

**MONEY AS MOTIVE: REVEREND IKE AND THE DRAMA OF CAPITALISM**

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*When I first started contributing to Reverend Ike's Blessing Plan, I had nothing... now God sends money for all my needs and delivered a new Cadillac to my driveway with the keys and title on the front seat. —a follower*

**INTRODUCTION**

The canons of Calvinist theology served as an effective catalyst and justification for the development of capitalist economy (Weber 1920) With a history of some 200 years, the United States still feels the ghost of John Calvin, and Weber's observations are as trenchant as ever. A host of organizations, such as AmWay, Shaklee, Dare to be Great, and numerous religious groups hawking everything from soap flakes to cosmetics preach the link between God and money (Mathison 1960). Religious motives have always been tied up with money in American culture, although much has been done to conceal this connection with a variety of selective inattentions. Religious vocabularies of motive support and make creditable a wide range of religious, financial, and business endeavors. Financial success still seems to be a goal which reveals God's favor; money has been transformed from *filthy lucre* to earthy evidence of God's grace.

Here we present an ethnographic analysis of a nondenominational, incorporated religious organization, the United Christian Evangelistic Association, led by the charismatic Reverend Frederick Eikenrenkoetter, better known by the more familiar *Reverend Ike*. He has become known as one of the nation's most famous evangelists. It is perhaps a paradigm case of Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, preached to an enthusiastic multitude of some 2.5 million hopeful entrepreneurs.

**MONEY AS DRAMATIC PROP**

All action incorporates performative qualities (Brisset, Edgley 1975; Goffman 1959; Burke 1937, 1945, 1950). The concept of the act is involved, not always with implications of pretense, but not always without such implications, either, in everything that people do. All

behavior is at least potentially symbolic, which means that people make things of it. If we use the metaphor of drama to guide our analysis of the relation between money and religion, several possibilities emerge. Dramas typically involve props, the function of which is to lend symbolic substance to ongoing action. And of all the props which might be used to provide a basis for action by establishing the credentials of the actor, the act, the scene, and the purpose, money is one of the most predominant.

It is widely held that money moves people to action. In the course of building acts, economic motives come to be used in ways which lead already-existing action this way or that, altering its course, or even bringing it to a sudden halt, should the money run out. Money is motive, but only to the extent that the actor is able to use it in rationalizing ways to persuade his audience of the legitimacy of his act. Reverend Ike stands the rhetoric of money on its head, and in so doing, reestablishes its credibility in religious dramas:

Money is good. Money does wonderful things. The evil is when someone misuses money. The evil is when somebody doesn't have enough money to meet his needs. Not money, but the *lack* of money is the root of all evil. (Reverend Ike, May 1975 31)

**METHODOLOGY**

This study is based on observations of numerous blessing/healing services and teaching classes conducted by Reverend Ike and his staff, as well as a content analysis of *Action Magazine*, Reverend Ike's house organ with a national circulation of 4 million. A 6-year collection of these magazines, for 1969-1975 were studied, along with radio broadcasts and numerous telecasts. Although access to actual financial records was never obtained, several personal interviews were conducted with Reverend Ike and his associates. A series of informal interviews were also conducted with members of the United Christian Evangelistic Association.

**FRONTSTAGING THE SUCCESS SCRIPT**

Dramas have to be staged to have any

meaning. Through the United Christian Evangelistic Association (UCEA) Reverend Ike and associates present to their audiences a persuasive performance which establishes a promise of financial success and monetary security through religious devotion. As the act unfolds, rhetorics of success provide a script.

A rhetoric is a vocabulary of limited purpose ... a set of symbols functioning to communicate a particular set of meanings, directed and organized toward the representation of a specific image or impression. Such vocabularies are not only verbal, but also include visual symbols such as objects, emblems and gestures. (Hall 1970 199)

The success of Reverend Ike can largely be laid to his expeditious use of a religious rhetoric which promises going from rags to riches. Four rhetorics are woven into a vocabulary of religious motives which justify, promote and promise the pursuit and acquisition of money: 1) the rhetoric of positive thinking; 2) the rhetoric of work; 3) the rhetoric of giving to get; 4) the rhetoric of appearance.

#### **RHETORIC OF POSITIVE THINKING**

Reverend Ike approaches his audience with that he calls a psychological interpretation of the Bible. From this viewpoint, the Bible becomes a handbook of "positive self-awareness," a philosophy like that of the Horatio Alger stories in which an unschooled backwoods boy can become president of his country. The positive self-image psychology of Reverend Ike is a recipe comprising a mix of high achiever national figures such as Henry Ford, Dale Carnegie (1936), Norman Vincent Peale (1952) and Thomas Harris (1971). These are in a sacred rather than a secular package. This positive self image is all that is between the faithful and wealth: "Whatever you define yourself as being, is what you become." (Ike May 1975 13). I want you to be very careful of everything you say. Don't say that you are anything that you don't want to be." (Ike May 1975 16) "You can't lose with the stuff I use, and the stuff I use is mind power." (Ike January 1973 12)

If one wants to escape poverty, he must stop defining himself as poor — selves and self-concepts are synonymous. Ike, aware of the impact of labels on the stigmatized and downtrodden, exhorts his followers to "... reject all the nice, neat sociological labels which are passed down by the experts,

including experts from Washington." (Ike May 1975 14) "The best thing you can do for the poor is not to be one of them."

Armed with a host of textual verifications, Ike used the Bible to convince his audience that in every activity in which they engage, they must positively affirm their identity: "I am a capable person. I will succeed. God is in me and motivates my action toward success' You should thank God for the forthcoming success even prior to its attainment. One should, at all waking hours, in prayers, at breakfast, at bedtime, in difficult circumstances — bless oneself with the power of positive thinking. A positive self image is God dwelling in people. "God is my success and my prosperity." (Ike May 1975 16)

Reverend Ike persuasively and convincingly dramatizes diverse success stories such as the acquisition of money, automobiles, mink coats, jobs, and the exorcism of drug addiction, alcoholism, and assorted physical ills. All of the successes are attributed to Reverend Ike's *Mind Science*, the power of positive thinking. "I teach the sick to redefine themselves as being well, with amazing results." A free-for-the-asking-but-donation-appreciated prayer cloth is the tangible symbol of this inner confidence of healing of ailments and solving of problems. The red personally-blessed cloth, representing the robe of Christ, which could heal if the one touching it has faith, can be affixed to a purse or wallet to solve financial problems, to a part of the body to resolve physical problems, or to the source of the affliction, as by wrapping it around a pack of cigarettes, harmful drugs, or a liquor bottle, to help one kick a bad habit. Most of Reverend Ike's sermons end with the slogan: *You can't lose with the stuff I use.*

#### **THE RHETORIC OF WORK**

According to Reverend Ike, God does not believe in welfare, which may account for the large number of prominent political conservatives that grace his platform. God does not tap his storehouse of blessings to support the dole. He helps those who help themselves; he who does not work does not eat. Followers are told that to get more of what they need or desire, work is mandatory. Think positively, and then get out there and practice that thrift and work that Ben Franklin talks about. Ike's

sermons rewrite *Poor Richard's Almanac*: There is nothing so bad as a good excuse for not doing what should be done. If you want to be nothing, *do nothing*, and you'll *have* nothing. Idle daydreams come to no fruition. One must think positively, set goals, and then do something objective to attain success. Reverend Ike emphatically warns his followers that faith that "does NOTHING, gets NOTHING!" (Ike May 1975 30)

Individualism is also a notion wed to the work ethic in Ike's psychotheology. Each one is the master of his own destiny. Individuals are personally responsible for their success or lack of it. Work is necessary to attain heaven on earth as well as in the hereafter. In contrast to Calvinism, though sainthood is not predestined: it is the individual person, not God, who is responsible for material success. However the Deity will aid those who initiate and follow through by working for success and prosperity. "The someone you learn to lean on is yourself." (Ike June 1975 6)

#### THE RHETORIC OF GIVING TO GET

The core of Reverend Ike's ministry and financial success is his "blessing plan." Positive thinking and work are combined to produce an entrepreneur's dream. Each sermon and each issue of *Action Magazine* proclaims the necessity of such a giving plan in order to gain success, however success may be defined by the individual. The *Blessing Plan* includes three ideas: 1) believing; 2) giving regularly to the church (UCEA); 3) prospering. Blessings in the form of money, healing, and other rewards return one's gifts tenfold. Each believer makes a monthly pledge of money: Step One, \$10 per month; Step 2, \$20, Step Three, \$100, and Step Four, a larger amount designated by the giver, which could reach hundreds or thousands per month. To continue growing in status and in favor with God and man, believers are told they should be progressing through the various stages. To remain stagnant is evidence of a lack of faith. Promise, give cheerfully and be blessed. "Winners do not remain at the starting line. I am asking everyone who has, or can get a hundred dollars to send it for a special offering within seven days." (Ike March 1974 15) For such offerings Ike suggests borrowing, withdrawal from a savings account, or any other sacrifice, because sacrifice only serves

to increase the yield on the return.

Contributors to the Blessing Plan are classified according to the amount of money given in the monthly pledges. "When you stop giving, your blessings stop. Life takes from the taker and gives to the giver.

More than half of the space in *Action Magazine* is devoted to these "giving and getting" stories. Pictured beside the testimony are rolls of money, Cadillacs, mink coats and other rich rewards, as proof that the givers receive far more than they gave.

Acquisitors of such material rewards are encouraged to plow them back in as a reinvestment for still greater profits. "When you receive extra money, send in an extra offering right away, to keep extras coming your way." (Ike March 1972 7)

#### RHETORIC OF APPEARANCES

Rhetoric may be said to appear in social relations just as appearances may be presented rhetorically (Stone 1962). To enact a convincing performance, the stage must be imbued with supportive props and equipment that are consistent with the line of the action that will occur. Reverend Ike manages to weave appearance and discourse into an impressive rhetoric of success.

The United Church at United Palace, for example, is located in the Washington Heights section of Manhattan, two blocks from the George Washington Bridge. The church covers four blocks and has been named by the City of New York as a historical landmark, displaying a pipe organ with gold and silver overlay. Each Sunday the 5,000 seats are packed to capacity. As a stage for Ike's sermons and teaching, it is unsurpassed. Similarly, Ike's clothing demonstrates the appearance of success. His expense account for wardrobe purchases is \$1000 per week. He is assuredly the best dressed minister in the United States. In his multitude of speaking engagements throughout the year, Ike chooses auditoriums which indicate the ability to pay: the Forum in Los Angeles, the Omni in Atlanta, the International Amphitheater in Chicago, the Cow Palace in San Francisco, and the Miami Convention Hall. Chartered tours by airplane and bus are advertised in *Action Magazine* for such engagements. Air tours cost \$300 to \$400 per person.

*Action Magazine* is printed on slick heavy stock with graphics and colored photographs obviously designed by professionals. Not only do the words used proclaim success, but the entire scene from which they stem affirms the success of the enterprise. Testimonials of celebrities lend credence to the venture. Over 4 million copies are distributed in the United States, headlining the theme: "The lack of money is the root of all evil!"

### BACKSTAGING THE SCRIPT OF SUCCESS

Performances are elementary rituals, and for a ritual to succeed, the human making of it must be concealed from the audience that will later view it. Backstages are ordinarily places, but they may also be constituted simply by shielding and masking information in social situations so that the audience does not realize certain things which might conflict with the performance when it is staged. Many of the frontstage performances raise interesting questions about possible backstage maneuverings. Where do the Cadillacs with keys and title on the front seat come from? From whence the cashier's checks for \$10,000, the paid up mortgage for a home, the mysterious addition to a checking account, or various rich gifts? Reverend Ike says that he cannot explain the sudden appearance of all such blessings, but the implicit explanation points to God who is tapping His unlimited storehouse of American manufactures to reward the faithful — those who have been giving faithfully under the Blessing Plan.

Content analysis of *Action Magazine* reveals that God prefers General Motors over the other auto makers, since gifts of Cadillacs outnumber Lincolns and Chrysler Imperials 8 to 1. The Deity cares enough to send the very best, and prefers mink exclusively when sending coats. Assuming that God does not write checks or deliver Cadillacs in Person, and assuming the authenticity of the reports, who is responsible for dispensing the multitude of blessings to the faithful investors. Though we were never able to see any financial records of the UCEA, nor did anyone of the organization confirm our conclusions, it appears likely Reverend Ike and the UCEA themselves send these material "blessings" to members.

With a secretariat of about 100 people locate in modern administrative offices, Reverend Ike

has individual records and files on each contributor to the *Blessing Plan*. These computerized files include addresses and the special needs requested by individuals as they have responded to Reverend Ike's solicitations of needs and problems. In true capitalist fashion, Reverend Ike reinvests portions of his capital in his business by sending money and gifts to selected respondents. Their testimonials, in turn, reinforce and lend credibility to the promises and programs of the *Blessing Plan*.

In some respects Reverend Ike and his organization serve as an insurance company. The faithful pay the premiums and when and if crises occur, the purse strings are loosened to cure the financial problem. Reverend Ike says that "God will not allow the faithful to suffer more than they can endure." And he takes note of hardship cases and ameliorates the situation.

### CONCLUSIONS

Money and success as values do not simply exist structurally, but must be continually affirmed through dramatic forms. In American society were the inalienable right to material possessions has been elevated to its zenith. Success has been dramatically blended with morality, character and religiosity. Being poor in America is a moral concern. The playing out of the moral nature of success and attainment has served as a vocabulary of motives for the business enterprise.

In places where success has been defined materially, the creative means of pursuit that have been devised by "moral entrepreneurs" have been the stuff of which myths and legends are made. Reverend Ike reveres God and money in the same breath. With props of success and vocabularies of devotion, Ike dramatizes the accessibility of success by offering a master plan of God's storehouse of blessings.

While making visible the fruits of success himself, Reverend Ike and his associates act out scripts that plot the means of attainment. Believe in yourself, work diligently, and give to God. God, in return, will multiply the gift by ten and return success to the sender. To the bulk of an audience that finds itself at the bottom rungs of the socioeconomic ladder such promises, offered in the name of religion,

offer better and more morally acceptable odds than the numbers game and other get-rich-quick schemes. The use of such rhetoric underscores Burke's contention that all dramas and certainly religious dramas are essentially morality plays which delineate the paths of righteousness and warn of the pitfalls of deviance (Burke 1937)

Backstage, the performance is being supported by issuing in God's stead, material possessions to those most in need. As further evidence of God's foresight and generosity, the success stories are trumpeted in the magazine to attest the genuineness and reliability of the religious routes to prosperity, in prayers, Cadillacs, mink coats, or healing miracles. Meanwhile, the Reverend Ike holding company reinvests its capital and achieves its own financial success from the monthly payments of the faithful.

Ironically, much of Protestantism has forgotten its Calvinist origins, and finds itself in the position of apologizing for the necessity of living in a material world. Ike reverses things, goes straight back to Calvin, and offers a transition from rags to riches in the rhetoric of religion.

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