

When Enough is Enough

Why God's abundant life won't fit in a shopping cart, and other mysteries of consumerism.

by William T. Cavanaugh

The contrast between consumerism and simple living at first glance seems fairly straightforward: Consumerism is about having more stuff, simple living is about having less stuff. Consumerism seems to be a permutation of the age-old vice of avarice, whose "special malice," says the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, "lies in that it makes the getting and keeping of money, possessions, and the like a purpose in itself to live for." As the old vitamin commercial from the '80s so bluntly put it, "I want MORE for ME."

Avarice, however, does not really exhaust the phenomenon of consumerism. Consumerism is not so much about having *more* as it is about having *something else*. It is not buying but shopping that captures the spirit of consumerism. Buying is certainly an important part of consumerism, but buying brings a temporary halt to the restlessness that typifies it. It is this restlessness—the moving on to shopping for something else no matter what one has just purchased—that sets the spiritual tone for consumerism.

In the Christian tradition we are accustomed to thinking that the greatest temptation associated with material things is an inordinate attachment to them. Since biblical times and before, some people have accumulated great stores of wealth, and the Bible is often quite severe in its judgment of them. When we hear that the "love of money is a root of all kinds of evil" (1 Timothy 6:10), and that the "poor in spirit" are blessed (Matthew 5:3), we resolve to cultivate an attitude of detachment from the material things we have. The problem is that consumerism is already a spiritual discipline of detachment, though one with a very different way of operating than classical Christian asceticism.

What marks consumerism as something new is its tendency to reduce everything, both the material and the spiritual, to a commodity able to be exchanged. Things that no other culture ever thought could be bought and sold—water, genetic codes, names (Tostitos Fiesta Bowl), human blood, the rights to emit pollutants into the air—are now routinely offered on the market. The recent story of the Nebraska man who auctioned off advertising space on his forehead is only the latest example of the commodification of everything. This story is not so much a lesson about greed—his forehead was apparently not big enough to garner bids for more than a few hundred dollars—as a statement about the extent to which we are able to become detached from even those things, like our foreheads, to which we are most obviously attached. We stand back from our bodies, faiths, vocations. Our very identity is something to be tried on, chosen, bought, sold, and discarded at will.

The satisfying nature of dissatisfaction. Consumerism is a spiritual attitude that is deeply

entangled with changes since the Industrial Revolution in the way goods are produced. In pre-industrial society, the home was a place not merely of consumption but of production. Most people lived on farms and made the majority of the goods that they needed. Starting with the enclosure of common lands in England and elsewhere in Europe, the bulk of the population was moved away from subsistence farming and into factory labor. Cottage industries were wiped away by the production of cheap goods from mechanized factories, compelling people to enter the market as wage laborers.

With the relentless pressures on the family farm that continue today, the home as a site of significant production has all but disappeared. We make almost nothing of what we consume. The process of globalization has accelerated this detachment from production. Fewer and fewer of us have any idea what factory work is like, since manufacturing jobs are more and more being transferred overseas. Nor do we have much more than a vague idea of the wages or working conditions of the workers who make what we buy.

There are two significant results to these historical shifts. First, many people have become detached from their labor, seeing work not as a creative vocation but as a commodity to be sold in exchange for wages. Part of our very selves and the impress we make on the world is commodified. Second, our connection to things has become very tenuous. We know almost nothing about how products are made and how they end up in our shopping cart. The bananas we meet in the grocery store refuse to tell us how they ended up in Minnesota in the dead of winter. We eat cows without ever having been near more than a few pounds of beef flesh at any one time. We simply pull products off the shelves, dump them in our carts, and keep shopping.

Detached from their origins in human work and the networks of human community, commodities take on a life of their own. In the moment of encounter between product and consumer, the connection to other people and places falls away. The consumer has little or no connection to the producer, and more than likely has little connection to the seller either, since most local stores have been replaced by giant, impersonal chain stores. The relationship of consumption has been reduced to the bare encounter of consumer and thing, with nothing to connect the two except the utility of the product to the consumer.

The story does not end with the detachment of consumers from production and from things, however, for alienation and detachment do not explain the appeal of consumerism. If the consumer and the inert thing were left staring at each other across the store aisle, consumption would not keep pace with production. The product must be made to sing and dance and create a new kind of relationship between itself and the consumer.

Histories of marketing commonly trace the rise of mass advertising to the need to create mass consumption in the wake of industrialization. Factories were capable of producing goods at a heretofore unimaginable rate. The value of manufactured goods increased more than sixfold during

the last four decades of the 19th century. Markets had to be created for all those products. People had to be trained to act as consumers, to be attracted to items to which they had no natural connection. Marketers began talking about "building relationships" between consumers and products. The catch is that these relationships could not be too durable or, once again, the pace of consumption would not keep up with the pace of production. People could not become too content or attached to products; desire had to be kept on the move. So began what the marketing department of General Motors—in a reference to changing car models every year—once called "the organized creation of dissatisfaction."

What has happened in consumer society is that dissatisfaction and satisfaction have ceased to be opposites. Pleasure resides not in having but in wanting. Insofar as an item obtained brings a temporary halt to desire, it becomes undesirable. This is why shopping, not buying, captures the spirit of consumerism, and why shopaholism is being treated as an addiction. Consumerism is a restless spirit, constantly in search of something new. Consumerism is typified by detachment, not attachment, for desire must be kept on the move. Consumerism is also typified by scarcity, not abundance, for as long as desire is endless, there will never be enough stuff to go around.

Being consumed. If detachment is the problem, should the Christian respond with greater attachment to material things? Not exactly. St. Augustine famously prayed to God "our heart is restless until it rests in you." Augustine knew that mere created things fall far short of the glory of God, such that ultimate satisfaction can never be found in created things on their own. Nevertheless, created things are good because they participate in the goodness of their creator. They contain vestiges of the Creator in them, vestiges that ought to lead us beyond the things themselves to the source of their being.

In this spiritual universe there is no such thing as an isolated commodity confronting an isolated individual. All created things sing and dance and shout of the glory of God. People and things are united in one great web of being, flowing from and returning to their Creator. Our dissatisfaction with things does not lead us endlessly on to the next thing but to our true end in God. The Christian view elevates the dignity of things by seeing them as participating in the being of God, but simultaneously causes us to look through and beyond things to their Creator.

Participation in this great web of created being informs the way that Christians view production. Work is not simply a means to gaining money so that we may consume. Work establishes an intimacy with God's creation, so that we become, as Pope John Paul II reminds us, "co-creators" with God in our work. Participation in God also informs how we view one another. Human persons are not only connected to things but to other persons. We are all made in the image of God, and all made to participate in the body of Christ. Such is our close connection that we share the same sufferings and the same joys (1 Corinthians 12:26). It is as impossible to ignore sweatshop labor as it is to ignore pain in our own bodies.

In the Christian view, we do not stand apart from the rest of creation as individuals, appropriating, consuming, and discarding. We are rather consumed, as it were, by something larger than us. When

we consume the body of Christ at the Lord's table, we are in fact consumed by the larger body, the church. Augustine hears Christ's voice say, "Grow and you will feed on me. And you will not change me into you like the food your flesh eats, but you will be changed into me." At the communion table, the act of consumption is turned inside out, such that in eating we become food for others. True consumption, in the Christian understanding, is thus a kind of self-emptying, a decentering of the self into a larger web of participation. Thus Jesus connects the "abundant life" in John 10:10 to laying down one's life in 10:11. True abundance is never realized by the competition of insatiable desires for scarce goods. It is realized by emptying the small self into the larger reality of God's superabundant life.

The Christian task in a consumer society, then, is to create economic spaces that underscore our spiritual and physical connection to creation and to each other. We must strive to demystify commodities by being informed about where they come from, who makes them, and under what conditions. We should support products, such as fair-trade coffee, that pull back the veil from the production process and offer a sustainable life to their producers. We should attempt to create local, face-to-face economies, where consumers and producers know each other well enough that their interests tend to merge. My parish's connection to a local cooperative of family farms (www.wholefarmcoop.com) is a hopeful example.

Finally, we should attempt to close the gap between work and consumption by supporting worker ownership of the means of production. The first step toward doing so is turning our homes back into sites of production. To bake bread, to make our own entertainment, and do so in community with others: These are small but important steps in turning from consumers to celebrants of God's abundant life.

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