

MY GOD, HOW THE MONEY ROLLS IN

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By James A. Haught

A jobless West Virginian, living on welfare, began preaching in Pentecostal tabernacles to support his family. Within a few years, T.D. Jakes had raked in so much money from believers that he was able to pay \$870,000 for two side-by-side mansions, one with a pool and bowling alley. Then his soaring cash flow enabled him to pay \$3.2 million for a Texas megachurch vacated by a crooked evangelist who went to prison. Before long, Jakes was grossing more than \$20 million annually. Today, he ranks among America's flagrantly rich preachers, traveling by private jet, wearing enormous diamonds, living like royalty.

Thirty-two centuries ago, during the reign of Ramses III, Egypt's great temple of the supreme god Amun-Re – supposed creator of the world and father of the pharaoh – owned 420,000 head of livestock, 65 villages, 83 ships, 433 orchards, vast farmland, and 81,000 workers, all obeying the ruler priests.

In medieval Europe, as the church acquired tighter control over all facets of life, a gold mine was discovered by the clergy. It was simony, the sale of blessings. Fees for absolution, baptism, burial, marriage, etc., escalated into a cash-and-carry system including sale of high church office. Most outrageous were indulgences, church documents bought by worried families to release dead relatives from the alleged pain of an invisible purgatory. In the 1200s, Pope Innocent III denounced simony, saying the clergy “are enthralled to avarice, love presents, and seek rewards; for the sake of bribes they pronounce the godless righteous.”

In every age, in almost every culture, priestcraft has been a ticket to comfort. Churches and holy men reap earnings and exalted status from the supernaturalism they administer to followers. As self-proclaimed emissaries of invisible spirits, they outrank common folk, who support them.

The Internal Revenue Service says Americans took tax exemptions for \$88 billion in religious donations in 2004 — thus the U.S. Treasury funded churches by forgoing taxes on the \$88 billion. And this total doesn't count unknowable sums dropped into Sunday collection plates. Religion is lucrative.

In 1931, amid the misery of the Great Depression, novelist Theodore Dreiser called the church and clergy parasites sponging off people — hypocrites railing against “sin” while doing little for the hungry. “For it is not men who are talking, as they assert, but God through them,” Dreiser wrote in *Tragic America*, “and so through the mouths of tricksters and social prestidigitators, and no more and no less, comes all this hooey in regard to the hereafter.” Two centuries earlier, in *The Age of Reason*, Thomas Paine likewise wrote that religions are “no other than human inventions, set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit.”

Through the years, other writers have sounded similar warnings. Yet most people rarely think about the giant earnings from faith, or their consequences. The topic mostly escapes notice.

For example, how many know that riches from religion contributed to the downfall of Classical Greece? Few have heard of the Sacred Wars that helped deliver the peninsula into the hands of Alexander the Great. Here’s the historical account:

In Ancient Greece, priests reaped wealth through various methods. One apparently was sacred prostitution. The Greek historian-philosopher-geographer Strabo wrote that Corinth’s Aphrodite temple had 1,000 consecrated women who served male worshipers for fees, enriching the temple. Presumably the holy hookers were slave women, visited especially by sailors arriving at the large Corinth seaport. If Strabo’s account is accurate, religion spawned a profitable bordello.

Even more lucrative were oracles, the fortune-tellers who captivated the ancient world. Superstitious Greeks flocked to oracles. First the worshipers purified themselves by bathing and prayer, then they paid dearly to hear mumbo-jumbo from priests and priestesses.

At Dodona, a barefoot priestess sat in a high cliff, listening to the supposed voice of Zeus in the rustle of leaves or the flutter of dove wings. She provided yes-or-no answers to written questions. At Delphi (named for a dolphin that Apollo allegedly became) a stuporous priestess breathed vapors in a grotto and made incoherent answers, which were “translated” by a priest. The messages were murky — but swallowed avidly by paying believers.

As the fame of the Delphi shrine spread, so did its storehouse of gold, silver and jewels taken from gullible clients. Kings and generals came to Delphi, seeking Apollo’s guidance on important decisions, and they brought rich donations to the gods. Soon, various city-states built treasuries around the shrine to hold the wealth. The Amphictyonic League,

a consortium of twelve city-states including Athens and Sparta, governed Delphi cooperatively and secured its riches, like directors of a bank.

But money breeds trouble. Mountain people surrounding the shrine, the Phocians, saw an opportunity to cash in on the holy traffic, and began levying steep fees on visitors. Other members of the League sent troops to halt the extra profiteering. Phocians resisted. The First Sacred War erupted in 601 BCE and lasted 10 years. The Phocians were defeated and forced to serve the shrine.

A century later, in 480 BCE, a Persian army under Xerxes marched on Delphi to seize its wealth, but a landslide (caused by Apollo, the faithful said) blocked the troops.

A generation later, Phocians again grabbed Delphi's treasuries, and the Amphictyonic League again attacked. This Second Sacred War, in 447 BCE, ended like the first.

Seventy years later, a different stash of religious wealth was looted. During many, many wars between Greek city-states, an Arcadian army plundered treasuries of the mighty temple of Zeus at Olympia in southwest Greece. Naturally, this theft triggered more warring by kings and assemblies who had donated riches to the Supreme God.

Soon afterward, back at Delphi, the Third Sacred War flared in 356 BCE when Phocians seized the Apollo shrine once more. Phocian leaders promised not to loot the treasuries — but soon did so. The wealth that had been drained from believers was squandered to hire mercenary soldiers to battle neighbors, to bribe opposing generals, and to reward cronies. Historian Charles Morris related:

“One hundred seventeen ingots of gold and 360 golden goblets went to the melting pot, and with them a golden statue three cubits high, and a lion of the same precious metal. And what added to the horror of pious Greece was that much of the proceeds of these treasures was lavished on favorites. Necklaces of Helen and Eriphyle were given to dissolute women, and a woman flute-player received a silver cup and a golden wreath from the temple hoard.”

This time, the Amphictyonic League had been sadly weakened by centuries of fighting, especially by the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta, and by constant conflict with Persia. From the north, King Philip of Macedonia had been gaining power, expanding his territory, and sending legions in attempts to grab Greek lands. After the Delphi shrine was seized a third time, some local assemblies asked Philip to drive out the occupying Phocians. Shrewdly, he obliged. Posing as devoted champion of

Apollo, he waged a long war that finally quelled the temple-grabbers. To inflict the vengeance of the god upon the looters, Philip drowned 3,000 Phocian prisoners on charges of sacrilege. Subtly, he formed Greek “alliances” that made him de facto ruler and protector of the holies.

Then the Fourth Sacred War erupted in 339 after a different neighbor state invaded the sanctified Delphi region. The Amphictyonic League asked the Macedonian army to save the oracle temple again. However, some city-states perceived that Philip was using his defense of Apollo as a pretext to seize large sections of the peninsula. They fielded troops to resist — but ten thousand Macedonians in full battle array were unstoppable. At a crucial clash at Chaeronea, Philip’s army crushed Athens, Thebes and other allies. Philip’s son, Alexander — who had been born at the start of the Third Sacred War — was a brilliant 18-year-old cavalry commander in the decisive massacre.

Victory in the Fourth Sacred War gave Philip complete control of Greece, except for defiant Sparta in the south. But he didn’t live to rule. He was assassinated in 336, and Alexander took command. Greece was subsumed beneath Macedonia in a mighty war machine, an engine of conquest. The era of city-states ended. After Alexander’s death, Greece fell under Roman rule. More than 2,000 years were to pass before it regained independence.

Although Ancient Greece had multitudes of wars, and plenty of other self-destructive factors, wealth taken by priests from the gullible was a trigger that helped topple the classic civilization.

It’s a little-known footnote in the age-old tale of riches from religion. Apparently, the tale never will end, as long as believers feel compelled to give tribute to purveyors of the supernatural.

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