

Cosmic Lessons: When the Ministry Pulls a Madoff

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You would expect that churches, like other donation-dependent organizations, might face financial challenges stemming from the economic meltdown; you could anticipate that such challenges would result in hard decisions, cutbacks, and creative use of existing resources; you might even anticipate that the worst aspects of human nature would manifest, and that congregations would suffer. And you'd be right.

Take the example of a modestly-sized church in Queens, New York. Members of the Local Christian Assembly Church, the *New York Times* reported, have lost 9 million dollars (other sources put the figure at over \$12 million) through a scheme arranged by "a former minister, a son of the church's founder" and several others who developed investment opportunities for members of the church. In spite of hard times, this group of investment managers was able to raise large sums of money through a promise of ridiculously high returns—as much as 75 percent. Few seemed troubled by such grand claims.

I understand that Christians assume that God wants the best for them (including financial success), but there is also an unavoidable dimension of deep greed at work here. Members of the church gave huge sums of money raised through refinancing homes and other sacrifices only to have that money used by Isaac I. Ovid and the others to purchase expensive items, including a Bentley and jewelry. Again, fraud within religious circles is not unheard of. Besides the clear and troubling lack of ethics, what troubles me about this situation (and others like it) is the continuing naïveté (willful ignorance?) regarding authority. According to the *New York Times*, members of the church have sought legal assistance and appealed to divine reciprocity. But shouldn't this situation raise questions concerning what is often a blind allegiance to religious authority?

While I suspect that at least some of these same church members voiced anger over the unethical practices of Bernard Madoff, they failed to exercise the same suspicion of unrealistic promises made by their former minister-turned-hedge-fund-manager. Both Madoff and Ovid used the connections forged through relationships of 'trust' to gain confidence, and played on greed to work their schemes. The difference: Ovid also had the blind trust of a congregation. For Ovid, there was an assumed line of religious knowledge and authority stemming from church founder to founder's son that allowed him to couple ministerial duties with financial services without significant challenge or question.

While I sympathize in certain ways with those (many of them elderly) who lost money to this fraud, I also believe it is time for church members to re-think the nature and 'privileges' of church authority. A 'calling' to ministry too often is a catchall providing general access to the lives and resources of church members with few checks and balances. Ministers are free, then, to cloak questionable activities in an appeal to divinely-ordained authority. Too often this shady appeal to a vague 'right' to whatever they deem necessary for the 'good' of the 'flock' trumps reason and common sense. Accountability is pushed to the side.

Like any profession, ministers are in the pulpit because they have convinced some of their ability in spiritual matters. But these interests and abilities do not translate into expertise in all areas. Ovid may have been a good preacher—I don't know—but this isn't ground for taking financial advice from him. Why give the church minister a pass simply because he or she quotes scripture or prays well? (One wouldn't expect one's doctor to give sound financial advice, or the butcher to suggest legal strategies.)

Recognize the limited scope of expertise that marks the minister and delegate to those with other forms of expertise concerns appropriate to them. This doesn't rule out such fraud but it does demonstrate recognition of the limits to "calling" and the boundaries that rightly define and confine religious authority. Spiritual commitment, whether on the part of the minister or the congregant, doesn't mean the absence of humanity's worst inclinations. The preacher's collar or robe isn't the sign of a superhero.

In this scenario, there is tension between full reliance on another for guidance and a strong push for self interest: money. With the former, a certain type of selflessness ('The Lord will work things out through the minister of the Gospel') is in place. It's then coupled, through the latter, with *selfishness* ('I want as much as I can get and the means by which this is achieved are not open to critical investigation'). Again, recall the 75% return!

This is an unhealthy and unproductive tension. When problems do arise, claiming them as part of some divine pedagogy, part of some cosmic strategy, does little to resolve them. Rather, it paints them as somehow *useful*, and best addressed through the tools of spiritual insight—a spiritual insight in service of unchecked material acquisition.

Did members of that church really need to lose hard-earned money in order for their God to provide them a vital lesson? Where's the compassion in that? The situation is best addressed by recognizing the manner in which greed and a misguided sense of the reach of spiritual authority have produced an unfortunate but predictable outcome.

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