

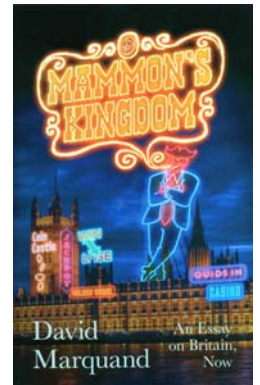
Mammon's Kingdom: An Essay on Britain, Now

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■ by David Marquand

reviewed by Michael Smith



The crypt of St Paul's Cathedral was an unusual place for a launch event recently for David Marquand's new book, *Mammon's Kingdom*. It was hosted by the St Paul's Institute and chaired by the Rt Rev Peter Selby, the former Bishop of Worcester.

Marquand, the political philosopher and former Labour MP, who turned 80 in September, has lost nothing of his robust and intellectual analysis. His book is a resounding call for a public debate on how to create a 'moral economy' following the collapse of 2008.

In some ways this is already happening. Think tanks such as St Paul's Institute and Tomorrow's Company have stimulated the debate. The headline to the last chapter of Gordon Brown's book, *Beyond the Crash* (2010) reads 'Markets need morals'. My own organisation, Initiatives of Change, holds forums on encouraging trust and integrity in the global economy. A great deal of soul-searching is going on.

But what disturbs Marquand is that little has really changed. We live in a more unequal society than ever. London has more billionaires than any city on earth. Yet the poorest fifth of Britain's population are among the poorest of all the EU countries, he claims. The benefits of growth are not evenly distributed. The UK is mammon's kingdom and 'no large Western democracy has been more devoted to money worship than Britain'. We have lost what Adam Smith called 'the bonds of sympathy' and we need to create a 'decent society' that doesn't humiliate people through poverty, homelessness, exploitation

and degrading working conditions—the chief sources of humiliation' (p.212).

The question is how. Marquand asserts that we won't learn how to walk the walk unless we first learn together to talk the talk.

His prescription is threefold. Firstly, we need 'the ethic of stewardship'. The question is no longer, 'What's in it for me?' It is, 'How can I best honour the generations that have gone before me and discharge my duty to distant generations that I will never know?' (p.213). This includes the environmental legacy for future generations: the imperative is sustainability.

His second guiding principle is 'to master capitalism'. He thinks 'the decent society is incompatible with today's untamed capitalism and the proliferating humiliations that are its hallmark' (p.214). He continues: 'The old élites tamed the capitalism of the nineteenth century in the name of an overriding public morality. In the last thirty years their achievements have been undone' (p.215). And 'capitalism's helter-skelter untaming in the last 30 years has made it indecent' (p.212).

Marquand acknowledges the role of the Abrahamic faiths in promoting the private and public virtues needed to master capitalism. 'Good capitalism is impossible without good people living good lives' (p.71). The very notion of a private religion, he asserts, is an oxymoron. 'Religion is public by definition... believers are supposed to bear witness and that bearing witness is a public act' (p.208). This is a helpful challenge and spur coming from someone who claims to be an

- ▶▶ ‘unbeliever’. Despite his non-belief, Marquand can write that the magic words of the Magnificat make the heart sing.

‘The incarnate God-the-Son of Christianity, we should never forget, was born in a stable, grew up in the family of a humble craftsman and was sentenced to a terrible death for sedition’. He worries that the churches have too often sought worldly power for themselves. That does not affect the central point, however. ‘As everyone knows, Christ told his followers to render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and unto God the things that are God. However, the things that are God’s are necessarily political’. He quotes Rowan Williams as saying that this defines a kind of citizenship in which ‘each member’s flourishing depends closely and strictly on the flourishing of every other’ (p.209).

Marquand’s third prescription is to call for decent élites and a decent democracy. If this sounds, well, élitist, he asserts that the public philosophy he argues for ‘would reject the unthinking anti-élitism which has fostered (and been fostered by) the culture of hedonistic individualism’ (p.216). It would stand for open, tolerant, responsive and accountable élites, from diverse communities and backgrounds, ‘imbued with an ethic of civil duty and public service’. So ‘decent élites’ are not just those at the top but the minority of opinion-formers and change-makers at all levels of society: ‘we enlarge our horizons to embrace the common good by taking part in collective action, first and foremost at the local level’ (p.217).

Indeed Jesus himself enlisted, in his disciples, a group of change-makers at the local level who lacked any political or ecclesiastical authority, as his followers to upturn the world. They turned out to be singularly successful!

Marquand asserts that the dream of participatory governance has had a powerful hold on human imaginations and aspirations across centuries, cultures and continents. Perhaps this applied to Jesus’ disciples too, who might have dreamed of a ‘participatory governance’ role, in overthrowing their Roman occupiers, and singularly failed - at

least initially - to understand the eternal nature of Jesus’s Kingdom, in the struggle for goodness and the rejection of evil. Marquand, meanwhile, traces the notion of ‘participatory governance’ right back to public deliberations that took place in Indian Buddhist councils as early as the sixth century BCE.

Given Marquand’s Christian references, it is surprising that he makes no reference to St Paul’s assertion that ‘the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil’ (1 Timothy 6: 10). However he does refer to Christ proclaiming in Matthew 6:24 ‘No man can serve two masters... You cannot serve God and mammon’. Indeed, the claims of Christ on a person’s life — the commitment to the divine will expressed in ‘Your will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven’ in the Lord’s Prayer — go far deeper than any secular morality in its acknowledgement of the ultimate source of power in the world.

The evening in the crypt of St Paul’s led to an interesting exchange with the audience on how the notion of conscience affects human wellbeing. The theologian Tina Beattie, Professor of Catholic Studies at Roehampton University, made reference to the notion of virtue, dating back to Aristotle, including prudence, justice, temperance and courage, to which we and society can all aspire. If we look at the values that drive the modern economy, she said, they are just the opposite: ‘recklessness, excess, cowardice and the result is injustice’. She affirmed that ‘the virtuous life is a happy life’ in which an inner conscience directs or lives. This also requires the ‘disciplining of desire—and discipline is a word we don’t like. But you can’t play in an orchestra if you don’t have discipline. You can’t live an orchestrated life if you don’t have self-discipline’.

Marquand concludes: ‘We can put the ethic of stewardship ahead of profit, empathetic understanding ahead of command and control, and sustainability ahead of growth’ (p.220). He has set down an important marker against complacency towards tackling injustice in a post-crash world. To adapt the words of an Elvis Presley song, we need a lot more conversation towards a lot more action. We simply can’t go on as we are. ■

Michael Smith is
Head of Business
Programmes at
Initiatives of Change
UK

