Consumerism and Christians:
Shopping for the Kingdom

***Iain Osborne** identifies three aspects of a Christian response to toxic consumerism: firstly, the need to care for things entrusted to us by God – we are responsible to God for them; secondly, to use them for the common good, although that includes looking after ourselves; thirdly, to rely on Christ alone for our security, and for our sense of identity – consumerism tempts us to be someone else, not our true self.*

We live in a consumer society. *Tesco ergo sum* ("I shop, therefore I am") appears to be a core belief of our culture. Christians are up to their necks in this society just as much as anyone else. And Christians in business are frequently involved in selling, marketing or advertising. It is an urgent task for the Christian church in our age to develop a mature spirituality of buying, owning and using goods and services.

This article looks at consumer*ism*. This is a complex term, with at least three meanings. We look at some of the questions each raises for Christians in business, and particularly some ethical challenges they might face.

1. Consumerism as a practice

First, consumerism is a *practice***.** Consumption is a practical activity (involving buying, owning and using), and we need to think whether we are taking the activity to excess, or pursuing the wrong aims in our activity.

What are the fundamental goals of owning anything, anyway? On this we can be guided by the teaching of St Thomas Aquinas[1], who suggests there are two purposes to private property.

The first is that it puts us on the hook to care for things. People tend

Photo: John B. Henderson

Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn
The Parable of the Rich Fool (1627)
Gemäldegalerie, Berlin

to look after their own belongings, and private property is a useful social institution because it harnesses this tendency. So when we buy something, we are adopting a part of God's world, and taking on a responsibility to care for it. That is as true when you buy a pair of shoes, as when you buy a kitten. The purpose of your ownership is in part to demarcate your duty: to mark out the things you have a responsibility to care for.

The second aim of our having things is to use them. But we are not given things to use for our own good, but for the common good. It is fair enough for us to use the things we buy and own so as to keep ourselves fed and safe and well: our own sustenance is part of the common good, and looking after ourselves stops us being a burden to others, and enables us to participate more widely in community. The same can be said of books to educate us or travel to connect us with the wider world.

It is not good, on the other hand, to buy things to pacify our insecurity, or to consume to feed our appetites. It is in any case impossible to satisfy our appetite, since appetite that is fed turns into addiction. Healthy consumption pursues an ethic of "enough and not more than enough", and surpluses are to be given away. But if we consume to serve our appetites, there never will be a surplus, because our appetites are infinite. This is not a grim Lenten message of sad self-denial. There is pleasure in eating and drinking, in culture and travel. We will encounter this pleasure as we meet our own needs. "Enough but not more than enough" will let us flourish, and protect us from the illness and sadness that over-consumption generates.

So what are the challenges here for Christians in business? Are you confident that your products meet a real need – not just one manufactured by advertising? What does marketing that encourages "enough and not more than enough" look like? How can businesses support their customers in developing self-discipline? Would your business prefer its customers to look after their possessions so they last a long time, or to throw them away and buy new ones; and if the latter, how can you encourage your customers to be thrifty, and buy only what is essential?

2. Consumerism and structural sin

Second, consumerism is a *system*, which is to say it is an evolved form of society and economy. In contrast to earlier forms of capitalism that emphasised trading, or accumulation of capital, consumer-capitalism emphasises consumption. At the same time, our society has been densely penetrated by market forces, with many activities formerly organised politically or communally now being provided and organised through markets. ('Society' and 'economy' are not, of course, the same thing, but because of this dense inter-penetration we address them here as one.) The economics and sociology of the consumerist system create some new ethical dilemmas.

Most of us who think about living ethically have spent time worrying

about how we shop. Fair trade and local sourcing have made great strides in recent decades, although these options still only cover a limited proportion of a typical household's budget. As we grapple with these options, we are caught up in a paradox of consumer empowerment. In principle, in the consumer economy, the "customer is king"; and if this is true, then as consumers we must share moral responsibility for complicity in the outcomes of the markets that serve us. However, our lived experience is that as an individual consumer one does not seem to be able to change the system much. Traditional moral theology suggests that one is only culpable for harms one actually causes or could practically have prevented, and the damage done by "the system" does not seem to fit into that category. Some writers have therefore suggested there is another category of culpability, arising if we are "complicit". By complicity they mean the fact of benefitting from a harm, even when it is caused by others over whom one has no influence or almost no influence. This would include harm that arises from the actions of a democracy of which one is a citizen[2].

What seems to be needed is for the market to operate differently. For instance, Pope Benedict XVI's encyclical letter *Caritas in Veritate*[3] sees society as inter-penetrated by the market, so that the encyclical's theology of society also encompasses a theology of markets, since they are places where social life happens. The demands of love are not to be considered after the operation of institutions and markets but from the beginning: in commercial relationships the principle of generosity and the appropriateness of gift are signs of fraternity, finding their place within everyday economic activity.

The letter therefore rejects a model of the market that is mechanical and not subject to human choice. "Authentically human social relationships of friendship, solidarity and reciprocity can also be concluded within economic activity, and not only outside it or 'after' it.... Traditional principles of social ethics like transparency, honesty and responsibility cannot be ignored, but also... in commercial relationships the principle of gratuitousness and the logic of gift as an expression of fraternity can and must find their place within normal economic activity." (§36)

The market is seen as a place within which spiritual relationships take place; Benedict is rebutting here the ideology that markets can operate alone and unconstrained, originated by libertarian political philosophers such as Hayek or Friedman.

There is room for debate about how in practice to bring love into markets. Benedict himself sees the key issue as the intentions of market players – he calls for a greater role for non-profit organisations, and a spirit of what we might call "corporate social responsibility" (CSR) (although he does not use that phrase). That said, some might be sceptical as to whether a change of one's intentions or values is enough. FIBQ has seen a debate in recent issues about CSR, with some questioning whether it is possible or even legitimate for managers to act justly if this is not the desire of a business' owners[4]. Some CSR practices may well be good for business – but what happens if they are not? People can act self-sacrificially, but can a business?

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These fundamental ethical challenges about how love can be brought into markets suggest that it may ultimately be necessary to change the rules of the market to produce loving outcomes from market operation. Those "rules" might simply be agreed ways of operating, part of the culture, and Christian business people have an important role in championing fair, just ways of working. However, there is a sad tendency for "bad money to drive out good", and some changes to market operation need to be underpinned by regulation or by law. Christian business people should be campaigning for such changes, even if the effect of such regulation might be to reduce profitability.

3. Consumerism as a way of thinking

Third, consumerism is a *way of thinking* (about what it is to be human or a citizen, for instance), that both arises from consumerism-as-practice and consumerism-as-system, and helps to sustain them both. These processes can be understood by reference to sociology and cultural studies.

Ethicists are often much stronger on how we *should* behave, and offer relatively few resources that help think about how we *can* behave. What makes consumerism so difficult to tackle is partly that this social structure also works on our minds: we are manipulated into a shrunken sense of social identity, with correspondingly limited options for action or resistance: "Consumerism is not merely a way of life – it is increasingly recognized as a framework through which people find their identity and sense of belonging in society."[5]

Naomi Klein is an activist and campaigner who writes against what she calls Big Brand. In *No Logo*[6], she describes how branding and advertising stopped telling us about the qualities of goods, or

differentiating them, and instead started selling lifestyles, by manipulating the self-image of the consumer. These companies create financial value, but not mainly by creating tangibly useful goods. Klein also analyses brand-driven companies' systematic work to associate themselves with whatever young people considered "cool", and also describes how brand-companies have been able to market through the US school system. The poignant effect, as she describes it, is that the places and images and activities that constitute youth culture – that enable young people to think or imagine at all – are slanted towards making the young people buy things. Also, they are, literally, owned by the brand-company: so that when creative young people pick up their most familiar cultural reference points as springboards for their own creativity, they are expected to pay, or risk being sued.

This picture may ring bells for you too. Why is one fizzy drink sold as being the real thing? Are the others not real? And what does real mean anyway? What has "just do it" to do with sports gear? Why do so many adverts not tell you anything about the product advertised? Why all the naked flesh? Such adverts are not chiefly about the product, they are mainly about the consumer. They tell you that you are missing out, that other people have got something you should want – usually, an identity you might want. They offer an image of a way to be, and a way to be that way. Buy our stuff and you will be young, sexy, funny, ironic. That might be presented in terms of opportunity, but in reality it means anxiety because it starts from the assumption that, raw, we don't measure up. Advertising presents us with an image of life that is in fact quite unattainable.

Then, the whole consumer economy runs on segmentation. Many of our buying choices have the effect of corralling us into socio-economic herds. The place we live, the clothes we wear, which supermarket we use, what we drink, the car we drive. These all place us in one herd or another. Now, we human animals tend to be shaped by the people around us, there is nothing inherently wrong with that. But if the result is a community that is balkanised into multiple identities, our fundamental solidarity is compromised. And if we are seduced into an identity that is market-given, not God-given – one that is not truly ours – then we become alienated from ourselves.

We saw earlier that part of the fundamental purpose of our owning anything at all is so that we can *use* goods to serve the common good. Part of that common good is looking after our own needs: we use goods for strict subsistence, to enable cultural life, to build relations with others, and this is all well and good. However, consumerist societies distort the way things are used. We also buy so as to assuage anxiety or to assert control. From a sociological point of view, we buy branded goods or decorate our homes to shore up our sense of identity, and this can mean policing the boundaries of our tribe.

All this is quite toxic. An urgent task for Christians is to reclaim a healthy relationship with things, so that we do not come to rely on them to define us. We find our identity in Christ.

This is urgent not only because our souls are at risk – but also because this kind of consumerism is destroying our eco-system, because under this consumerism our needs are infinite. We can contrast it to Aquinas' economic concept, which was self-stabilising: if each of us uses goods to meet only our needs,

and is also gifted with skill that tends to improve productivity and enables us to produce more than we need, this will always tend to lead to a growing surplus available for the common good. In the consumerist sphere, by contrast, there is no limit to how many goods people might want for 'self-cultivation': the human spirit has no limits that we have yet encountered, and 'identity' is inherently a moving target, so consumerist demand can always be stimulated further, and can never be satisfied. This helps explain, at the global scale, why we live perennially beyond our environmental means, and at the individual level why households are so often heavily indebted, and have no surplus to give away.

What are the ethical challenges that all this raises for Christian business people?

They are perhaps particularly acute for those involved in advertising and marketing. I can imagine an advertising industry for which a Christian could work – one that provided truthful information to help consumers select the best product for them. What is less clear is whether a Christian can with good conscience work in the advertising industry as it operates today.

More widely, this discussion of the dangers of consumerism might ring alarm bells for anyone who earns a good salary. "Spiritual poverty" is a goal for all of us – but is perhaps harder to achieve if one is in fact surrounded by much wealth.

I conclude, then, with some concrete suggestions – spiritual practices that can help any of us to lead more authentic and coherent lives as consumers.

First, start thinking of ownership as responsibility. When you look in your wardrobe, or around your home, ask yourself: how much of God's creation do I want to take responsibility for? Before you buy something, think about how you will take care of it. A dog is for its life, but so is a sofa or a shirt, or a pair of shoes.

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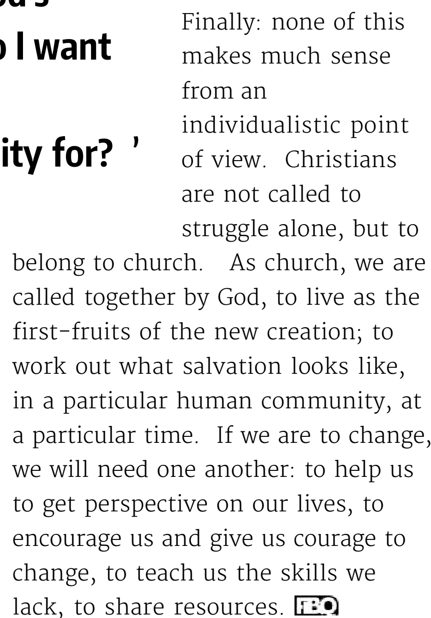

Second, regard your ownership of things as purposeful: and the purpose is to serve the common good, not your own ends. Think about what the "common good" means in your business, your community, your street, your office, your life. Let "enough, and not more than enough" become your watchword. And then, given what you do have: what can you share? How can you use the things you own to serve others? I stress again, ordering our consumption to the common good is not a path of self-denial, but one of flourishing.

Third, consider how shopping relates to your sense of your own identity. Advertising seeks all the time to make you feel bad about yourself, so you'll buy the product, which will make people believe you're better than you are. Reflect on that. Think about what herds your purchases make you a member of. And, if you understand yourself to be a beloved child of God, what herds do you want to belong to?

Finally: none of this makes much sense from an individualistic point of view. Christians are not called to struggle alone, but to belong to church. As church, we are called together by God, to live as the first-fruits of the new creation; to work out what salvation looks like, in a particular human community, at a particular time. If we are to change, we will need one another: to help us to get perspective on our lives, to encourage us and give us courage to change, to teach us the skills we lack, to share resources. FIBQ

1 His main teaching on property is found in the Treatise on Justice, Summa Theologiae, II-II.
2 For instance, see the careful articulation and partial rebuttal of this approach in Albino Barrera, 'Individuating Collective Responsibility', in Distant Markets, Distant Harms: Economic Complicity and Christian Ethics, ed. by Daniel K. Finn (Oxford/; New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). In general, this work offers a very interesting guide to the issues of structural harms from value-chains serving consumer markets.
3 Pope Benedict XVI, Caritas in Veritate (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2009).
4 See Gary Cunhill's "Response to David Parish on Corporate Social Responsibility", FIBQ 17.4, page 27.
5 Christ and Consumerism: Critical Reflections on the Spirit of Our Age, ed. by Thorsten Moritz and Craig G Bartholomew (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000).
6 Naomi Klein, No Logo: No Space, No Choice, No Jobs (London: Fourth Estate, 2010).

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