



**Review of Tom Boland & Ray Griffin,  
*The Reformation of Welfare: The  
New Faith of the Labour Market*  
Bristol University Press, 2021, 212+v pp.**

Stefan Schwarzkopf  
*Copenhagen Business School*

Scholarship in economic theology typically speaks of capitalism as a system of faith in markets. The literature mostly deals with consumer and financial markets when it castigates this secular faith. Banks then appear as new temples, central bankers and economists as high priests, and money as our new God. But is this all there is to economic theology? Tom Boland and Ray Griffin, two younger Irish sociologists, open a surprising new perspective by investigating the theological genealogy of a market that is too often overlooked, namely the labor market with its proliferating punishments, coercive activations, workfare policies, nudges and incentives, etc. Critical accounts of welfare reforms for the unemployed are usually constructed around the idea of punitive neoliberalism, seeing it as an ideology of restructuring to not simply enable the unemployed to find a job, but with the aim of strategically withdrawing welfare support in such a way that the unemployed are punished. Historical studies of the making of “the unemployed,” that is studies that look at the long history of the very concept before the Thatcherite reforms of the 1980s, often present a story of secularization in which the welfare state is presented as an outcome of the secularization and rationalization of earlier religious regimes of caring for the poor and needy.

Boland and Griffin challenge these readings by suggesting that contemporary neoliberal welfare and unemployment regimes are in fact the consequence of medieval theological teachings on redemption and salvation. At the heart of these teachings is a set of values that sees individual suffering as a permissible—and indeed necessary—step on the journey of self-transformation. In this, Boland’s and Griffin’s historical sociology differs strongly from any empiricist sociology of unemployment that merely looks at ‘what works’: the aim of welfare and/or workfare measures in contemporary labor market arrangements is not merely for an unemployed person to simply “get a job,” but to set up a series of tests and trials that ultimately aim at producing a new human being. Fans of the British comedy series “The League of Gentlemen” will instantly remember the character of Pauline, a 48-year-old workshop facilitator at a JobCentre in the fictional town of Royston Vasey, who started her motivation workshops for “jobseekers” with summary

humiliations. In one installment, the “restart officer” Pauline enters the room and notices a strange smell, only to proceed: “That is the smell of idleness... that is your smell, jobseekers.” The fact that a popular TV series such as this can pick up on the degrading treatment of unemployed people reveals the extent to which the ritualistic character of testing, punishing, and then re-testing “jobseekers” in dedicated “restart centers” really has become part of a shared, normalized culture in societies all across Europe, North America, and increasingly in East Asia (China, Hong Kong, Singapore, to name a few).

Boland and Griffin argue that this shared culture is able to draw on a set of values that has its ultimate origins in Christian notions of shame, guilt, purgatory, redemption, and salvation. In the book, the authors use these theological concepts to analyze the structures of welfare regimes in a way that does not reduce them to yet another expression of “neoliberal ideology”. Instead, they argue, unemployment is governed as a form of purification by the fire of incessant and painful self-reflection, with the aim of discovering the fault for unemployment within the self. After reviewing and reminding readers of Max Weber’s central work on the religious origins of an ethics that sees work as a conduit of inner-worldly salvation and self-transformation, the authors then focus on three central theological concepts that underpin the contemporary labor market: purgatory, pilgrimage, and confession.

According to Boland and Griffin, the moralizing pressures that are brought to bear on the unemployed resemble the purgatory, a medieval theological invention that located a place after death—but before hell and heaven—in which souls would be cleansed from evil, and a decision upon their descent to hell or ascent to heaven was made. Exposed to endless punitive measures and endless “restart workshops” and supervision meetings, the unemployed are stuck in this limbo which is designed to instill suffering and agony in those who have fallen from grace. But redemption is possible for those willing to change—from inside. Such a person will no longer be an unemployed, or someone “on the dole” (incidentally, “dole” and “ordeal” as a trial by physical test share the same etymology). Rather, they reinvent themselves as “seekers” on a journey of penitence. The unemployed, hence, have become “jobseekers,” “career changers,” “career heroes,” and so forth. Theirs is a pilgrimage. On that path, a new faith has to be built, a new optimism in the providential character of the market. As a core document of that faith, as an avowal of a new-found self, stands the confession of the curriculum vitae: “... every CV is a prayer composed in hope of being redeemed, composed under the injunction of advisors, yet directed to the market” (166).

Boland’s and Griffin’s book highlights the curious temporal nature of work, welfare, and unemployment regimes in our times. In the past, there were more or less definite ends and clear secular eschatologies we all lived towards. Lenin’s and Stalin’s definition of communism as the absolutely final stage of the revolution of the proletariat meant that hard work could potentially

achieve that kind of heaven on earth. Propagandists of endless revolution, like Trotsky, were killed off. On the other side of the geopolitical divide, an end of history was also seen possible as late as 1992, when Francis Fukuyama declared the arrival of “the Last Man.” These attitudes seem to have given way to new de-eschatologies of endlessness. Modern welfare programs do often not even seem to try to connect to the creation of real jobs in agriculture and industrial production. Pauline, our fictional restart officer from Royston Vasey, threatens one of the jobseekers to have his benefits withdrawn if he should dare and attend a job interview as a firefighter. If all of her trainees got a job, she would be unemployed herself, so Pauline has to make sure to keep the “seekers” in the system forever: “Endless tests and trials, help, advice and opportunities for self-transformation are offered. Rather than escape, there is no end to the work of reformation; even to the stubborn and recalcitrant or backsliding, endless second chances are offered” (69).

The authors do a very fine job at questioning this value structure not from the perspective of “unmasking” neoliberalism, but from a more critical-realist stance of pointing out that future challenges of the automation of work and resource depletion will most likely require less, not more work. Thus, scholars with an interest in the future of work will find Boland’s and Griffin’s theological-genealogical interpretations inspiring since they suggest that specific innovations might require our societies to overcome a centuries-old value system that privileged self-transformation through punitive, disciplining work regimes. Which self-disciplines, one might ask, will become necessary in a world that is heading towards a mix of full automation and peak resources?