

Lecture #17 - George Bernard Shaw, *Major Barbara*

The idea of opposing Money and Religion as rival allegiances is taken by Shaw from the Sermon on the Mount, particularly from the notion that "You cannot serve both God and Mammon [the god of wealth: the phrase is often translated "You cannot serve both God and Money".] But Shaw's play, surprisingly, opts for Money. What justifies this hard-and-fast opposition? Is money a form of *service*? Undershaft, when asked about his religion, answers, "I am a millionaire. That is my religion." What have money and religion in common? Barbara labors ceaselessly to extract donations from the poor, in order to fund the work of the Salvation Army, but she rejects Bill Walker's pound note and the huge benefaction of Bodger, the whiskey-distiller. What does she want from Bill? Why reject Bodger's benefaction? Is money ever dirty money? What (exactly) is wrong with working for an arms manufacturer? A distiller? A narcotics dealer? A manufacturer of toothpaste? Does the product really matter? If not, why not? If so, why does it make a difference? Is there a point in Shaw's making his representative of the Gospel of Money a munitions-manufacturer? If so, what is it? Could the play have equally well made Undershaft a distiller? a manufacturer of dental floss, of tobacco products? How would you justify (or excuse) your managerial role in such case, or would you draw the line at some of these employments?

Lady Britomart advises Stephen to accept his inheritance and then hire a manager to run it. Is this foolish advice? How would you go about hiring such a manager? What is the issue about succession in the play? Why is it necessary to choose a foundling, i.e., a bastard, to be CEO. How do you hire a CEO?

Consider Lady Britomart's view that it is all right to manufacture and market munitions, provided that you sell them only to "the right sort of people". We have something of the same opinion today, in the insistence of our government that only certain sorts of nations have a right to nuclear weapons. In contrast, Undershaft will sell armaments to anyone who wishes to buy and will arrange for generous loans for those who cannot afford it. What view of the world underlies his practice? Perhaps we should think of Undershaft's munitions as the symbolic equivalent of power, power to do good or harm, power of aggression and of defense. In this light, we might consider the role of Sloan professors, who sell managerial knowledge and arrange loans for those who cannot afford to buy. What would Lady Britomart think of this practice? Is the knowledge that Sloan sells a form of power? Should it be available only to the right sort of people?

From the Sermon on the Mount: "Lead us not into temptation . . .", which may also be translated as "Please do not test us . . ." and is frequently so translated. Is it a good thing to pray not to be tested? The passage comes from what has come to be known as "The Lord's Prayer", which also instructs us to pray for forgiveness, so that we may be forgiven in turn. What is the power of forgiveness? Is there any other motive for doing it? Can the world use more forgiveness? Cusins, in the play, rejects forgiveness. "Forgiveness is the beggar's refuge. We must pay our debts." Our watchword for this term is "accountability". Note in this connection that Barbara gives Bill Walker a hard time, refusing to let him pay off his offense against Jenny Hill by getting his own face bashed in. What does she want of him? Explain. Is the power to forgive, forget, and start anew always "a beggar's refuge"?