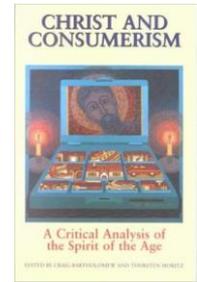


Craig Bartholomew and Thorsten Moritz (eds)

Christ and consumerism – Critical reflections on the spirit of our age

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Notes by Alison Morgan October 2000



Excellent, readable essays. Academic credentials of contributors impeccable. Purpose is not just to be interesting, but to equip us for mission.

Foreword

Mission is difficult; because Jesus calls us to be both in our own culture, understanding its passions and attractions, as well as to be deeply countercultural in our relationship with that same culture. The horizon of heaven calls us to be deeply dissatisfied with our own times as well as to embrace and redeem them.

Often mission (activism) and spirituality (a goal in its own right) have become separated. Wherever there is such a separation, there lies a danger in the extremes of unhealthy isolation from the culture or undue seduction by it.

Preface

This is not a 'how to survive consumerism as a Christian' manual. Group of academics looking at it from the different angles of their own specialities.

1. Christ and consumerism: an introduction - Craig Bartholomew

Often it is only when we travel to a different culture that we become aware of ourselves as cultural beings. A (not the) spirit of our age is consumerism. It is arguably *the* religion of the late C20th; the framework within which people seek to understand the world and establish goals and values. We have to tackle it: [evangelism without a worldview is simply marketing with no purpose other than mounting numbers of warm bodies](#) - Wells, *God in the wasteland*, p 221.

Consumerism is the overarching narrative structuring our lives at the end of the 20th century. The introduction of the credit card in 1950 may be seen as symbolically marking the transition to consumerism. The 80s saw the collapse of communism and the capitulation of the eastern bloc to consumer culture; and the subordination at the same time, with the arrival of postmodernism, of production to consumption in the form of marketing.

Characteristics of consumerism:

- it points to a culture in which the core values of the culture derive from consumption rather than the other way around; and everything can be consumed, inc relationships
- freedom is equated with individual choice and private life; the community is no longer guardian of the right to decent and dignified life.
- Needs are unlimited and insatiable; consumerism promises to satisfy our needs in an unprecedented way, but its continuance depends on that satisfaction never actually being achieved

2. Consumerism and the spirit of the age - Colin Greene

Jeff Gates: 'we are all now buffeted by a global economy in which key actors are encouraged, even mandated, to maximise financial returns in a world-wide auction of sorts in which financial values have become a substitute for the values of ethics, religion and community' p 13.

Three models for cultural engagement:

i) The apostolic model - Acts 1 and Pentecost. 'Church resistant to culture.' Characterised by: community, service, scattering, martyrdom. Latter no longer applies; we may live in a culture which is not gospel friendly, but the relationship between church and contemp culture cannot be reduced to a simplistic model of believer vs antagonistic persecutor. So doing it the NT way is not the simple solution.

ii) The Christendom model, AD 313-1648

Began with conversion of Constantine. 'Church married to culture'. Relationship of church to culture redefined as peaceful co-existence. Community replaced by territory - parish boundaries. Service becomes good citizenship. Scattering no longer necessary (no persecution). Mission disappears, as church has become indistinguishable from its cultural landscape.

iii) The pluralist model, 1648-now. 'Capitulation of church to culture'. Enlightenment demanded new relationship between church and culture. Ability of Christian faith to offer a unified worldview and so provide a political and social stability for its peoples ended. Reformation and religious wars. Birth of nation state. Beginning of Picknixon religion. Result now: 'the religious tradition, which previously could be authoritatively imposed, now has to be marketed. It must be 'sold' to a clientele that is no longer constrained to 'buy'. The pluralist situation is, above all, a market situation. In it, the religious institutions become marketing agencies and the religious traditions become consumer commodities.' (Peter Berger), p 21.

Some features of our church are still tied to all 3 models. If we perceive our fundamental relationship with contemporary culture as antagonistic or subversive opposition, we withdraw into our own cultural ghetto. If we continue with the custodian of values model, we are seen as hierarchical, patriarchal, hopelessly traditional, boring, and in the paraphernalia of Sunday worship, church governance, and the practice of ministry, marooned in the traditions of a previous era. If on the other hand we ape the spirit of the age, we have no plausible message.

The postmodern model. We must find a model best described in terms of the critical interaction of church and culture. We must return to the public domain; we must rediscover the Bible as scripture. 18% of regular churchgoers have never read anything in it for themselves; 14% haven't in the last year!! We must rediscover the 'enchantment' of the world - world as alive, created by God, not a machine. And we must reinvent the human person.

3. The Old Testament and the enjoyment of wealth - J Gordon McConville

Jolly good essay pointing out that material abundance seen as blessing; with some provisos...

The horizon of the OT is creation, not just redemption. In OT, the power of the God of creation is at the service of his purpose to procure deliverance, community and justice. Link between morality and wealth; but not an automatic one. Because of the created order articulated in the OT, wealth can be enjoyed when it is acknowledged as God's gift, and when it finds its proper place in the context of healthy relationships. This means proper attitudes to land, commandments and laws, and sacrifice.

Wealth as gift yet danger - Deut 8: the very enjoyment of wealth has the capacity to obscure the memory that it comes as the gift of God. This can have destructive consequences.

4. NT voices for an addicted society - Thorsten Moritz

Can't distance ourselves from the dominating worldview as if we ourselves had nothing to do with it. Instead, we need a clear understanding of how our modern and postmodern storylines differ from those of early Christianity. Only then can we ask what steps and attitudes are necessary to increase the compatibility between our lifestyles and those envisaged by Jesus.

A) Note it OK for Zacchaeus to give half his wealth away, but rich young ruler told to give them all. Christian living has more to do with making sense of our personal and social stories in the light of God's bigger picture than it does with observing a set of rules and regulations.

B) the status of work and purchasing power functioned quite differently then from now. We consider it fine to work with a view to enhancing our social and economic status; they didn't. Work was a way of maintaining inherited status, not changing it - hence the problem with tax collectors, who not only sought to change it but did so at everyone else's expense.

Now and not yet. Passages which have been interpreted to foretell imminent end of world better understood as referring to the end of the world *order* brought about by the cross. It was a theological world order which distinguished between those who were 'in' (ie in covenant) and those who were 'out' (on ethnic lines).

At the heart of Jesus's confrontation with Israel was his claim that her anti-Roman agenda was misguided in the sense that her real enemy was not Rome at all. Her real problems are the direct result of a misguided separation paradigm, where holiness is defined in ritualistic terms rather than in terms of God's mercy, thus leading to spiritual elitism and ritualistic and social segregation (Borg). Such tendencies need to be reversed; and reversal lies at the heart of Jesus'

ministry. List of reversals from Luke, p 64. Christ's kingship has the principle of reversal of worldly values and outlooks at its very core (Mk 8.31-8), and we have to understand that such reversals are needed in the lives of all, not just those who are considered to be over the edge of what society tolerates as 'normal'.

Q of wealth and poverty cannot be reduced to a rule. Jesus' own approach was contextually determined. Jesus himself came from almost middle-class home; father of James and John employed day labourers, Levi was well-off tax collector, women travelling with them were rich. This, vs God/Mammon, blessed are the poor, sell everything you have. So (Johnson) poverty is best understood as theological poverty - ie detachment from material values, albeit with possibly radical financial implications. One's own use of possessions speaks either the transforming language of gospel proclamation or that of consumerist idolatry.

Problem with consumerism is that mass production, advertising and the acquisition of goods appeal to the consumer's increasing sense of having to satisfy one's own 'needs', thus banishing thoughts of caring for the underprivileged. Parable of banquet in Luke 14. The well-off who are invited fail to turn up on less than creditable excuses, some of which revolve round the acquisition of material wealth. Clinging to worldly values is incompatible with the receptiveness of heart that the acceptance of divine mercy presupposes.

You could opt for a material asceticism, but both testaments include clear imperatives rather for using one's possessions for the benefit of the needy. We do not, strictly, possess anything; 'the earth is the Lord's and everything in it', Ps 24.

Consumerism fails the test of some of the core values of the biblical storyline - trust in God, preservation of creation, rejection of idolatry are some of them.

There follow some rather tame suggestions about buying second hand cars...

5. Consuming God's Word: biblical interpretation and consumerism - Craig Bartholomew

Consumerism as an idol. Christians are not pressured to stop being Christians; but they are tempted to let their Christianity become another product in the market place. Bible occupies a central place in the battle against idolatry. Brueggemann's warning that we must construct an evangelical infrastructure for people, who otherwise will rely on the dominant structure of consumerism. This means designer religion, offering benefits for the self and asking for little or no spiritual accountability, providing a sense of Something Other in life but never requiring that we stand before that Other. 'Without a strong doctrine of the authority of Scripture as God's infallible word, we have no adequate basis for a prophetic critique of our time and of our church' 89. Not an easy task in our context, in postmodernism, which privileges the reader as the locus of textual meaning and simultaneously denies determinate meaning for texts. Example of OT prophets, continually recalling people to loving obedience under God's reign - which extends to all of creation. This creation-wide, all-embracing perspective of prophetic ministry is absolutely crucial if we are to bring a critical perspective to bear upon our culture. Without it, we won't see the need to address issues like consumerism. If we are to operate prophetically in our culture, it is crucial we recover a biblical doctrine of creation and let this shape our worldview.

6. Postmodernism is consumption - Alan Storkey

How can the shopping trolley come to rival the Creator God? Not through philosophy or apologetics. But it does have an ideology of consumption - unexpressed, because it is so banal - 'drinking this brand of coffee gives you exciting relationships, whoever you are'.. The faith lives and grows as myth because it has countless well-paid servants who, though often unhappy, go about their Master's business. The servants of the Lord God are dwarfed in number and working hours by the servants of consumption. And we haven't even seen the challenge.

It began about 130 years ago with the neoclassical revolt in economics. It shifted emphasis from production to consumption, and ended the theory of value. Now 20-50% of what we produce has no real value to humanity - cigarettes, alcohol, fast food, advertising, weapons, drugs, media dross, fast cars, cosmetics, sugar drinks, security systems, lotteries etc. A further assumption is the maximisation of consumption. We are told the generation of unlimited wants is good for us and is one of the bases of our affluence. Result is personal problems - overeating, overdrinking, domestic overconsumption, time stress/leisure pressure.

Advertising is the fastest growing form of communication in the world. The average American watches 80 ads a day on TV, plus hoardings, magazines, newspaper and Web advertising. This level of penetration is unprecedented by any ideological group in history. What will sell becomes the truth. 'But this is not truth as we have hitherto known it, but a process whereby products are linked to the inscape of persons. Let us list a few of the inner appeals which are made, premised on buying certain goods: confidence, innocence, relaxation, love, security, power, naturalness, fun, status, comfort, peace, happy families, romantic love, friendship, excitement, freedom from stress, sex appeal, personal attraction, health, youth, happiness, serenity... The appeals of consumerism are pathetic in that they are not true. Consumer goods and services cannot give the qualities they claim, and can often not even contribute to them... So we have an invasion which landscapes the mind, emotions and inner character of millions of people, even though it is fabricated of lies.' 114.

Much of the most arcane and erudite discussion of postmodernism misses the most powerful theory of all. Postmodernism is consumption.

Of course, Jesus is there already. He spoke of gaining the world, and now the whole world is on offer. There is nothing, nowhere, you cannot buy, it seems. Is 55: 'why spend money on what is not bread, and your labour on what does not satisfy? .. hear me, that your soul may live.' At present there seem to be many queuing in very smart cars on the wide roads that lead to destruction.

7. Life and Death and the consumerist ethic - Gordon Wenham

Relationship of consumerism to traditional Christian ethics.

Sunday trading.

Consumerist ethic is affecting the modern approach to the fundamental points of human life, ie birth, marriage, death. Traditionally seen as fixed points in human existence that had to be accepted and that entailed certain unalterable obligations by those involved and by society as a whole. In the Christian way of life, lifetime monogamy makes sense. In the consumer way of life, serial polygamy is more sensible. Whereas trad Christians regarded procreation and child-rearing as intrinsic to marriage, modern consumerism regards this as optional; expensive, detrimental to career, a tie. Running through the consumerist ethic is the idea of individual choice or human autonomy. IVF. Abortion. Since 1967, more than 4m in Britain - more than British soldiers in 1WW. Euthanasia and old age.

8. Shopping for a church: consumerism and the churches

Every year 12 billion catalogues are mailed in the US and the average American child sees 20,000 ads on TV. Even higher education is affected by consumerism - course leaders think primarily in terms of what the students want rather than what they need to know.

1950s Britain became a consumer society.

80s Thatcherite values began to hit churches - which began to believe they must engage in aggressive marketing in order to survive; while potential members go church shopping. Churches tend to react either by opting out and staying in the past, or by competing fully in the open market for customers.

Talking up the market - 'preaching the anointing' just round the corner, which never comes. Toronto?

Weber - the greater the distance people travel to church, the greater is the decline in its influence.

Downside of consumerism in contemp Christianity is that it has resulted in rampant individualism; doing good has been replaced by feeling good.

Benefits of consumerism - physical quality of life vastly improved. Even for church - stimulates thought, provokes vision.

9. The Toronto experience in a consumer society - Graham Cray

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