

Curing Our Affluenza

BY NORMAN WIRZBA

Consumerism has an ambiguous, even destructive, legacy: it has provided status and freedom to some, but has not been successful in treating change and uncertainty, inequality and division. As these books discover, our “affluenza”—a feverish obsession to consume material goods—is not healthy for us or the creation as a whole. Its cure is not a call to dour asceticism, but rather an invitation to receive God’s extravagant grace.

Nearly two hundred years ago, Alexis de Tocqueville observed in *Democracy in America* that Americans, though living among the happiest circumstances of any people in the world, are followed by a cloud that habitually hangs over their heads, a cloud that makes them serious, even sad, in the midst of their pleasures. Though they have cause for celebration, they never stop thinking of “the good things they have not got.” Consequently, they pursue prosperity with a “feverish ardor,” tormented by the suspicion that they have not chosen the quickest or shortest path to get it. “They clutch everything but hold nothing fast, and so lose grip as they hurry after some new delight.”

Were he alive today, de Tocqueville would not need to change his words very much, perhaps adding only that the intensity of our ardor, the scope of our clutching, and the depth of our loss have increased substantially.

Having been advised by countless spiritual guides that money and the pursuit of material comfort will not bring us happiness, why do we still maintain this ambition as a personal, even national, quest? What is becom-

ing clear to many in our society is that consumerism is not healthy for us or for the creation as a whole, and that it leads to anxiety, stress, boredom, and indigestion, all maladies with tremendous personal and social costs. Social commentators like John de Graaf have gone so far as to diagnose our condition as “affluenza,” an epidemic of consumption analogous to past health epidemics like the plague.[†] Yet we, churchgoers included, continue

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in our consumptive ways, perhaps harboring the secret hope that we will escape ill-health and ultimately be satisfied.

Anyone wishing to understand the complex array of personal, social, economic, and political factors that contribute to the continuing success of consumerism as a way of life, should begin with the excellent, multi-layered

history found in Gary Cross’s *An All-Consuming Century: Why Commercialism Won in Modern America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000, 320 pp., \$18.50). The great merit of this book is that it characterizes consumerism as a social and political force. Unlike many critics who simply reduce consumerism to the individual pursuit of material comfort, and thus bankrupt on spiritual grounds, Cross casts it as a compelling ideology that concretely expresses the major ideals that have guided the last century: liberty and democracy. “Consumer goods allowed Americans to free themselves from their old, relatively secure but closed communities and enter the expressive individualism of a dynamic ‘mass’ society” (2). As diverse ethnic groups came to America, the purchase of commodities gave them the opportunity to at least appear to be on an equal footing with others. What was being consumed, in other words, were not only material goods but also personal identities. With the right clothing or car, the appropriate cigarette or appliance, they could break from old traditions without necessarily abandoning, or, as was the case in many old-world cultures, violently clashing with them, and thus enter the cultural mainstream.

Cross’s characterization of consumerism as an ideology in competition with other “isms” like communism is particularly helpful because it broadens our understanding of the many practical functions and roles consumerism plays in culture—consumerism is not simply about greed or personal insecurity. It gives concrete shape to liberty by providing various means for personal expression. It enlivens democracy by enabling diverse groups to share in the ownership and use of goods. In a time when the workplace,

ethnic solidarity, tradition, or political representation often fail to give meaning and dignity to people, consumerism has shown itself to be an attractive alternative that meets immediate needs, eases social tensions, and gives concrete shape to life's major transitions.

This historical background about how consumerism shaped American society should not be read as an unqualified endorsement of it. Cross is fully prepared to admit that consumerism leaves an ambiguous, even destructive, legacy. The satisfaction of immediate needs, for instance, has had the effect of quelling the desire to search for higher goals. It has obliterated a culture of constraint, just as it has often undermined communities of shared values and long-lasting commitments. Moreover, "affluence hardly encouraged introspection and self-cultivation" (238). As consumerism, especially at century's end, becomes an increasingly individualistic and private affair, we risk losing key virtues that stabilize and promote social life: care for others, compromise, friendship, responsibility to the past, and a felt obligation for the future.

Cross concludes his book not optimistic that all-embracing consumerism will come to an end anytime soon, for it is simply too successful at helping people cope with change and uncertainty, too valuable in redressing social inequality and division. And so, barring economic or environmental collapse, consumerism likely will continue to thrive. The jeremiads invoked against consumerism will hardly register on the cultural map.

Both Arthur Simon, author of *How Much is Enough? Hungering for God in an Affluent Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003, 192 pp., \$11.99), and Michael Schut, editor of *Simpler Living Compassionate Life: A Christian Perspective* (Denver, CO: Living the Good News, 1999, 296 pp., \$14.95), are convinced that Cross's concluding prediction is incorrect. Their books are compelling because they are not written as jeremiads. Calmly, and sometimes beautifully, they show that consumerism, in the end, is not successful in treating change and uncertainty, inequality and division. In fact, when the church is faithful to the mission of Christ it produces personal and social well-being that far surpasses the gains of consumerism. The call away from consumerism is not a call to dour asceticism, but rather an invitation to joy, an invitation to receive, as Simon says, God's extravagant grace.

Simon, who is the founder and now president emeritus of Bread for the World, a Christian lobby group advocating for the poor and hungry of the world, starts with a rather unsettling observation: in desiring to be part of mainstream culture the church has become affluent, a willing partner in the consumption-driven American Dream, and thus hostile to the ways of Jesus. When we consider how comfortable and luxurious our lives currently are, it is simply scandalous how little we give to others around the world who are often in desperate need. Simon is not calling us to vows of poverty. Rather, we are to give out of our abundance and live more simply and intentionally so that others can have basic needs met.

At root our problem is one of distrust. We do not really believe that God has and will continue to provide for us. We live, as de Tocqueville suggested, on the assumption that we have to take care of ourselves, and do everything in our power to secure our lives, for no one else will. This is a losing battle because as prisoners of mammon (money becomes mammon when its acquisition gets in the way of or overrides compassionate giving) we participate in the “myth of scarcity” that tells us we can never have enough. This attitude is in direct opposition to the faithful discipleship to which Christ called us: to belong to Christ is to live out a new identity in which the cares of God, rather than self-care, are the determining focus. To the extent that we keep our focus on God we will build caring communities that preclude the problems consumerism is well-designed to address, problems like loneliness, anxiety, boredom, and fear. Our actions, however, indicate that we really do not believe that God will take care of us.

As we truly enter into the body of Christ, the patterns of our lives should shift from getting to giving. Our model for this life, of course, is God, who gave extravagantly in the creation itself, and continues to give in the redemptive life of the Son and Holy Spirit. God desires that we experience pleasure and enjoyment, but this joy cannot be authentic if it is premised on economic injustice and personal or social suffering. This is why Simon points us repeatedly to the social and political dimensions of Christian living. Christian life is lived outward, which means that it is directed to others in acts of sharing, encouragement, and mutual upbuilding. As we are transformed into the nature of Christ, our very being and presence on earth will bring glory to God. “Power used selfishly is power corrupted. Ability wasted is power corrupted. But opportunity to do good, received as a trust from God and exercised to help others, is power ennobled” (100).

Simon recognizes that we cannot live this faithful life alone. We need the support and guidance of church communities. Above all, we need to steep our lives in prayer, and give our fears and insecurities over to God. To help us see how this all works, Simon intersperses his book with numerous personal examples of people who make the transition from fretful consumerism to faithful, abundant living. He also concludes with several practical suggestions like turning off the TV and developing more responsible home budgets.

Simpler Living Compassionate Life is a collection of essays designed to move us from the frenzy and pain of the rat race to the enjoyment and celebration of all creation. Authors as diverse as Frederick Buechner, Juliet Schor, Henri Nouwen, Wendell Berry, John Cobb, Richard Foster, and Calvin DeWitt, lead us into a deep and far-ranging exploration into how we experience time, money, work, food, our bodies, and the places we live. They challenge us to think spiritually about what these things mean, with the overall aim of bringing our aspirations and fears into dialogue with a Christian understanding.

For example, consider the biblical teaching of creation. On this view, all that we enjoy, even ourselves, are gifts that come from the unfathomable love of God. The grasping, clutching character of our lives indicates that we have not really appreciated this teaching. We know this because we have bought into the consumerist mind-set that keeps us forever unsatisfied and ungrateful—this is why we are constantly looking for more. But if we did appreciate creation for what it is, a blessed landscape of generosity, then our work, eating, friendships, and playing would be concrete expressions of gratitude. Our church communities would become great witnesses to the friendship and grace of God.

One of the strengths of this book is that it includes a study guide, designed flexibly to fit a four-, six-, eight-, or twelve-week schedule of church Sunday school or group discussion. Participants will benefit immensely from the very helpful exercises and discussion prompted by the reading. Moreover, they will learn to develop practical steps that will move personal and church life closer to what God desires. Michael Schut, who works with Earth Ministry in Seattle, Washington, an organization devoted to mobilizing churches to become better stewards of creation, designed the book as a resource to help laypeople live a more compassionate Christian life. In this task he has succeeded admirably.

Consumerism, as these and many other books indicate, is clearly a growing cultural concern. It is also a very complex affair, touching people on a variety of levels. If the church is to play a leading role in returning us to health (one of the root meanings of salvation), it must first understand why consumerism is so very attractive, and then come to terms with its complicity in this phenomenon. Having done this, the church will be better positioned to preach and model the truly abundant life that Jesus promised to all who follow in his ways.

NOTE

†For many useful statistics about the pace and direction of consumerism, see John De Graaf's excellent television documentaries, *Affluenza* (1997) and *Escape from Affluenza* (1998), available through Bullfrog Films, and accompanying book written with David Wann and Thomas Naylor, *Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2001).



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