenian social practice justifies and encourages social comparisons which are related to the means by which the ritualization is enacted – the ritualization acts as a baseline qualifier while the social comparison assesses how well the ritualization was performed relative to the performances of others.

Using concepts from the *Theory of the Leisure Class* as models of Veblenian social practices, we find that the US Prosperity Gospel indeed deploys ritualized habituations to sustain and expand its reach: the tithe is an act of conspicuous consumption; invidious distinctions are made with respect to faithfulness; and emulation is encouraged through comparisons of prosperity; and each of these is ritualized, habituated, and measurably compared against others, albeit not in equal proportions. Overall, the Veblenian social practices of the Prosperity Gospel work to undermine doubt and reinforce investment – both literally and figuratively – in the movement.

Conspicuous consumption – the tithe

Believers in the Prosperity Gospel are encouraged to tithe as regular religious practice, but are urged specifically to tithe when asking for something from the Divine:

If you don't have enough money to pay your bills, sow a seed . . . every time a worried thought about money pops up in your mind, the next thing you do is sow. This is spiritual law. Whatsoever a man soweth, he shall also reap (Savelle, quoted by Walton 2012 108).

The call for tithing - and the disastrous outcomes that follow when one doesn't tithe diligently - are taken primarily from the Book of Malachi. In the Jewish tradition, the Book of Malachi does not feature prominently, and in the Christian tradition, Malachi is typically overlooked given its home in the Old Testament. The Book of Malachi, however contains strict admonitions against negligence in tithing and grand promises for diligence³. Malachi thus is a favorite among Prosperity Gospel preachers and its place at the end of the Old Testament is framed as setting up the prosperity promised in the New (Jenkins 2006).

The Prosperity Gospel teaches that the tithe - a financial contribution to the church - is a demonstration of faith; depth of faith is therefore measurable and demonstrable through the act of tithing. More importantly, the Prosperity Gospel teaches that the tithe-as-an-act-of-faith attracts prosperity:

In order to receive financial reward from God, there must be financial seed sown. Plain and simple. You want a harvest of corn? What do you plant? Corn seed. You desire, or better yet, need money? What do you plant or sow or give? Money seed! Ask of the Lord, and He will direct you concerning giving (Dollar)

Before you can qualify for a promise to be fulfilled in your life, someone has to give a tithe. No tithe, no promise (Dollar 1998 39).

Although warned about the purity of intentions in tithing, the bottom line of the Prosperity Gospel is clear: money measures faith. Tithing is a portent to prosperity (Bowler 2013; Walton 2009).

The call for tithing out of the Prosperity Gospel is thus a clear example of a Veblenian social practice. In the *TLC*, Veblen compares the habits of the gambler to that of a religious devotee. For Veblen, the "betting man" called upon supernatural forces in her specific social practices which were enacted to evoke the favor of those forces and grant her the desired outcome. The tithe of the Prosperity Gospel is like the ritualistic behavior Veblen notes in his analysis of the betting man: "the belief in an inscrutable propensity or a preternatural interposition in the sequence of events" (1997 136).

(T)he betting man's animistic sense . . . has developed into a more or less articulate belief in a preternatural or hyperphysical agency, with something of an anthropomorphic content. And where this is the case, there is commonly a perceptible inclination to make terms with the preternatural agency by some approved method of approach and conciliation. This element of propitiation and cajoling has much in common with the crasser forms of worship--if not in historical derivation, at least in actual psychological content (1997 136).

The attempts of the gambler to appease the gods of chance undoubtedly have roots in older religious practices such as prayer, fasting, or sacrifices. For the betting man, these ritualistic habits take on an adapted form as they are invoked in efforts to elicit a specific outcome of a named event.

And in seeking communion with the divinity the ways and means of approach are assimilated as nearly as may be to the divine ideal that is in men's minds at the time. It is felt that the divine presence is entered with the best grace, and with the best effect, according to certain accepted methods and with the accompaniment of certain material circumstances (1997 57)

The Prosperity Gospel is a continuation of the evolution of those social practices, wherein the tithe – the seed of faith – is planted and the believer receives that for which she asks.

If the preacher is the pinnacle of faithfulness and the preachers of the Prosperity Gospel not only promise that God will deliver wealth to the faithful but also offer their own considerable personal wealth as proof, then in order to achieve the wealth of the preacher, congregants must emulate their devotion through the act of tithing. Consider Veblen's description of emulation through the consumption of goods by using the tithe as the specific consumable good:

But the human proclivity to emulation has seized upon the (tithe) as a means to an invidious comparison (of faithfulness), and has thereby invested (tithing) with a secondary utility as evidence of relative ability to pay.... The (tithe) is meritorious, and (tithes) which contain an appreciable element of cost in excess of what goes to give them serviceability for their ostensible mechanical purpose are honorific (1997 71-2). Within the world of the Prosperity Gospel, tithing is an act of conspicuous consumption which is considered both honorable to the social group and an invidious act of fealty to God.

Once established, Veblen notes that these ritualized behaviors, these social practices, become difficult to interrupt or redirect:

...the propensity for emulation--for invidious comparison--is of ancient growth and is a pervading trait of human nature. It is easily called into vigorous activity in any new form, and it asserts itself with great insistence under any form under which it has once found habitual expression. When the individual has once formed the habit of seeking expression in a given line of honorific expenditure--when a given set of stimuli have come to be habitually responded to in activity of a given kind and direction under the guidance of these alert and deep-reaching propensities of emulation--it is with extreme reluctance that such an habitual expenditure is given up (1997 51).

The social practice – in the case of the Prosperity Gospel, the tithe – once ritualized, sanctified with spiritual significance, and easily evidenced becomes habitualized.

No class of society, not even the most abjectly poor, forgoes all customary conspicuous consumption. The last items of this category of consumption are not given up except under stress of the direst necessity. Very much of squalor and discomfort will be endured before the last trinket or the last pretense of pecuniary decency is put away. There is no class and no country that has yielded so abjectly before the pressure of physical want as to deny themselves all gratification of this higher or spiritual need (1997 40).

Imagine how much more willing people are to give up their meagre income for a literal spiritual pursuit - especially under the promise of a return on that investment-tithe.

Invidious distinctions of faithfulness

Prosperity Gospel preachers point to stories of wealth throughout the Bible⁴ in order to support their claims that God ordains prosperity according to belief (Jenkins 2006). Prosperity Gospel preachers claim to be role models - living examples that God's abundance is awarded to the most able practitioners. They argue that their conspicuous displays of wealth provide evidence of the power of the Prosperity Gospel as well as honor God and His beneficence (Bowler 2013). The wealth of Prosperity Gospel preachers proves their point that faithfulness pays and if you are ill or experiencing financial difficulties, it is the result of insufficient faith. In the world of the Prosperity Gospel, invidious distinctions are essentially distinctions of piety – invidious distinctions of faithfulness.

The Prosperity Gospel justifies wealth and conspicuous displays of wealth through three central assertions. First, in addition to eternal salvation, the Crucifixion promised believers earthly salvation from death, disease, and poverty. Poverty is the result of evil forces working in the individual's life, and much like demonic spirits, could be cast out through acceptance of Christ as saviour:

Prosperity is due you as a believer, because in Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection, He took your place in poverty. He took your place of *poverty* so you could take His place of *prosperity* (Thompson 1997 217, emphasis original).

Secondly, they argue that Jesus was prosperous.

As soon as Jesus arrived, that anointing to prosper acted like a magnet, drawing wise men with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Those were not cheap gifts, either. Prosperity attached itself to baby Jesus immediately, and that same gift to prosper has been given to us as heirs of Christ (Dollar 2004 16).

That his (earthly) parents owned a donkey (a Cadillac, when adjusted for inflation) provides further proof according to Dollar (Bowler 2013). Kenneth Copeland suggests that Jesus was wealthy throughout his life:

Up until the time (Jesus) went to the Cross He was extremely prosperous. He not only had the finance to fund His entire ministry team, He was famous for giving money to the Poor. His resources were so great He even needed a treasurer to oversee them (K. Copeland 2017 9).

Thirdly, Prosperity Gospel preachers draw from the Abrahamic covenant that faithfulness and fidelity will be rewarded materially as well as spiritually. Prosperity Gospel proponents have well-rehearsed responses to critics who point out the seeming incongruity between the New Testament and Jesus' comments on wealth. In response to critics who cite Matthew 6:19-21⁵ or Matthew 19:26⁶, Prosperity Gospel believers counter that it is not wealth that God abhors per se, but rather the prioritization of wealth above God. Likewise, when critics cite the Biblically inspired adage 'money is the root of all evil,' Prosperity Gospel believers counter by quoting the entire passage in 1 Timothy 6:10⁷, again emphasizing that it is the 'love of money' that is contrary to God – not money itself (Van Biema 2008).

The Prosperity Gospel thus sanctifies and ritualizes wealth. If the tithe is a marker of faithfulness, then wealth is God's recognition and reward of that faithfulness – wealth is proof.

The possession of wealth confers honour; it is an invidious distinction... An invidious comparison is a process of valuation of persons in respect of worth. (1997 13, 17).

The materialism rejected by mainstream Christianity is thus sanctified, made honorable, and serves as an outright distinction of worthiness of grace.

Veblen further explains that the honorific only emerges from the extraordinary, so that it is only ascension to those ranks from which an individual can more conspicuously display her success that sustains the honor in expenditure:

What is common is within the (pecuniary) reach of many people. Its consumption is therefore not honorific, since it does not serve the purpose of a favorable invidious comparison with other consumers (1997 74 parenthetical original).

The Prosperity Gospel is likewise premised on the idea that what is common is unremarkable:

I DECLARE I am special and extraordinary. I am not average! I have been custom-made. I am one of a kind. Of all the things God created, what He is the most proud of is me. I am His masterpiece, his most prized possession. I will keep my head held high, knowing I am a child of the most high God, made in his very image. This is my declaration. Joel Osteen (2012 emphasis original)

The doctrine of the Prosperity Gospel specifically states that the individual believer is exceptional in God's view – the proof is in the prosperity. That prosperity is measurable and thus comparable to others through wealth.

Although Veblen didn't anticipate the modern Prosperity Gospel explicitly, it is clear that he would not be surprised by its existence.

In any community where such an invidious comparison of persons is habitually made, visible success becomes an end sought for its own utility as a basis of esteem. Esteem is

gained and dispraise is avoided by putting one's efficiency in evidence. The result is that the instinct of workmanship works out in an emulative demonstration of force (1997 8).

Western capitalist societies operate and are sustained by faith in merit – the idea that hard work will eventually pay off financially. Evidence of this hard earned success can be found in the trappings of Veblen's leisure class, even if that success was earned by previous generations. In other iterations of Christianity, faithfulness might be informally measured by any number of metrics, such as church attendance, involvement in church activities, mission trips and the like. In the Prosperity Gospel, faithfulness can be measured by the same metric of success as capitalism – through money. The tithe demonstrates faith that God will allow the believer to prosper, wealth is the proof. Given the interactive institutional evolutions of Christianity and capitalism, the melding of the two seems inevitable in retrospect.

Prosperity Emulation

Wealth is an example of the fulfilment of the Prosperity Gospel and believers are encouraged to practice what Veblen might call prosperity emulation – acting as if the same prosperity experienced by the church leaders will manifest itself in their own prosperity and wealth. Relentless optimism is the underlying theme to the Prosperity Gospel; it is taught, socialized, ritualized, and habituated. Since its beginning, Prosperity Theology has emphasized heavily the power of the not simply professed, but confessed affirmations - "positive confessions" (Bowler 2013 67). Positive thinking, grounded in faith in God and spoken out loud, unleashes prosperity:

When discouraging thoughts attack, instead of complaining and expecting the worst, say it again and again: 'Something good is going to happen to me. I'm a victor and not a victim.' It is not enough to merely think positively: You need to speak positively . . . (Osteen 2007 200-201).

The obsessive emphasis on optimism encourages believers to see obstacles as opportunities (Bowler 2013). Indeed, Prosperity Gospel preachers shy away from the threats of fire and brimstone for sinners and instead push a relentlessly positive message. The only real sin that a believer commits is to speak or think negatively, the punishment for which is that their pessimistic expectations will be fulfilled (Ehreneich 2009).

Believers of the Prosperity Gospel are expected to act 'as if' – as if they aren't sick, as if they aren't economically precarious, as if their prayers have already been answered – because acknowledgement of difficult circumstance invites negative forces and creates difficult circumstance (Bowler 2013 and 2015).

If you pray and you believe that you have received you can never pray about it again . . . Only to the extent of thanking the Lord that you believe you have it . . . but you sure can't ask for it again. Because if you ask for it again, you've just said by asking that you didn't believe you received it. And therefore the system is short-circuited. And it can't work! Because if you did have it, why would you ask for it again? (Price in Bowler 2013 152)

When you want to make a withdrawal from your faith account, speak the Word of faith. Don't talk the circumstances. Don't "tell it the way it is." Speak the end result. Say what God says the outcome is going to be . . . If you want prosperity, stop talking about lack all the time . . . Start calling yourself blessed and prosperous. "But, Gloria, I'm not prosperous right now." Well, just imitate God then and call things that are not as though they were! Use your words to write some checks on that faith account you've been building. You'll be amazed at what will happen (G. Copeland 1994 12-3).

When faced with financial difficulties, believers must take care to not worry, for to worry is to doubt and lack faith. The time between the positive confession and the receiving of improved physical or financial condition, is marked by unabated claims - "claiming it" (Bowler 2013 151) means one must never admit that circumstances are ever anything other than what the believer hopes for. To speak hardship out loud is to allow hardship to exist and persist. Negativity is not allowed - indeed, negativity invites and assures prolonged illness or poverty. In terms of helping the less fortunate, aid to individuals and local community engagement is limited and primarily takes the form of non-localized (and non-structural) educational and self-help materials, such as financial counselling or in limited-run services or annual drives as opposed to sustained, longer-term initiatives. While the prohibition on negativity ritualizes positive thinking, it also effectively blocks any discussion of lingering hardship. Congregants can only speak of the blessings they've received - even if they had yet to receive them. Pointing to evidence that the Prosperity Gospel failed is credited with creating that very failure. As such, critique is effectively silenced (Bowler 2013; Walton 2009).

When faced with indisputable evidence that the faithful have attracted prosperity, believers react - according to Bowler (2013) in one of four ways: to reserve comment, so as not to judge; blame a personal failing on the part of the sufferer; rationalize hardship as "righteous suffering" (176) in the spirit of Job⁸; and lastly, a minority would quietly and privately, question the church – or as Veblen might explain:

On pain of forfeiting their good name and their self-respect in case of failure, they must conform to the accepted code, at least in appearance (1997 39).

All of these tactics silence any critique or questioning. Critics, including those which point to evidence of the failings of the Prosperity Gospel, are dismissed by Prosperity Gospel preachers as either Satan's emissaries or as lacking sufficient faith (Jenkins 2006).

With the ritualization and habituation of positive confessions, the Prosperity Gospel discourages critique of its own core tenets. The frequency and fervency of the positive confessions provide a convenient metric for social comparisons as well as discourage reflection on potential negative outcomes, such as acquiring debt: after all, to explore potential negative consequences invites negative outcomes according to the Prosperity Gospel (Walton 2012).

Selling Salvation

Prosperity Theology stands apart from other religious movements because of its promises of earthly, tangible rewards. Sustaining faith in promises of earthly fulfilment requires confrontation with lived experiences of material reality and failure of fulfilment. As previously discussed, the Veblenian social practices of Prosperity Theology, particularly the positive confessions of prosperity emulation, habituate individuals into denying the failure of the Prosperity Gospel to deliver. In a note to chapter 11 of his book *Absentee Ownership*, Veblen addressed the remarkable sustainability of religion writ large – a sales endeavor that continually fails to deliver in any material way:

The large and enduring success of the Propaganda through the ages is an object-lesson to show how great is the efficacy of *ipse dixit* when it is put over with due perseverance and audacity hitherto the publicity-agents of the Faith have habitually promised much and have delivered substantially none of the material advertised, and have "come through" with none of the tangible performances promised by their advertising matter. All that has been delivered hitherto has-perhaps all for the better-been in the nature of further publicity, often with a use of more pointedly menacing language; but it has always been more language, with a moratorium on the liquidation of the promises to pay, and a penalty on any expressed doubt of the solvency of the concern (1994 305-6).

Today, Veblen would find that the Prosperity Gospel has raised the sustainability and sales efforts of religious institutions to a fine art.

According to Veblen, selling faith is no different than selling any other product and in his indictment of the practice, Veblen was no less scathing:

The Propaganda of the Faith is quite the largest, oldest, most magnificent, most unabashed, and most lucrative enterprise in sales-publicity in all Christendom... None other has achieved that pitch of unabated assurance which has enabled the publicity-agents of the Faith to debar human reason from scrutinizing their pronouncements... That the same principles of self-publicity are found good and profitable for the traffic in spiritual amenities and in these material comforts should serve to show how deep and pervasively the scheme of deliverance and rehabilitation is rooted in the merciful gift of credulous infatuation ...how truly business-as-usual articulates with the business of the Kingdom of Heaven. As it is with the traffic in these divinely beneficial intangibles, so it is with the like salesmanship on the material plane... (1994 304-5).

The Prosperity Gospel proprietors have combined salesmanship on the material and spiritual planes through their booming merchandising industries. Consistent with past religious movements and continuing from faith healing practices of years past, believers are encouraged to carry blessed modern-day relics, such as handkerchiefs to represent health made manifest. Material and physical lack are created by flawed faith. Medical science can only provide a temporary relief of symptoms and serious, life-threatening illness meant that an individual's symptoms outpaced her faith. Natural remedies, however are justified as the harnessing of God's bounty, and are acceptable. Naturopathy segues into homeopathy, acupuncture, sundry diets, and holistic healing that are interpreted as part of God's bounty intended for human use - and many Prosperity Gospel preachers develop product lines to assist believers in making Godly choices. Throughout the evolution of acceptable practice for physical health treatment, one thing remains clear - only faith can cure (Bowler 2013). The true staple of any Prosperity Gospel ministry's inventory, however, is books. The Prosperity Gospel largely puts a spiritual spin on the basic premise of any generic self-help book or motivational speaker: belief that it (whatever that it might be) can happen to you; the promise of efficacious advice; and the incitement to put one's money where one's mouth is (Bowler 2015). Industry figures - including sales, yearly income, or even congregation numbers⁹ - are difficult to uncover or assess. The closest proxy for the sales effort within Prosperity Gospel churches is in the number of books authored by the central figure in the respective organization.

# of "distinct works"	
Joyce Meyer	727
Creflo Dollar*	360
Kenneth Copeland*	272
Benny Hinn	170
Joel Osteen*	149
Jerry Savelle*	69
Paula White	64
Charles Capps*	60
Leroy Thompson*	19

All figures from each individual author's page on Goodreads

*author quoted in this paper

It should be noted that the number of books published by the central figure in the Prosperity Gospel ministry constitutes a very conservative proxy for the sales effort. Each ministry's website sells much more merchandise than these numbered works here listed, including

books authored by other members of the ministry (typically a spouse of the central figure), CDs, DVDs, study guides, conferences, and assorted gifts (candles, wall art, tote bags, etc).

Prosperity Gospel churches have also embraced the aesthetics of corporate America in their large, non-descript - in one case, a former pro-basketball arena - worship headquarters and have adopted business management practices into their operations: large payrolls; retail stores offering everything from books to clothing to home décor; production studios to polish the weekly services to a high shine for the millions in the global audience watching online. The Prosperity Gospel doesn't just support capitalism, it has harnessed capitalism for its own purposes (Ehreneich 2009). Over 100 years ago, Veblen argued that despite the failure of Christian religions to deliver materially, they nevertheless continued to grow, their going-concerns expanding in operation, employment, and overhead:

This failure to deliver the goods is brought up here only as an object-lesson which goes to show what and how great are the powers of sales-publicity at its best; as exemplified in a publicity enterprise which has over a long period of time very profitably employed a very large personnel and a very extensive and costly material equipment, coupled with no visible ability or intention to deliver any material part of the commodities advertised, or indeed to deliver anything else than a further continued volume of the same magisterial publicity that has procured a livelihood for its numerous personnel and floated its magnificent overhead charges in the past. In the lucrative enterprise the Propaganda of the Faith employs a larger and more expensive personnel and a larger equipment of material appliances, with larger running expenses and larger revenues-not only larger than any given one line among the secular enterprises in sales-publicity, but larger than the total of all that goes into secular sales-publicity in all the nations of Christendom The man-power employed in this work of the Propaganda is also more considerable than that engaged in any other calling, except Arms, and possibly Husbandry... All told if it were possible-it will be evident that the aggregate of human talent currently consumed in this fabrication of vendible imponderables in the nth dimension, will foot up to a truly massive total, even after making a reasonable allowance, of, say, some thirty-three and one-third percent, for average mental deficiency in the personnel which devotes itself to this manner of livelihood ¹⁰ (1994 307-8).

Today, Veblen would be unsurprised by the scale of operations of the Prosperity Gospel and its expanding capitalist endeavors. Indeed, the Prosperity Gospel is a micromodel of capitalism: the preachers hold the 'means of production' - they are the gatekeepers, the owners of sacred space, and the liaison to God; the congregation are 'the workers' - apart from church service, they volunteer their time to keep the church running and are charged to recruit other workers/worshippers into the fold. The call to tithe is outright extraction (Bowler 2015).

There can be little doubt that as much contempt as Veblen had for salesmen and the sales effort more generally, it was eclipsed by the scorn he heaped on the peddlers, "the publicity agents of Faith" for even in their failure to deliver on promises made, their customer base does not fault them:

It is of the nature of sales-publicity, to promise much and deliver a minimum...it should be the high good fortune of the perfect salesman in the secular field also to promise everything and deliver nothing... There is, of course, no call and no inclination to take the publicity-agents of the Faith to task for failure to deliver the goods...Since the sales-publicity from which these publicity-concerns derive their revenue plays on unreasoning fear and unreasoning aspiration... (1994, 304-306).

The Prosperity Theology has proven as resilient in its non-deliverance as the church salesmen of which Veblen wrote, even though its rhetoric continually promises earthly, material

rewards. Part of this resilience is due to the ritualization of positivity and the prohibition of negative aspersions, but the Prosperity Theology has also proved flexible. Indeed, Prosperity preachers were able to turn the Great Financial Crisis in their favor, calling on congregants to energize their efforts and work harder in believing prosperity could be theirs, although the tone adapted, changing focus from achieving luxury to focus on coping strategies and how to survive in the economic downturn (Bowler 2013). While the Prosperity Theology might be easier to sell during periods of boom, it also provides a safe harbor during periods of economic downturn: economic anxiety is soothed by assurances that faith will deliver, God will make the way forward (Walton 2012).

Conclusion

Veblen's analysis of the interactive and inseparable co-evolutions of the Western institutions of Christianity and capitalism remain instructive even after 100 years:

In some of (Christianity's) elements this morality is so intimately and organically connected with the scheme of Western civilization that its elimination would signify a cultural revolution whereby occidental culture would lose its occidental characteristics and fall into the ranks of ethnic civilizations at large. Much the same may be said of that pecuniary competition which to-day rules the economic life of Christendom and in large measure guides Western civilization in much else than the economic respect. Both are institutional factors of first-rate importance in this culture, and as such it might be difficult or impracticable to assign the primacy to the one or the other, since each appears to be in a dominant position. Western civilization is both Christian and competitive (pecuniary); and it seems bootless to ask whether its course is more substantially under the guidance of the one than of the other of these two institutional norms (1910 169).

Although Veblen did not anticipate necessarily the evolutionary branch of the Prosperity Gospel, based on the three pieces examined here, he would found the evolution of the sect predictable and logical.

The appeal of the Prosperity Gospel cuts across class lines: for the upper class, it further justifies their place in the hierarchy; for the middle class, it affirms their aspirations and opens the perception of possibilities; and for the poor, the Prosperity Gospel gives hope. The appeal to groups which have benefited from capitalism as well as those exploited by it is easier to see through Veblen's analysis: under the Prosperity Gospel doctrine, humility is not just irrelevant but an insult to God. The upper classes are able to worship while enjoying not just their wealth but the display of their wealth under the PG, while the rest of the population could, according to the PG theology, ascend the class ranks. Humility, not part of the origins of Christianity or uniformly taught in its diffusion across Europe, could be - and within the Prosperity Theology has been - jettisoned for more amenable doctrine (1910 176).

The Prosperity Gospel presents itself as means by which the American Dream might be achieved. For those who are less adept at navigating the business world, financial success is still available for those who can dedicate themselves with the same frenzied ambition to the spiritual world. Indeed, Western capitalist societies operate and are sustained by faith in merit – the idea that hard work will eventually pay off financially. In other iterations of Christianity, faithfulness might be informally measured by any variety of social practices, such as church attendance, involvement in church activities, mission trips and the like. In the Prosperity Gospel, faithfulness can be measured by the same metric of success as capitalism – through money. The Veblenian social practices which sustain and perpetuate the Prosperity Gospel in the US all hinge upon financial signifiers: the tithe demonstrates faith that God will allow the believer to prosper, wealth is the proof, and emulations of prosperity are encouraged.

Through these Veblenian social practices, individuals are socialized and habituated to deny the material reality of the failure of their faith. Veblen's Propaganda of Faith is particularly instructive here, as the Prosperity Theology is able to further mitigate doubt and fill its coffers by selling materials which promise and inspire the individual believer to improve her performance in those Veblenian social practices:

Start calling yourself healed, happy, whole, blessed, and prosperous. Stop talking to God about how big your mountains are, and start talking to your mountains about how big your God is! — Joel Osteen, *Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential*

Veblen is quite clear throughout all of his works that capitalism and modern Christianity cannot be meaningfully studied without reference to one another. Veblen would no doubt agree that the Prosperity Theology, so popular in the US for the past nearly half century, is the next stage in the co-evolutions of the two – an obvious and likely inevitable merger.

Veblen certainly recognized the ability and tendency of the clergy class and upper class to use religious doctrine as a tool of exploitation (1899).

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¹ Although as Diggins points out: “Not only does his (Veblen’s) treatment of Christianity contradict his earlier argument that competitive exploit develops with the passing of polytheistic and matriarchal forms of worship, but Veblen never makes it clear whether the masses of Roman converts were communalists because they were Christian or whether they were Christian because they were communalists (Diggins 1978 135).”

² For a thorough and thoroughly engaging read on the history of the Prosperity Gospel, see Bowler 2013.

³ Malachi 3:8-12 KJV “Will a man rob God? Yet ye have robbed me. But ye say, Wherein have we robbed thee? In tithes and offerings. Ye are cursed with a curse: for ye have robbed me, even this whole nation. Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the Lord of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it. And I will rebuke the devourer for your sakes, and he shall not destroy the fruits of your ground; neither shall your vine cast her fruit before the time in the field, saith the Lord of hosts. And all nations shall call you blessed: for ye shall be a delightsome land, saith the Lord of hosts.

⁴ For example: Abraham, Joseph, and David

⁵ Matthew 6:19-21 KJV “Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also”

⁶ Matthew 19:2 KJV “And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God”

⁷ 1 Timothy 6:10 KJV “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs”

⁸ According to the Prosperity Gospel, material lack might well be a test proctored by God to test one's devotion or faith - much like Job (Barker 2007).

⁹ The Prosperity Gospel preaching churches transcend denominational lines; most of the mega-churches who preach the Prosperity Gospel self-categorize as non-denominational. Prosperity Gospel preaching also transcends traditional media as the followers of the Prosperity Gospel learn and participate in its teachings through a sundry of mediums outside the traditional in-person church sermon, whether through watching televised services, books and videos, engaging with the material through social media or participation in workshops. For this reason, counting the number of believers is a difficult, if not impossible task (Bowler 2013).

¹⁰ Veblen's endnote at the end of this sentence is a listing of the "Extra Services at St. Patrick's" (1994 308)