Corporate christianity and the crucified worker: the harsh irony of religion in ‘...

Barbara Ehrenreich’s memoir Nickel and Dimed commemorates her experiences as an “ unskilled” worker attempting to live on the low wages of her temporary lower class. As she works various jobs in different geological locations across the United States, she describes her own economic, physical, mental, logistical, and social challenges as well those of her fellow workers. She uses those experiences not only to prove the difficulty of minimum wage living, but to criticize corporate establishments and to advocate simultaneously for the individuality of workers and for their solidarity. In constructing this argument she includes descriptions of several encounters with Christians, specifically referring frequently to Jesus, drawing implicit comparisons between the religion and corporations, mixing capitalistic and religious diction. She makes clear her disdain for what she perceives to be Christian hypocrisy through her sarcasm and ironic religious diction, and successfully attacks romanticization of poverty perpetuated by Christian notions of sacrifice and suffering.

The religious aspect of Ehrenreich’s argument emerges subtly as she establishes the distrust that Christians hold for the working class and the similar distrust held by corporations. She mocks her own “ middle-class solipsism” when the “ gross improvidence” of many of her coworkers’ housing situations “ strikes” her (26). The ambiguity of the word improvidence provides this statement with two distinctly possible and nearly opposite meanings; improvidence as meaning wasteful or thriftlessness implies that the plight of her coworkers is their own fault, an idea she directly refutes when she notes a “ host of special costs” prohibitive to the most thrifty decisions for the poor. Alternatively the word must imply a lack

of divine direction, and thus Ehrenreich implicitly argues that God does not guide the poor, an argument which can be extended to a metaphor for modern Christians, whom Ehrenreich believes have forsaken the lower class. Of her time waitressing in Florida, she claims that the worst customers are the “ Visible Christians”, noting that the “ people wearing crosses or ‘ WWJD?’ buttons look at [the workers] disapprovingly no matter what [they] do” (36). In making this generalization she characterizes Christians (at least the ones she perceives to be sanctimonious) as universally distrustful of the working class.

With certain Christians’ distrust toward the lower class established, Ehrenreich further critiques modern Christianity and, more generally, religion, by directly comparing it to the corporations in control of the workers. Accompanying these references is nearly always capitalistic diction, conjoining and confounding religiously morality with capitalistic benefits. She notes the Mexican-American man who summarizes “ our debt” to Jesus, and describes the “ business of modern Christianity” (68-69), turning the religious institution of Christianity into a corporate one, which places monetary gains above the individuals who endow it with the power necessary to its own existence. Similarly, the non-corporeal “ theoretical entit[ies], the corporation[s]”, minimize the value of their employees as people and prioritize the company’s profit above the well-being of the individuals (17). In the Wal-Mart associate orientation meeting the employees are discourages from committing “ time theft”, and the “ indignities imposed on so many low-wage workers” create a debilitating sense of shame which perpetuates the cycle of cheap labor (115). The

parallels Ehrenreich draws between religious and corporate institutions with regards to attitudes toward and treatment of the poor working class provide a strong basis for her eventual Marxist rally cry of the workers despite her merely temporary membership in their class.

If Christianity in its righteousness is comparable to the corporations that Ehrenreich claims oppress their workers, then her comparison paints herself and, more broadly, the entire, suffering working class, as Jesus Christ. She describes two distinct versions of Jesus which she believes exist: the live Christ, “ the living man, the wine-guzzling vagrant and precocious socialist”, and “ the crucified Christ” (68). This dichotomy of Christ presents a metaphor for both the individual workers and for the working class as perceived by corporations and, as Ehrenreich argues, by a certain sect of Christianity. Each worker, like the living Christ, is an individual who “ is never mentioned, nor [is] anything he ever has to say” (68); rather, the crucified Christ is the only worshipped symbol, and his crucifixion is the very source of “ our debt” to him (68). It is “ the business of modern Christianity to crucify him again and again” just as she claims it is the business of corporations to metaphorically crucify the workers — to subject them to physically demanding labor with little pay and long hours. Similarly, modern Christianity’s praise of Christ “ as a corpse” and the perceived hypocrisy and sanctimony of their righteousness is akin to the corporate rhetoric intended to deceive potential employees into believing the corporation has “ Respect for the individual”, when in actuality they are treated as little more than service drones (144).

Ehrenreich’s ultimate purpose in sustaining the Christ motif and the comparisons between modern Christianity and corporate manipulation is ironic; she attempts to tear down the traditionally Christian romantic notions of poverty that have grown in prevalence in the United States. She implies that she herself is an atheist when she sees a church tent revival as “ the perfect entertainment for an atheist out on her own,” thus distancing herself from any religious moral implications. With her atheism established, the irony of her words regarding religion becomes clear. Ironically, she claims that she is “ not working for a maid service; rather, [she has] joined a mystic order. . . grateful. . . for [the] chance to earn grace through submission and toil” (62). The sarcasm and humor with which she skewers the idea of suffering as a path to some sort of religious —and therefore capitalistic betterment (by way of her previously established intermixed religious and capitalistic diction) is made more effective by the sincerity with the sincerity of the “ rich people [who] pay to spend their weekends. . . doing various menial chores” (62). Similarly, she mixes her legitimate evaluation that “ Jesus. . . more or less [was] favored by an inscrutable God” for the sole purpose of his suffering with the more sarcastic application that she would consider a mortally wounded coworker to be similarly favored. Ultimately, she effectively takes advantage of her established Christ motif and employs it as a way to reveal the hypocrisies of both Christianity and corporate America by mixing sarcasm with the legitimate Christian and corporate notions. In placing the two in such close proximity, she forces the examination of both, highlighting her perceived unfairness of the status quo.

Ehrenreich’s ubiquitous Christ motif interacts almost in perfect coordination with her illustrations of the individual worker versus the large, nebulous corporations. She successfully uses her own experiences to illustrate the similarities between Christianity and corporations. When her discussions move to topics related to religion specifically, her typically biting, though lighter sarcastic humor takes on a more vitriolic edge. This proves to be an effective tool in achieving her desired critique of both religious and corporate hypocrisy simultaneously. However, her bias reveals itself through occasional blanket generalizations, which do not account for varying Christian opinions, as she relies on primarily a single experience for the basis of her religious argument. Nonetheless, she provides a compelling argument exposing a hypocritical coincidence of corporate and religious America.