

## CONSUMERISM AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS

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*The author examines and clarifies the phenomenon of consumerism. He surveys historical and social scientific perspectives before turning to the recent theological and ethical literature on the topic. An emerging concern in the ethical literature is development of a virtue approach along with the papal insistence on striking a proper balance of “being” and “having” as part of authentic human development.*

SOMETIMES THE MOST OBVIOUS MATTERS get the least attention from moral theologians. Consumerism is a hallmark of American life. Indeed, many commentators consider the United States the exemplar of the consumer society. Yet the topic has never been the subject of the moral notes.

The English word “consume” has its origins in the French *consumer* and farther back is rooted in the Latin *consumere*, meaning to devour, waste, exhaust. Its English usage (consume, consumer, consumption) was negative, with consumption being popularly employed to describe tuberculosis. During the 18th century the word began to be used by political economists without the negative connotation: a consumer was distinguished from a producer, and consumption became the counterpart to production.<sup>1</sup>

In the mid-20th century the word became commonly accepted as a replacement for customer as the buyer or purchaser of goods. Raymond Williams sees this as significant since “*customer* had always implied some

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Aldridge, *Consumption* (Malden, Mass.: Polity, 2003) 2.

degree of regular and continuing relationship to a supplier, whereas *consumer* indicates the more abstract figure in a more abstract market.”<sup>2</sup>

Today the words *consumption* and *consumer* remain contested. For many social critics the terms still have a negative tone, while economists tend to ignore this and use the term in a neutral sense. The other word, *consumerism*, has an equally confusing meaning. One usage of *consumerism* refers to a social movement; as such, business and economics generally view the word favorably: “it is about the empowerment of consumers as citizens, upholding their rights, protecting them from abuses of power, and supplying them with objective information that will help them to make rational choices.”<sup>3</sup>

Another way of seeing consumerism is as an ideology. In this sense, consumerism is a way of talking about a market mentality that defends individuals’ freedom of choice and entrepreneurship while criticizing economic models like communism, socialism, or other approaches that interfere with rational agents making decisions in minimally regulated free markets.

Understood in yet another sense, consumerism is a way of life. And while some celebrate it, citing the benefits and pleasures of material affluence, most writers who think of consumerism in this way, tend to view it as unfortunate: “an excessive, even pathological preoccupation with consumption.”<sup>4</sup> This third understanding of consumerism, as a way of life, will be the main focus of this moral note, though the other views of consumerism will also be found in the literature under review.

In this section of the notes I will highlight some recent studies in the area of consumerism, touching upon literature beyond the theological and ethical due to the prominence other disciplines have given consumerism. The relative lack of attention given it by theologians is striking when compared to the attention given it by social scientists. Historians, sociologists, economists, and anthropologists have all given significant attention to consumption, consumers, and consumerism. Of late, however, the theological community is beginning to contribute to the vast literature. Before addressing these recent contributions, it will be helpful to review some of the studies in other fields.

### HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

Although many commentators focus on consumerism as a 20th-century phenomenon, various historical studies have argued that the roots of con-

<sup>2</sup> Raymond Williams, “Consumer,” in *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader*, ed. Lawrence Glickman (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University, 1999) 17–18, at 17.

<sup>3</sup> Aldridge, *Consumption* 6.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 6

sumerism can be seen in colonial America and that consumerism's origins can be traced back to 17th-century England and Holland.<sup>5</sup> Still, post-World War II American consumerism is a predominant focus of much study due to the difference of degree, if not difference in kind, from other cultures where consumerism was prevalent.

Today many historians place consumption at the center of their work, no longer confining it to popular culture or the history of business.<sup>6</sup> The lenses of consumption and consumerism have become ways of understanding much of what has transpired in American history. Michael Sandel, in his influential volume on American public philosophy, points out that the rise of a truly national economy, distinct from local or regional economies, raised the issue of national unity. What would serve to unify Americans and give them a sense of identity that overcame the differences of class, ethnic heritage, and occupational diversity? Sandel maintains that the engine of social solidarity was consumption. Progressive era reformers focused on people's problems as consumers rather than as producers or citizens. The evolution of large retail outlets—department stores, chain stores, and mail order companies—created consumer solidarity in a manner similar to how large-scale production had earlier created worker solidarity.<sup>7</sup>

Although the purpose of focusing on consumer solidarity was progressive, seeking to create a counterpoint to the power of big business, the shift had major repercussions for America's understanding of democracy and citizenship. Sandel explains that the political economy of the nation's founders began with producers because "the world of work was seen as the arena in which, for better or worse, the character of citizens was formed."<sup>8</sup> Early republican thinkers, with their concern for democratic citizenship, aimed to create people capable of self-government. A political economy of

<sup>5</sup> See the essays in Glickman, *Consumer Society*: by James Axtell, "The First Consumer Revolution" 85–99; T. H. Breen, "Narrative of Commercial Life: Consumption, Ideology, and Community on the Eve of the American Revolution" 100–129; Joyce Appleby, "Consumption in Early Modern Social Thought" 130–144.

<sup>6</sup> "Where once consumption was studied, if at all, as an element in the history of popular and commercial culture, it is now seen as being intertwined with the major themes of national identity and American history—including economic, political, foreign policy, intellectual, cultural, environmental, labor, racial, ethnic, and gender history. Similarly, where once consumer history was a topic limited to the twentieth century and even to particular decades—typically the 1920s or the 1950s—it is now seen as playing an important role in all phases of American history, including the colonial period" (Glickman, "Preface," in *Consumer Society* vii–ix, at vii).

<sup>7</sup> Michael Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap, 1996) 222.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 224.

consumerism, however, views democracy not as the means of cultivating civic virtue so as to have self-government, but as a means to attain the greatest measure of material satisfaction. Thus, for Sandel, the rise of consumer-based reform in the 1900s was “a shift away from the formative ambition of the republican tradition, away from the political economy of citizenship.”<sup>9</sup>

A less critical assessment of consumerism’s political effects argues that consumerism has provided “on balance, a more dynamic and popular, while less destructive, ideology of public life than most political belief systems in the twentieth century.”<sup>10</sup> According to Gary Cross, the republican approach that focused on producers meant solidarity was premised on class, religion or ethnicity, while the consumerist approach was thought to build solidarity based on shared use of goods. While Cross acknowledges that groups “formed around suburban homes, country club memberships, and college diplomas” exclude and even humiliate the poor and outsiders, the old “religious, political, and other social groups were at least as discriminatory, and . . . often caused more resentment and hostility.”<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, consumer goods have been appropriated into a language that defines and eases relationships among family, friends, and strangers alike. Fashion lets children break with parents and bond into peer groups without causing serious intergenerational rifts; consumer fads bring people into communion with one another; the possible variations in clothing, entertainment, and travel permit all sorts of people to find a niche to suit themselves. Children of immigrants can redefine themselves as they adopt new foods and forms of recreation distinct from those of parents and grandparents. In all this Cross sees a radically pluralist nation negotiating its differences in a reasonably peaceful and relatively harmless manner enabled by consumerism.<sup>12</sup>

Cross is not, however, a simple booster of consumerism. He thinks it is problematic that a market mentality all but engulfs American society, and he is critical of reducing individual freedom to ever wider options for shopping. His study suggests that consumerism is a mixed blessing and not the all-out disaster that some jeremiads portray it to be.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 225. Sandel’s narrative (227–31) of how chain stores came to undermine independent “mom and pop” stores nicely illustrates the shift in political economy from a republican to consumerist goal. In another interesting narrative (267–73) Sandel shows how Keynesian economics aided and abetted the consumerist approach to political economy.

<sup>10</sup> Gary Cross, *An All-Consuming Century: Why Commercialism Won in Modern America* (New York: Columbia University, 2000) viii.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 2–3.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 232.

<sup>13</sup> “Consumer culture may be the fate of modern democracies unable or unwilling

Cross's work is emblematic of much of the history being written today on the subject of consumerism. The complexity he uncovers in patterns of consumption explains why there is no broadly accepted synthetic reading of U.S. consumer history.<sup>14</sup> The lack of consensus in telling the historical narrative reflects the burgeoning interest among historians in examining consumerism as central to the telling of America's narrative. Because historians' interest in consumerism has been late-blooming is why it has been, to a great extent, social scientists rather than historians who have ground the lenses through which most of us view consumerism.

### SOCIAL SCIENCE VIEWS

Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* is generally acknowledged as marking the onset of modern criticism of consumerism.<sup>15</sup> He coined the phrase "conspicuous consumption" to describe how the affluent use material goods to signal status. Later social critics Vance Packard and John Kenneth Galbraith wrote widely read challenges to the utility and benefit of unlimited consumption.<sup>16</sup> Not long after their popular studies, Betty Friedan in the *The Feminine Mystique* analyzed how consumerism was a significant factor in defining women's role in the family and society.<sup>17</sup>

Since that time social scientists have maintained a fairly consistent focus on consumerism. Today that attention continues and has even intensified due to four factors. First is the new inequality where the top quintile of income accounts for one-half of all consumer spending. This has led to a surge in examples of conspicuous consumption. Second is the increasing commodification of areas of life that once resisted such trends. Child care, food preparation, grocery shopping, and lawn and yard maintenance are familiar household rituals being outsourced to others; health care and education are shifting from nonprofit to for-profit providers; the invasion of almost all areas of public space by advertising and marketing efforts; the "privatization" of public services—all of these developments raise the

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to provide their members with deeper and more direct means of expressing individuality and sociability. But in another sense consumer culture is democracy's highest achievement, giving meaning and dignity to people when workplace participation, ethnic solidarity, and even representative democracy have failed" (ibid. 10).

<sup>14</sup> Another important historical study is Lizabeth Cohen's *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Knopf, 2003)

<sup>15</sup> Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study in the Evolution of Institutions* (New York: MacMillan, 1899).

<sup>16</sup> Vance Packard, *The Status Seekers* (New York: McKay, 1959); John K. Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958).

<sup>17</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, 1963)

awareness level of a consumerist mentality. A third factor, one getting much attention, is the proliferating reality of globalization and the opposition to Western culture by many outside it, which challenges the universality of consumerism's appeal. Finally, a fourth factor is environmental awareness; ecological costs of heavy consumption have contributed to interest in studies of consumption.<sup>18</sup>

Boston College sociologist Juliet Schor has written several significant books on consumerism in contemporary America. In *The Overspent American*,<sup>19</sup> she analyzes the "competitive consumption" of Americans. Her thesis is that the majority of Americans now seek to emulate the lifestyles of the wealthiest one-fifth of the nation. No longer do Americans compare themselves to the Joneses next door or even those somewhat better off. Instead it is the top 20 percent that becomes the standard of comparison. That this group has in recent years done far better economically than the general population means that many Americans seek to live like people who have far more resources than they do. The result is dramatic increases in household and individual indebtedness. According to Schor, television plays a major role, as it drives up viewers' aspirations, both through commercials and the lifestyles portrayed by characters in many of the shows.

Schor's earlier book, *The Overworked American*,<sup>20</sup> examines why Americans, in the age of increased productivity, are not working fewer hours and gaining more leisure time, but are actually working longer and harder. The reason, Schor proposes, is that people need the additional income to pay for their increased consumption. Against economists who argue that consumers behave rationally and buy what they need or want and can afford, Schor argues that mainstream economists are too abstract and ignore the social context in which consumers think and act. Attention to that social context led Schor to the thesis of overspending.

Continuing debates about consumerism's driving force have led social scientists to analyze advertising and its effects to see whether producers determine consumers wants and needs by manipulating (seducing? persuading? alerting?) them, or whether consumers have their own agendas that producers research to discover what they must create in order to enter a market?

<sup>18</sup> See Douglas Holt and Juliet Schor, "Introduction: Do Americans Consume Too Much?" in *The Consumer Society Reader*, ed. Juliet Schor and Douglas Holt (New York: New Press, 2000) vii–xxiii, at vii–x.

<sup>19</sup> Juliet Schor, *The Overspent American: Upscaling, Downshifting and the New Consumer* (New York: Basic, 1998).

<sup>20</sup> Juliet Schor, *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure* (New York: Basic Books, 1991)

Early critics of consumerism (Packard, Galbraith, the Frankfurt School represented by Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer<sup>21</sup>) leaned toward corporate influence as the decisive element. A standard charge of the critics was that advertising transforms wants and desires into false needs.

An important development in advancing this line of criticism emerged from the insights of another social science, anthropology. Scholars from this perspective have illustrated how advertising is often able to develop value significance as associated with certain products. In effect, the meaning of a consumer good does not always flow from its functional role. What anthropology “has been particularly good at showing . . . [is that] human understandings and experiences of what are seemingly objective properties are actually cultural constructions.”<sup>22</sup>

In the English-speaking world, the work of Mary Douglas and Douglas Isherwood was an early and important contribution to the social significance of consumer goods. Consumerism was seen as entailing a language that communicates through material goods. It is a series of rituals that show esteem, mark the calendar, and shape personal identity. Early commentators on consumption presumed that goods are sought for three reasons: material welfare (physical needs for clothing, food, shelter), psychic well-being (security, leisure), or display (Veblen’s conspicuous consumption). These ways of viewing consumption abstract it from the social world where goods play the role of mediating materials that help people relate to one another (holiday foods, drinks to celebrate with others, flowers to express affection, clothes to express mourning or celebration). For Douglas and Isherwood goods are neutral, they can be used to bring people together or drive them apart.<sup>23</sup>

Another key figure is the French writer Jean Baudrillard whose work articulated a theory for how commodities are used to produce social meaning. He is not content with the claim that the market merely responds to the needs and wishes of the consumer. Baudrillard asks, How are the individual’s needs and wants created? He replies that human desires for certain goods are actually expressions of class differences, understandable to members of a culture that conveys meaning through such goods.<sup>24</sup> As a result of this analysis, great interest has developed in the question of how advertis-

<sup>21</sup> Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” in Holt and Schor, *Consumer Society* 3–19.

<sup>22</sup> Holt and Schor, “Introduction” xii.

<sup>23</sup> Mary Douglas and Douglas Isherwood, *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption: With a New Introduction*, rev. ed. (London: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>24</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (London: Sage, 1998; orig. French ed., 1970).

ing gives a particular symbolic import to certain goods. This interest has led in turn to a spate of research on the practice of “branding.”<sup>25</sup>

The anthropological approach provides a corrective to the standard perspective of economists who view an act of consumption as a rational decision based on the consumer’s sense of need. Economists avoid asking why people want goods and simply accept the desire for goods as a given. People, however, are deeply social with heavy mutual influence among consumers. There is far more collective choice than economists realize. Anthropologists remind us that goods serve as a way of signaling to others what we are for or against, what we believe or deny, with whom we do or do not ally ourselves. “Instead of supposing that goods are primarily for subsistence plus competitive display, let us assume that they are needed for making visible and stable the categories of culture.”<sup>26</sup>

One additional influential account of consumerism is sociologist Colin Campbell’s theory of the romantic ethos and consumerism. He believes that to see simple acquisitiveness behind consumerism overlooks the fact that “modern consumer society is characterized as much by the extent to which individuals dispose of goods as the extent to which they acquire them.”<sup>27</sup> For Campbell, what is characteristic of modern consumerism is the central role imagination plays: “the basic motivation underlying consumerism is the desire to experience in reality that pleasurable experience

<sup>25</sup> Douglas Holt, “Why Do Brands Cause Trouble? A Dialectical Theory of Consumer Culture and Branding,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 29 (2002) 70–90.

<sup>26</sup> Douglas and Isherwood, *World of Goods* 38. The authors provide a now dated but simple example of the cultural importance of consumption: “Consumption is the very arena in which culture is fought over and licked into shape. The housewife with her shopping basket arrives home: some things in it she reserves for her household, some for the father, some for the children; others are destined for the special delectation of guests. Whom she invites into her house, what parts of the house she makes available to outsiders, how often, what she offers them for music, food, drink, and conversation, these choices express and generate culture in its general sense. Likewise, her husband’s judgments as to how much of his wages he allots to her, how much he keeps to spend with his friends, etc., result in the channeling of resources. They vitalize one activity or another. They will be unconstrained if the culture is alive and evolving. Ultimately, they are moral judgments about what a man is, what a woman is, how a man ought to treat his aged parents, how much of a start in life he ought to give his sons and daughters; how he himself should grow old, gracefully or disgracefully, and so on. How many of his aunts and uncles and orphaned nephews is he expected to support? Do family obligations stop him from migrating? Should he contribute to his union? Insure against sickness? Insure for his own funeral? These are all consumption choices”; they determine the shape of a culture and are shaped by it (ibid. 37).

<sup>27</sup> Colin Campbell, “Consuming Goods and the Good of Consuming,” in *Consumer Society in American History* 19–32, at 22.

the consumer has already enjoyed imaginatively.”<sup>28</sup> Marketing and advertising are formative in inciting the consumer to imagine the pleasure a given object may provide. The crucial role of daydreaming helps explain that consumers are continually striving, through material goods, to close the gap between their imagined and experienced pleasures. This pursuit of imaginative desire may be good or bad, states Campbell. The difficulty with his analysis, however, is that it does not provide much assistance in determining whether a particular instance of consumption is good or bad. That question leads us to the developing interest in consumerism within the religious community.

### THEOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL ANALYSES

Several historical studies have shown that consumerism is not a new topic of theological interest. The 19th century saw constant debates among the Victorians about consumption, and we still see the ideas in those debates echoed in today’s discussions.<sup>29</sup> Early 18th-century debates divided goods into the necessary and luxurious, or natural and unnatural, and these categories provided a moral framework. In the later 19th century came disputes about productive and nonproductive uses of wealth.

About that same time and on into the 20th century, mass consumption gave rise to a new moral concern, the inability of the masses to make discriminating judgments about material goods. Various elites worried that the lack of taste and education among new groups with disposable income would vulgarize a culture. More recently, according to the British historian Matthew Hilton, we seem to be moving into a new phase, one in which consumer behavior has been removed from ethical judgment and a “high degree of material accumulation and individual acquisitiveness” is “the norm rather than the exception to be critiqued.”<sup>30</sup>

Increasingly, consumerism came to be viewed not as a difficulty for one’s relationship with God or with others, as in earlier times, but problematic only when it impacted negatively upon the consumer, and this usually in the sense of clearly harming one’s health through overconsumption of drugs, liquor, or food. In some circles, to be fat seems to have become more unacceptable than to be neglectful of the poor.

Hilton’s essay suggests three broad, if overlapping, trends regarding consumption and morality. An early 19th-century view saw some consumption as unproductive and irrational, thus contradicting the ideals of classical

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 22.

<sup>29</sup> Matthew Hilton, “The Legacy of Luxury: Moralities of Consumption since the 18th Century,” *Journal of Consumer Culture* 4 (2004) 101–23.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 116.

liberalism. This form of liberalism stressed the duties of wealth creation, distributive justice, and cultivation of the higher facets of the human person, the arts, and religion. A second phase led to criticism by elites of mass consumption and the plethora of cheap luxuries coming onto the market to the delight of people who did not exercise adequate taste and discrimination. Finally, late in the 20th century a consumer ethic arose that focuses on the individual for the sake of the individual's well-being, often in the guise of health and fitness.<sup>31</sup>

It is possible that we are now also seeing a new phase emerging due to growing awareness of the interplay between patterns of consumption and the environment, care for the global poor and the spiritual void left over from disappointment with material affluence. These moral concerns are among recent themes found in the literature.

### Theological and Spiritual Readings of the Consumer Culture

Consumerism in contemporary theological and ethical literature generally avoids two extremes. One is a world-hating, anti-materialism of some jeremiads; the other is a gospel of wealth found in some evangelical Protestant approaches. Overall, the tone of much of the theological literature is more negative than positive in the assessment of consumerism.

Thomas Beaudoin of the University of Santa Clara is an astute observer of youth culture. In a recent book, his concern was to develop an economic spirituality, by which he means, "a process of integrating who we are with what we buy."<sup>32</sup> In keeping with a traditional Christian perspective, he sees one's use of material goods to be an aspect of one's fundamental stance toward God.

Beaudoin is much taken with the practice of branding, the efforts of companies "to make their logos into a 'personality'—that is, a lifestyle, an image, an identity, or a set of values."<sup>33</sup> The aim of branding is for people to see a given brand as a way of forging identity, of making a statement about who they are through their relationship to consumer goods. This practice, of course, points up the centrality of imagination for consumer culture. Through branding, certain goods come to be identified with our preferred self-image, our future aspirations, our professional status. Relying on Colin Campbell's thesis, Beaudoin sees consumerism as being promoted by the desire to know in reality the pleasures already enjoyed imagi-

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 118.

<sup>32</sup> Tom Beaudoin, *Consuming Faith: Integrating Who We Are with What We Buy* (Lanham, Md.: Sheed & Ward, 2003) 21.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 4.

natively. The phenomenon of branding testifies to the belief that for marketers, “what isn’t matter is what matters.”<sup>34</sup>

Beaudoin proposes both “indirect” and “direct” approaches to developing a Christian spirituality that addresses life in a consumerist society. He is worried, however, that we not develop a spirituality that is anti-materialist. “We can’t do without ‘stuff.’ There is nothing wrong with buying, nothing wrong with the existence of brands.” Needed is not an anti-consumption stance, but an education in “being good stewards of God’s gifts, responsible for how we use resources, aware of how what we buy affects others.”<sup>35</sup> The latter is especially important when the laborers producing consumer goods are exploited.

Another scholar who seeks to develop a balanced approach to living in a consumer society is David Matzko McCarthy of Mt. Saint Mary’s University. Reflecting on his own wedding he writes, “I used to think that the profusion of dishes, pots, pans, tablecloths, gravy boats, candlesticks, bath towels, and bedspreads commercialized and diminished the occasion. In some cases, the excesses of gifts, tuxedos, and wedding receptions do, in fact, cheapen the day. However, I now realize that in many instances there is a different kind of economy at work. A community is investing in a home. A community is outfitting a home for key practices of sharing life, for hospitality, faithfulness, and longevity.”<sup>36</sup> His appreciation for the meaning of the ritual of gift-giving is close to Mary Douglas’s insight about how goods become signifiers. At the same time, McCarthy is not blind to the dangers of excess and the risks of various forms of consumption—conspicuous, competitive, and emulative—that hover over events like weddings.

For McCarthy, “the trouble is not that we are mindlessly controlled by things; instead, a marketplace of things provides our most pervasive common language, and this shared language shapes a common world.”<sup>37</sup> In a sense, the danger is very close to what Robert Bellah and his colleagues pointed out in their wise book on America’s public philosophy.<sup>38</sup> Recall that for Bellah and his coauthors it is not that the language of individualism is simply bad, but it has become so dominant in our lives that we risk losing sight of the biblical and republican languages that also have contributed to our public life. Similarly, McCarthy suggests that seeing consumer goods as

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 76, quoting Jeffrey Rayport, “Introduction,” in *Branding: The Power of Market Identity*, ed. David E. Carter (New York: Hearst, 1999) 4.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 107.

<sup>36</sup> David Matzko McCarthy, *The Good Life: Genuine Christianity for the Middle Class* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Brazos, 2004) 54–55.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 76.

<sup>38</sup> Robert Bellah, et. al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California, 1985).

a way of communicating to one another is not simply wrong, but permitting the language of consumer goods to become such a pervasive form of social interaction threatens other important ways of human interaction.

Echoing the view of Campbell, McCarthy sees consumer goods as offering not only a means to communicate but also a way of living out our dreams. He refers to Campbell's romantic consumption as "an economy of the daydream" and sees it teaching us to always look beyond what we have, encouraging not only acquisitiveness "but also a capricious attachment to things."<sup>39</sup> The culmination of this process of constantly moving from one material object to the next in pursuit of an ever elusive sense of satisfaction is that we are becoming a people with disordered desires.

McCarthy's antidote is a middle-class asceticism, a simplicity and moderation in lifestyle that permits us to realize "what we need to live well is a suitable and respectable place among others, and what we need to live without shame depends upon the nature of our society and our place."<sup>40</sup> This last point, however, reveals a problem, for it is precisely the ever-expansive understanding of what is "suitable" or "respectable" when comparing ourselves to others that drives consumerism, as Schor and others have pointed out.

A well-received book by Vincent Miller of Georgetown University provides the most searching theological reflection on consumerism. Miller's project is not to provide a critique of consumerism per se, but to examine how religion is transformed when its adherents are immersed in a consumer culture. He takes seriously the charge that one of the effects of a consumer society is that everything becomes a potential commodity, even religion.<sup>41</sup> More important for Miller than the values and beliefs of a consumerist mentality is the manner by which a consumerist mentality affects the way one approaches values and beliefs, including those of Christianity. "Consumer culture is best diagnosed not as a deformation of belief but as a particular way of engaging religious beliefs that divorces them from practice."<sup>42</sup> His wise and witty observations on the seductive impact of consumerism on the imagination make for an important lesson in any theology of culture.

<sup>39</sup> McCarthy, *The Good Life* 102.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* 108.

<sup>41</sup> The entire Spring 2003 issue of *The Hedgehog Review* 5/2 is devoted to commodification and consumerism and contains many fine contributors. I would single out Joseph Davis, "The Commodification of Self" 41–49; Graham Ward, "The Commodification of Religion or the Consummation of Capitalism" 50–65; Jennifer Geddes, "An Interview with Margaret Jane Radin" 98–102; and Edward Song, "Commodification and Consumer Society: A Bibliographic Review" 109–21.

<sup>42</sup> Vincent J. Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2004) 12.

### Ethical Inquiries into the Consumer Lifestyle

Christine Firer Hinze in a recent essay notes that the language of Catholic social teaching presumes limits to consumption. Expressions such as “living wage” and “authentic development” suggest a sense of sufficiency or adequacy regarding material possessions.<sup>43</sup> She observes three ethical approaches among Catholic writers when assessing the topic of overconsumption: liberationist, ecological, and virtue. Her own project is to retrieve resources within Catholic social thought for developing an ethic of sufficiency, using traditional, progressive, and radical strands found within the literature.

As she has done on other topics, Firer Hinze looks to the work of John Ryan as an aid in developing her own position. Ryan was wary of those who strove for happiness through material consumption and spoke positively of the “power to do without,” the ability to resist too easy a reliance on material goods.<sup>44</sup> Firer Hinze notes Ryan’s suspicion about amassing superfluous wealth and is generally positive in her appropriation of his ideas. While both are correct to oppose what Firer Hinze calls “an ascendant creed of consumption and material satisfaction” as the path to happiness, I find Ryan’s analysis too static for today’s society. Sufficiency is not a fixed target, and Ryan did not fully appreciate the social mobility afforded by modern economic life. He was more confident than I am of being able to define specific limits to income and spending for working and middle class families.

Firer Hinze, while acknowledging Ryan’s contribution to normative ethics, pushes beyond him in her assessment of virtue, structural arrangements, and power as important categories. She devotes considerable space to underscoring the central role that a virtue approach might play in addressing consumption. Virtue is required for people to be able to distinguish needs from wants and to prioritize them properly. A question of particular importance, therefore, is to what extent does our present market system induce or provoke intemperance?<sup>45</sup> Firer Hinze returns to the Augustinian theme of desire and reminds her readers that persons are “always liable to a slippage of the moral gears” so that the human ability to desire

<sup>43</sup> Christine Firer Hinze, “What Is Enough? Catholic Social Thought, Consumption, and Material Sufficiency,” in *Having: Property and Possession in Religious and Social Life*, ed. William Schweiker and Charles Mathewes (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2004) 162–88, at 162–63.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* 167. Given that Ryan devoted much of his adult life to improving the economic lot of the poor and workers, there is no reason to believe that Ryan was motivated by an antimaterialist viewpoint.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* 174–75.

more, what drives us to transcendence, can turn into a fruitless quest for fulfillment through acquisition of ever more temporal goods.<sup>46</sup>

Using a virtue ethic when discussing consumerism offers several benefits. It acknowledges how social valuations affect our ability to see, judge, and act substantively. Virtue language provides a way to understand how entrenched, habituated patterns of consumption became part of our normal world; it also makes the connection between these patterns and human flourishing. Finally, Firer Hinze observes, such an approach “offers tools for considering how destructive patterns of economic valuation and activity may be identified, resisted, and sometimes, through grace and arduous effort, changed.”<sup>47</sup>

Firer Hinze’s rich essay closes by listing three lessons derived from employing both virtue and what she calls “radical-interpretive” lenses to view consumerism. By this expression she means an analysis of the ideology of market systems offered by critical social theorists. The lessons are: the lack of “stable guidelines of what constitutes sufficiency or excess” regarding spending or consumption; the extraordinary frequency with which ideas about sufficiency get revised ever upward creating a sense of insufficiency amidst abundance; and, finally, the intemperate nature of a culture that “siphons attention and energy primarily into the labor-consumption cycle” with sad results for nonmarket relations and practices.<sup>48</sup>

One regret about this insightful essay is that it is long on diagnosis but short on prescription. Still, the merits of the analysis make it a helpful contribution to the field.

### Virtue, Asceticism, and Consumption

An earlier essay that took a virtue ethic approach to consumerism was that of Methodist scholar James Nash.<sup>49</sup> According to him, frugality, once an important virtue for Christians seeking to be responsible economic actors, needs to be retrieved today as a “subversive virtue,” that is, as a dissent or protest.

Nash highlights four dimensions to the protest: (1) against the view that humans have an insatiable desire for material goods and a recognition that wants are often created and can be restrained; (2) resistance to constant market promotion and the phenomena of impulse or therapeutic shopping;

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 177.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 178.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. 186.

<sup>49</sup> James Nash, “On the Subversive Virtue: Frugality,” in *Ethics of Consumption: The Good Life, Justice, and Global Stewardship*, ed. David Crocker and Toby Linden (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998) 416–36. The essay originally appeared as “Toward a Revival and Reform of the Subversive Virtue: Frugality,” *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (1995) 137–60.

(3) rejection of an economic ideology of indiscriminate growth as unsustainable; and (4) opposition to those broad social forces that stimulate different forms of consumption (as for example, consuming to conform with one's peer group or to compete with those one seeks to outdo; or as therapy for feelings of anxiety, loneliness, or powerlessness; or out of addiction rooted in the compulsive need for novel gratification).<sup>50</sup>

For Nash, frugality is not an end in itself, but an instrumental good that allows us to discipline production and consumption for the sake of higher ends. It is best thought of as an economic subspecies of temperance—as a social as well as a personal virtue.<sup>51</sup> This last point is crucial for Nash since frugality is not to be thought of as a fixed formula (something that Ryan comes close to at times), but must be determined relationally. Frugality entails solidarity.<sup>52</sup> One assesses appropriate consumption with an eye to the common good, nationally and internationally.

It is also important for Nash that we not associate frugality either with miserliness or some idealized rural simplicity. Frugality is part of the search for abundant life, but it requires that we view abundance differently than a mere plenitude of things. Abundance is better seen in relation to enhanced relationships and communities that enrich a person's life. It points toward a life of being more, not having more. (This latter concern for being over having is commonly cited within theological writing on consumerism.)

Nash, however, is anxious to make clear that frugality is not to be viewed as “holy poverty” or as Christian asceticism, both of which he views as severe responses to consumption. He also thinks that these latter approaches require a faith stance, whereas frugality is defensible on grounds of right reason rather than religious belief. “It is not dependent on a Christian confession, even though that confession is a primary historical source of the norm. A coherent case can be made for frugality as a rational and just response to the economics–ecology dilemma.”<sup>53</sup> According to Nash, frugality is needed if we are to be able to address the material suffering of the global poor and resolve the challenge of environmental sustainability.

Writing as a defender of asceticism, Maria Antonaccio suggests that a proper view of it makes a valuable contribution to the discussion of the ethics of consumption. She argues that asceticism is not only “a renunciatory practice aimed at mortification of the flesh and restriction of bodily pleasures” but also “the acquisition of a skill . . . the education of desire in the constructive aim of living well.”<sup>54</sup> The dual aspects of asceticism offer

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. 418–20.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. 422.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. 424.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. 428.

<sup>54</sup> Maria Antonaccio, “Asceticism and the Ethics of Consumption,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 26 (2006) 79–96, at 80.

a “prophetic model” to “condemn the excesses of consumerism” and a *techne* model that addresses the art of living and sees “moral and even religious significance in consumerism.”<sup>55</sup>

Antonaccio finds two features of consumerism especially important today. One is the way that consumption is promoted by “powerful cultural and economic forces” that shape human desires through the images that people appropriate in order to fashion identity. Here Antonaccio’s comment returns to the issue of branding, and how marketing and advertising add symbolic value to material goods. The problem, according to Antonaccio, is that these powerful forces are often “pernicious, catering to what is most base and excessive in human appetites.”<sup>56</sup>

The second feature of contemporary consumer society is commodification, particularly the expansion of the range of goods that are subject to the logic of market exchange. Antonaccio quotes a phrase that “we now live not only in a market *economy*, but also a market *society*.”<sup>57</sup> She raises the important point that ethicists must ask whether there are some things that money should be unable to buy.<sup>58</sup> There needs to be a challenge to the market mentality that has seeped into realms once considered off-limits to market logic: the family, personal relations, education, and, as Miller’s work convincingly shows, even religion.

Antonaccio argues that a proper understanding of asceticism strikes a balance between calls for renunciation and those defenders of consumerism who celebrate its expressive role in personal formation. She sees the need for renunciation as a crucial step that fosters the transformation of human desire rather than merely negating it or cultivating its expression. The transformation leads to a responsible consumerism. In explaining her position she cites Nash approvingly as one who has seen frugality not simply as restraint but as a positive strategy for solidarity and community.

While there is much to commend in Antonaccio’s intelligent essay, her retrieval of asceticism simply provides some different language to discuss consumerism. Ultimately, as her reliance on Nash indicates, she does not add new solutions but another way to reach a traditional conclusion. The tension she wishes to maintain between the two notions of asceticism looks very much like the virtuous middle of temperance.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. 81.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. 86.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. 87, quoting “The Commodification of Everything,” *Hedgehog Review* 5.2 (2003) 5–6, at 5.

<sup>58</sup> See Michael Sandel, “What Money Shouldn’t Buy,” *Hedgehog Review* 5.2 (2003) 77–97, for a forceful argument against turning some goods into market commodities. A more extensive critique of the “market mentality” is Thomas Frank’s *One Market under God: Extreme Capitalism, Market Populism, and the End of Economic Democracy* (New York: Random House, 2000).

Timothy Vaverek, a parish priest writing in the *Houston Catholic Worker*, puts forth a practical approach to Christian asceticism and consumerism.<sup>59</sup> He understands consumerism as “a social and economic order based on the systematic creation and fostering of the desire to possess material goods and personal success in ever greater amounts.”<sup>60</sup> Viewed that way, consumerism leads to three errors: an abiding sense of dissatisfaction with one’s present situation; the unwise use of disposable income to satisfy desire and self-image “by artificially inflating one’s lifestyle, worth and status”; and neglect of saving for economic security by running up personal debt to finance a way of life that exceeds one’s income.<sup>61</sup>

Echoing Schor, Vaverek sees the consumerist mentality fostering a hyperactive lifestyle as we work harder and longer to earn, as well as a chronic lack of time for the enjoyment of family, friends, prayer, leisure, and volunteer activities. What is needed is to assist people in breaking free of consumerism’s hold, and this requires asceticism to discipline our appetites and develop a sense of sufficiency of goods. Vaverek suggests three traditional Christian ascetical practices: the penitential life, honoring the Sabbath, and tithing. These three practices are practical efforts to abet Christian conversion through the time-honored actions of self-denial, prayer, and almsgiving.

Becoming a church that once again promotes communal penitential practices, Vaverek suggests, will foster conversion and provide an alternative understanding of how one attains true satisfaction. For example, fasting teaches us the ability to live without the need to seek immediate gratification of every appetite. Keeping the Sabbath would likely require a rescheduling of other days of the week to get done what used to take place on Sunday, for example, shopping and household chores. Having to build one’s week around the Sabbath makes time for prayer and leisure a central element of life. Finally, giving away a tenth of one’s income in a society that encourages spending into indebtedness is a challenge not only dramatically to revise one’s consumer patterns but also to teach us that we are accountable before God for what we have and what we do with it.<sup>62</sup>

What Vaverek provides in his brief but thoughtful essay is a pastoral reflection on how specific and traditional ascetical practices not only involve renunciation but also move us toward a changed and more abundant life than consumerism offers.

<sup>59</sup> Timothy Vaverek, “Christian Asceticism: Breaking Consumerism’s Destructive Hold,” *Houston Catholic Worker* 21/1 (January, 2001) 1–7, at [www.cjd.org/paper/consum.html](http://www.cjd.org/paper/consum.html) (accessed July 15, 2006).

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.* 1.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.* 2.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.* 5–7.

### Catholic Social Teaching

At the outset of the modern era of Catholic social teaching, beginning with Leo XIII, the focus was on “too little consumption by the poor,” but with the papacy of Paul VI we have seen attention being given to “too much consumption by the rich.”<sup>63</sup> In commenting on the issue of consumption and consumerism it is interesting to see how many themes found in the nontheological literature on consumerism work their way into papal teaching. It is also of interest to note the anthropological focus that the papacy gives the question, making the viewpoint distinctive in its emphasis if not unique in content.

In his brief overview of papal teaching Charles Wilber, an economist at the University of Notre Dame, gives three reasons for why overconsumption and consumerism have become issues: there is excessive consumption by some while others suffer want; excessive consumption threatens the environment; for some persons consumption has become the primary goal to the detriment of their own well-being.<sup>64</sup>

Wilber then proceeds to comment that despite the papal concern, “it is perfectly rational for people to accept a philosophy of consumerism.” The reason being that although modern economies often deny people a meaningful sense of work, undercut a sense of community, and frustrate the enjoyment of nature, they do provide a wealth of material goods to compensate for the losses.<sup>65</sup> So people settle for what the economy provides: consumer goods in abundance.

What must be reestablished is a broader view of human welfare. Certainly, people need material goods, even goods that are not strictly necessary but that enhance human living. However, at some level a class of luxury goods becomes a distraction from other human goods. What people truly need is a sense of esteem from others and community where there is a reasonably equitable distribution of material goods. Freedom, the experience of genuine self-governance is also crucial to human welfare. People need to have a sense that they are able to exercise a good measure of sovereignty over their lives and their communities so that their preferences are taken seriously. Wilber’s comment about governance and community connects with the idea that something important has been lost, as consumer has replaced citizen as the chief public identity of Americans. Akin to Sandel’s earlier remarks, Wilber laments that political decision-making has become less participatory and often skewed by well-financed lobbying

<sup>63</sup> Charles Wilber, “The Ethics of Consumption: A Roman Catholic View,” in *Ethics of Consumption* 403–15, at 404.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.* 405.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

campaigns. The main decisions remaining for individuals are choices about what material goods they prefer to consume, while substantive decisions about how we shall live together are made by elites.<sup>66</sup>

Wilber is not optimistic that we can transform our present consumption-based economy, given the structural and ideological forces at work in support of it. He does not see present-day liberalism as offering much by way of a serious alternative to the neoconservative economic model that presently reigns.

Several key encyclical texts capture the papal critique of consumerism. In *Populorum progressio*, Paul VI was concerned to put forward a vision of authentic development for persons and societies. He was most troubled by the threat of poverty to such development, but he did see the danger lurking in material abundance. Like the Gospel parable of the rich man who keeps storing up his possessions only to suddenly die, there is the risk that modern men and women will “regard the possession of more and more goods as the ultimate objective.” This blindness turns material goods into the highest good and winds up enslaving people. People “harden their hearts, shut out others from their minds and gather together solely for reasons of self-interest rather than out of friendship; dissension and disunity follow soon after.” Too narrow a pursuit of material goods stifles authentic development; it stands in contrast to the “true grandeur of human beings.”<sup>67</sup>

Elsewhere, Paul VI used moral language to describe the problem: “greed,” “avarice,” and “jealousy” are all used to explain the dynamic at work in overconsumption. Twenty years later, John Paul II, in his commemoration of Paul’s encyclical, adopts a different tone. He notes that alongside the misery of the many due to underdevelopment, there is also the reality of superdevelopment that is equally unacceptable and for the same reason: it works against what is good and leads to true happiness.

Superdevelopment, defined as “an excessive availability of every kind of material goods for the benefit of certain social groups,” is faulted for making “people slaves of ‘possession’ and of immediate gratification, with no other horizon than the multiplication or continual replacement of the things already owned with others still better.”<sup>68</sup> This superdevelopment is

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. 407–9.

<sup>67</sup> Paul VI, *Populorum progressio* (On the Development of Peoples) no. 19, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/paul\\_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_enc\\_26031967\\_populorum\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum_en.html) (accessed November 21, 2006)

<sup>68</sup> John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (On Social Concern) no. 28, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_30121987\\_sollicitudo-rei-socialis\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis_en.html) (accessed November 21, 2006).

identified with the “civilization of ‘consumption’ or ‘consumerism,’ which involves so much ‘throwing away’ and ‘waste.’”<sup>69</sup>

Of the effects of consumerism, John Paul focuses on two: “a crass materialism” and “a radical dissatisfaction” that the more one has, the more one craves. Both effects point up the fact that consumerism cannot satisfy “the deeper aspirations” that “remain unsatisfied and perhaps even stifled.”<sup>70</sup> Consumerism is the equally ugly twin of poverty. For the latter, “being” is hindered due to deprivation of essential goods, while, for the former, “being” is undercut due to an excess of nonessential goods.<sup>71</sup> It is obvious, therefore, that “having” is not evil in itself since we need to aid the many who have too little. The problem is having “without regard for the quality and the ordered hierarchy of the goods one has.”<sup>72</sup> Both quality and hierarchy arise from placing goods and their availability at the service of a person’s true vocation.

Several years later, on the centenary of *Rerum novarum*, John Paul II issued *Centesimus annus*, again addressing consumerism. At one point in his encyclical, he explicitly attended to the difficulties particular to more advanced economies. His approach was anthropological: “the manner in which new needs arise and are defined is always marked by a more or less appropriate concept of the person and his true good.” The key is to “be guided by a comprehensive picture of the human person which respects all the dimensions of his being and which subordinates his material and instinctive dimensions to his interior and spiritual ones.” When an economy operates with an inadequate view of the person, “consumer attitudes and

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> The contrast between “having” and “being” employed by both Paul VI and John Paul II is based on Vatican II’s *Gaudium et spes* no. 35: “Human activity, to be sure, takes its significance from its relationship to [the person]. Just as it proceeds from [the person], so it is ordered toward [the person]. For when a [person] works he not only alters things and society, he develops himself. He learns much, he cultivates his resources, he goes outside of himself and beyond himself. Rightly understood this kind of growth is of greater value than any external riches that can be garnered. A [person] is more precious for what he is than for what he has. Similarly, all that [people] do to obtain greater justice, wider brotherhood, a more humane disposition of social relationships has greater worth than technical advances. For these advances can supply the material for human progress, but of themselves alone they can never actually bring it about.

“Hence, the norm of human activity is this: that in accord with the divine plan and will, it harmonize with the genuine good of the human race, and that it allow men and women as individuals and as members of society to pursue their total vocation and fulfill it” ([http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_yatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_cons\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_yatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html)).

<sup>72</sup> *Sollicitudo rei socialis* no. 28.

life-styles can be created which are objectively improper and often damaging to physical and spiritual health.”<sup>73</sup>

For John Paul one cannot simply treat consumer preferences as determinative, for no economic system of itself provides adequate criteria “for correctly distinguishing new and higher forms of satisfying human needs from artificial new needs that hinder the formation of a mature personality.” What is needed is “the education of consumers in the responsible use of their power of choice, the formation of a strong sense of responsibility among producers and among people in the mass media in particular, as well as the necessary intervention by public authorities.”<sup>74</sup>

Again the pope returns to the now familiar papal theme of distinguishing between being and having. “It is not wrong to want to live better; what is wrong is a style of life which is presumed to be better when it is directed towards ‘having’ rather than ‘being,’ and which wants to have more, not in order to be more but in order to spend life in enjoyment as an end in itself. It is therefore necessary to create life-styles in which the quest[s] for truth, beauty, goodness, and communion with others for the sake of common growth are the factors which determine consumer choices, savings, and investments.”<sup>75</sup> While the question of proper distribution of material goods and the needs of the poor are never far from Paul VI or John Paul II’s thoughts, it is striking to see how much of their commentary on consumerism focuses on the anthropological issue of what consumerism does to the consumer. While avoiding the pitfall of simply dismissing the utility and enjoyment of material goods, the popes clearly and directly warn that our understanding of authentic human development and flourishing is distorted by the consumerist bent of wealthy nations.

An additional theme of the papal critique is that of ecology and consumerism. Voiced initially at the 1971 Synod of Bishops, the critique linked exploitation of the earth with exploitation of the poor. The argument was essentially that richer nations had developed economically by pursuing a path that is unsustainable and therefore not to be followed by poor nations.<sup>76</sup> Thus, the rich have used global resources meant for all in a manner that benefited only a minority; and now it is untenable for the poor majority to use the remaining resources in the same irresponsible manner.

The ecological critique also has at its origin an anthropological dimension. “At the root of the senseless destruction of the natural environment lies an anthropological error, which unfortunately is widespread in our day.

<sup>73</sup> John Paul II, *Centesimus annus* no. 36, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_01051991\\_centesimus-annus\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus_en.html) (accessed November 20, 2006).

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Synod of Bishops 1971, *De justitia in mundo*, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 63 (1971) 923–42, at 924–26.

The human person who discovers his capacity to transform and in a certain sense create the world through his own work, forgets that this is always based on God's prior and original gift of the things that are. The human person thinks that he can make arbitrary use of this earth. . . . Instead of carrying out his role as a co-operator with God in the work of creation, the human sets himself up in place of God and thus ends up provoking a rebellion on the part of nature, which is more tyrannized than governed by him."<sup>77</sup>

Consistently we see that modern Catholic social teaching develops its critique of consumerism on the basis of an anthropological claim about what constitutes the genuinely human and what values and practices serve authentic development. While not overlooking other forms of criticism such as care for the poor or environmental sustainability, the conviction about what constitutes human well-being is what generates the strongest papal criticism of consumerism.

### CONCLUSION

William Schweiker of the University of Chicago underlines the crucial import of a correct anthropology for addressing consumerism. For him the issue should be seen not only, or even primarily, as one of social justice, but rather a matter of moral anthropology. What is needed is to reinsert political economy into moral inquiry, to retrieve an analysis of human desire, and to resurrect the language of virtue and vice. Schweiker's fine essay argues that the Christian community offers a noncommodity, God, for shaping desire, and that this offering may be the key to restraining consumer society. "The love of God . . . can limit the desire for acquisition precisely because what is desired exceeds objectification."<sup>78</sup> Without this return to the centrality of God in resolving the puzzle of human desire, there is little hope that the dark side of consumerism can be avoided. Should that theological response be heeded, Schweiker believes, it then becomes possible for the modern consumer to live responsibly, that is, for the human agent to develop a proper self-understanding in the exercise of the power to produce and consume.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>77</sup> *Centesimus annus* no. 37. For a secular take on the environmental dimensions of consumerism, see Alan Durning, "An Environmentalist's Perspective on Consumer Society," in *Consumer Society in American History* 78–81.

<sup>78</sup> William Schweiker, "Reconsidering Greed," in *Having* 249–71, at 269.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.* 271.