

CHRISTIAN SOCIAL THOUGHT

Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire

William T. Cavanaugh

Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2008 (100 pages)

Just before the market meltdown, before the credit crunch, before the worldwide recession, came a stiff critique of consumerism from William T. Cavanaugh of the University of St. Thomas in Minnesota. Writing before the economic crash, he acknowledged, in an almost prescient way, that we are always urged to spend to speed up a sluggish economy, even though he will have none of this argument. Still, it must seem ironic now at first reading of this slender book (only one hundred pages, with the notes blessedly at the bottom of the page) that its attack on American buying habits arrives exactly when government is trying to overcome the slowdown in consumer spending to combat the recession.

I say at first reading, for there is more here than meets a cursory overview. The standard criticism of the consumer mentality is that we desire to possess ever more, that we are too materialistic, that we are simply greedy. No, says Cavanaugh. It is not that we actually want what we buy. It is the pursuit that counts: restless shopping that can never be satisfied and actually devalues something once we have bought it. Objects obtained give no pleasure once the chase is over, and they are then meant to be discarded. Our throw-away, disposable culture means we are *detached from* things—not *attached to* them.

Expanding this insight, Cavanaugh moves from material things to traditions and cultures and even to religions. A plethora of choices, created by the ever-expanding global economy, feeds the consumer mentality, but all are devalued because they can be *chosen* for whatever reason pleases us. None appears to be really worth having, for all are on equal footing, all in the same shop window, so to speak: “The surface appearance of diversity in fact masks a stifling homogeneity.”

There is a truly dark side to this detachment. The impersonal market-driven economy that creates all those choices is a screen that hides the conditions of production from our view. The so-called free market does not operate to the advantage of all, contra Adam Smith, but drives down wages and leads to the exploitation of the weakest and poorest workers available in the world. Cavanaugh is sharp and eloquent in driving this point home.

It is an intriguing analysis, with much truth in it, especially his comments about the exploitation of developing world labor. Still, one is bound to ask some questions. Is it really true that we do not actually want to own the things that we buy? Does acquaintance with other traditions and cultures really dull our appreciation for their difference from our own? Does contact with other religions really rob us of the unique value of our own? These will be matters for readers to ponder and perhaps challenge.

Assuming, for now, the truth of his analysis, what does Cavanaugh think should be done? He offers a familiar list of good causes, meant to restore a personal link between consumer and producer, or even to erase the boundary between them: cooperatives of various kinds, credit unions, socially conscious purchasing such as the fair-trade movement and the rejection of goods from sweatshops, buying locally produced food (e.g., from farmers markets), and patronizing locally owned businesses. These are things we can all support, rather than wringing our hands helplessly before impersonal, all-powerful, globalized market forces.

The salient feature of this book, however, is actually not its critique of economic structures, which has a familiar ring, but its theological grounding. It is written from an explicitly Catholic perspective and reflects much of a traditional Catholic fondness for the “natural” precapitalist economy, which I myself encountered most radically in the Catholic Worker movement. Cavanaugh certainly does not go that far. He is not a romantic, much less a Luddite. He knows perfectly well the necessity of industrial society to reduce poverty and feed the world, but neither is he enamored of a competitive, market-driven economy, whose engine ultimately is the self’s quest to satisfy itself.

The goal, then, is to harness desire to a worthy end, a proper end, which is service to and solidarity with the rest of humanity. He invokes Augustine to argue that we do not have truly free will unless it is moved to right ends, as, for example, an alcoholic is not free even if he can buy all the drink he wants, for he is captive to his illness. Modern consumers are not free, either, for they are captive to the saturation bombing of modern advertising (with which Cavanaugh has some fun), which diverts them from worthy economic behavior. True freedom is the ability to make right choices.

Of course this way of thinking carries well-known dangers. It may be difficult to escape from the self’s prison of selfish desire without becoming a prisoner anew, this time to some external authoritarianism. Many of us know the old joke about the aging Communist telling his son, “When the revolution comes, we will all eat strawberries.” The boy says, “Dad, I don’t like strawberries.” The father erupts, “Comes the revolution, you *will* like strawberries.”

Nevertheless a radically free will, uninfluenced by external forces (paternal or otherwise), does not exist; if it did, it would be a pathological condition. The task is to offer an

education that leads the will to good choices. The play of private desire turns out badly for many because we lack a lively sense of the common good where concepts such as *justice* and the *true ends of human life* govern economic behavior. Briefly entering the classic discussion of the ethics of property, Cavanaugh says that ownership must serve the common good so that it does not become a means of power over others. Though he does not use the classic slogan, he surely would agree that “right use determines right ownership.”

Cavanaugh finds the common good served most powerfully when we really identify with others in a solidarity so profound that we feel one another’s pain and become, as St. Paul said, truly members one of another; for Cavanaugh the ultimate model of that unity is the Eucharist, in which the partakers all become one in the same body of Christ, which he extends to mean the whole human community. Following von Balthasar, he says we do not lose our individuality in this communion, yet our empathetic distance from others collapses to nothing. Consequently, we cannot discharge our obligation to the weak by simple gifts of charity; a more profound identification is required. One of his sentences in particular lands a solid punch to the complacent: “Those of us who partake in the Eucharist while ignoring the hungry may be eating and drinking our own damnation.”

Put succinctly, then, as Cavanaugh does right at the start, the book argues that an economy must be judged by its ability to enhance “communion among persons and between persons and God.” Valid economic exchanges are those in which we see the other as part of the same body of Christ. It is a lofty goal, and he tells us how to pursue it for ourselves. What the larger economy will or can do is another matter.

—Thomas Sieger Derr

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**A Promised Land, a Perilous Journey:
Theological Perspectives on Migration
Daniel G. Groody and Gioacchino Campese (Editors)
Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press,
2008 (332 pages)**

Debate over immigration, particularly illegal or undocumented immigration along the southern border of the United States, has been highly contentious during the last few years. There is no reason to think that the controversy will abate any time soon, especially in difficult economic circumstances. Daniel Groody and Gioacchino Campese enter this conversation as theologians who have lived and worked with the poor on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. They desire to bring the human face of the immigrant to the fore of the discussion, and they succeeded spectacularly in their must-see video, *Dying to Live: A Migrant’s Journey*.

In addition to their “pastoral interest in the plight of immigrants,” Groody and Campese want to build, “a more solid conceptual grounding of theology and migration” (xix).