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"When Enough is Enough: Why God's abundant life won't fit in a shopping cart, and other mysteries of consumerism"

William T. Cavanaugh



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

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ILLUSTRATION BY MIKE RUTLEDGE



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.

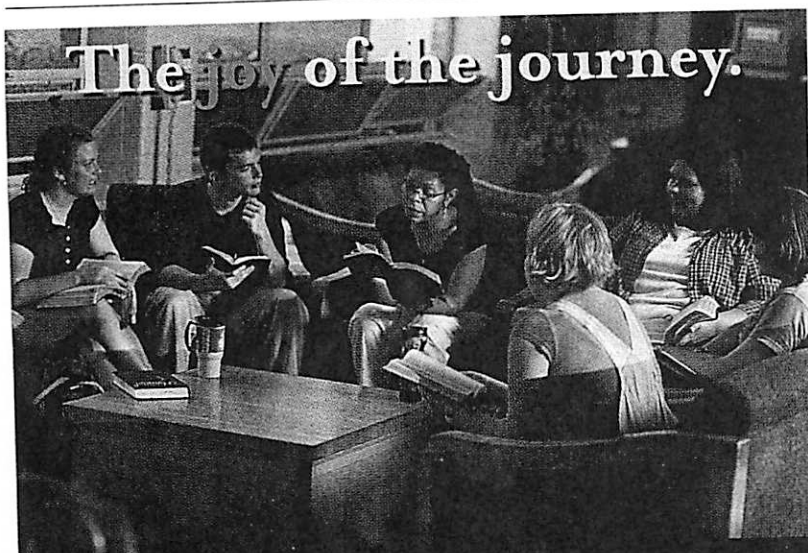
Detached from their origins in human work and the networks of human community, commodities take on a life of their own. In the moment of encounter between product and consumer, the connection to other people and places falls away. The consumer has little or no connection to the producer, and more than 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 six-fold 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 con-

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The joy of the journey.

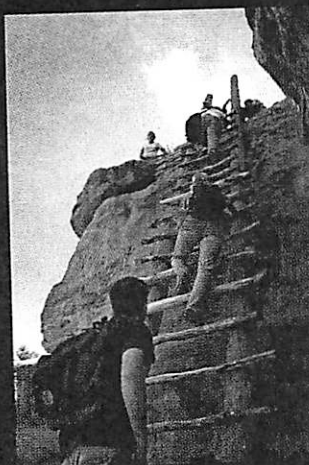


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