

**Marketing and the Common Good:
Essays from Notre Dame on Societal Impact**
Patrick E. Murphy and John F. Sherry, Jr. (Editors)
London and New York: Routledge, 2014 (328 pages)

Hardly a recent publication in the marketing field can claim more, and more enthusiastic, testimonials from well-known scholars than this book. Patrick Murphy, who is one of the founders of the discipline of marketing ethics and professor of marketing at the University of Notre Dame, and John Sherry, the chairman of the marketing department, have edited a volume of nineteen essays, mostly authored, and usually coauthored, by members of Notre Dame's marketing faculty. In various forms, every contribution addresses some question concerning the contribution of marketing to the common good or, in trendier language, its "societal impact." Expectedly, despite the common über-topic, the issues chosen and views taken are very diverse, which makes a comprehensive review impossible. Rather, the question of unity in diversity will be of interest.

After an introductory essay on the common good by Murphy, William Wilkie and Elizabeth Moore set the stage by describing the "aggregate marketing system" as a vast and complex social system. John Sherry follows up by asking how any common good may be achieved if marketing is so all-pervasive that it no longer is related to or embedded in but rather is identified with society. Joel Urbany shows that many marketers obfuscate the information they make available to consumers—for example, through product complexity—whereas greater clarity would contribute to a common good. John Gaski and Michael Etzel take the most defensive view in the volume by claiming that a common-good orientation of marketing only requires fair relations with consumers but no particular social responsibility. Through tracking consumer response as measured by the multi-item Index of Consumer Sentiment toward Marketing, the authors show that attitudes to the "four Ps" of the marketing mix have improved from an index value of 100 in 1984 to 106.28 in 2011. Whether this really means that overall consumer satisfaction has improved and can be understood as a contribution to a common good, may be up for debate. But this contribution is without doubt the one most friendly toward a *laissez-faire* position.

Part 3 of the book features two essays on "Catholic Social Thought issues in marketing." They spell out, respectively, the implications of Benedict XVI's great encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* for marketing and argue for the legitimacy of marketing within a Catholic view of business. The present Pope Emeritus was the first ever to reflect on the role of marketing in a pontifical teaching document (*Caritas in Veritate*, nos. 58, 66). Part 4 features three essays on sustainability in marketing: on the role of commons from the perspective of moral philosophy and economics, on the contribution the marketing mix can make to a sustainable society, and on the question of whether the planned obsolescence of products implies moral challenges and affects the common good. The three contributions in part 5 deal with public policy issues in marketing, from marketing food products to children that lead to childhood obesity and thus detract from the common good via the distribution

of firearms, to the intertwined history between the University of Notre Dame and the Federal Trade Commission. In part 6, three chapters address ethical issues in marketing. These concern the complex process of matching donated kidneys with recipients, ethical problems associated with selling activity, and issues of marketing ethics in China. Lastly, in his concluding essay, co-editor Sherry considers how marketing would have to change so as better to contribute to the common good, and John Kennedy gives a very brief account of the history of the department of marketing at the University of Notre Dame.

The essays collected in this volume testify to the liveliness and heterogeneity of voices and concerns of a discipline in a major Catholic university. They are at different levels of elaboration, and mostly of a conceptual rather than empirical nature. Some have the character of very illustrative case studies. Different though the topics are, the papers are yet united by a common search for what is good for all, and thus by a public policy orientation. But herein lies also a weakness—it never becomes quite clear what the common good is that marketers and consumers are supposed to support. Catholic social teaching itself is not entirely consistent on this. The famous definition, in *Gaudium et Spes* (n. 26), of the common good as “the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment” is unspecific and must be seen through a teleological and theological lens. If it is not spelled out what the purpose of mankind and of society is, it will, for example, not be quite obvious whether or not curtailing gun sales or reducing childhood obesity contributes to the common good. This good must lie in a condition that because of our nature and the “job description” we have received is truly common to us—not simply in the sense of a public good. Yet the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* takes a somewhat different angle by defining the common good as “the good of all people and of the whole person” (n. 165), moving the focus away from social conditions to a more distributed and anthropological meaning. The Church has in fact recognized two levels in the meaning of the term (International Theological Commission, *In Search of a Universal Ethic: A New Look at the Natural Law*, Vatican City, 2009, n. 85).

This may then be confusing to social scientists who just want a simple criterion by which to judge the goodness of social action. In no sense, however, can the concept of the common good of Catholic social teaching be reduced to the economic notion as being rivalrous and nonexcludable in consumption or to any secular purpose progressives may propose. For Catholics, it inextricably depends on how God wants humans to live—by some of our decisions and by God’s grace, we further the welfare of all of us. Creating peace will generally belong to these as will the creation of economic conditions that allow all of us to find work, to be entrepreneurial, and to satisfy our needs. Certain conditions allow us to thrive and grow into what we are meant to be—these are our common goods.

However, this points to a limitation in these essays as in much other work on the common good: All too often they assume that there is a single platonic entity—the common good—whereas in actual fact multiple common goods can be pursued in business. Easier and cheaper communication is a common good provided by mobile phone manufacturers and network companies; faster and safer transportation is offered by the makers or

operators of airplanes, trains, or automobiles; noise abatement systems, healthier nutrition, learning software, consumer credit, and a plethora of other products can all contribute to goods from which all benefit and that allow us closer access to our purpose. The very notion of contributing is somewhat suspicious for it assumes a common good that is, actually or potentially, already there. How about simply acknowledging that marketing activities—product development, packaging, pricing, distribution, and so forth—can produce various common goods and that other activities lead in the opposite direction?

This volume encompasses many voices that are critical of certain aspects of marketing, and such criticism is usually productive. From a Catholic perspective, little is gained by dismissing the exposition of flaws in the marketing system as being “anti-market.” The book also has much “positive” content, presenting inspiring and indeed uplifting examples of marketing strategies that further a common good. What does surprise the Christian reader is the paucity of real engagement with Catholic teaching on business; in most essays, it is an afterthought, as an *à propos* to justify inclusion in the volume. At Notre Dame, it seems, the existence of Catholic teaching on business is surely acknowledged and respected, but, with few exceptions, it is not taken much more seriously than in secular academe.

Overall, this volume reflects some of the heterogeneity of a discipline that accommodates inspirations from psychology, economics, social anthropology, and other disciplines, and that at its best is not even averse to philosophical sophistication or theological profundity. Although the reduction of marketing research to either formalistic model-building or empirical consumer psychology is often deplored or celebrated, depending on one’s perspective, this volume testifies to the fact that looking beyond the narrow confines of one’s specialty is not yet a dead end. Quite to the contrary, some of the most inspiring work is broad rather than narrow, and it does not neglect to address the question of who is and who ought to be served by marketing efforts. These essays by Notre Dame marketing scholars and a few allies live up to both challenges, and in some cases provide answers rooted in Christian ethics and Catholic social principles. The volume is a valuable resource for scholars and teachers on marketing and on business ethics, as well as for those thoughtful practitioners of commerce who understand that good in the sense of profitability always depends on good in the sense of moral worth.

—Wolfgang Grassl
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