

## Consumerism and Christian Community

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### Books discussed:

*Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*, by Robert B. Cialdini (Morrow/HarperCollins, 1999).

*Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic*, by John De Graaf, David Wann, and Thomas H. Naylor (Berrett-Koehler, 2001). Also available as a one-hour PBS videotape from public libraries or from [www.bullfrogfilms.com](http://www.bullfrogfilms.com).

*Consuming Desires: Consumption, Culture, and the Pursuit of Happiness*, ed. Roger Rosenblatt (Island Press/Shearwater, 1999).

*Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, by Barbara Ehrenreich (Henry Holt, 2001).

*Luxury Fever: Money and Happiness in an Era of Excess*, by Robert H. Frank (Princeton University Press, 1999; New York: Simon & Schuster/Free Press, 2001)

*Dematerializing: Taming the Power of Possessions*, by Jane Hammerslough (Perseus, 2001).

*The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies*, by Robert E. Lane (Yale University Press, 2000).

“Where your treasure is, there your heart is also,” Jesus cautioned. But what about the grief of those who have lost their jobs? What about those for whom decades of retirement savings or college savings have disappeared in the market downturn? In our consumerist culture, these people are doubly bereft: lost income, yes; but worse yet

may be the symbolic loss in a culture where the bottom line is the top priority and what we own is the measure of who we are.

Who are we if we are broke? The abundance of God makes no sense at all in a market economy where, by definition, only what is scarce has value. And yet the abundance of God is a belief that both consoles our fears and deconstructs the illusions that hold us captive.

Although we live in a society of unparalleled prosperity, we also face a culture of unparalleled consumerism in which more is never enough. As a result, even the prosperous feel needy. Even the successful are driven to work inhuman hours. “Stuff and Salvation” might be a fall adult education program that can meet some of the deepest, most dangerous spiritual needs of our time by laying bare the forces driving our consumerism. The segue to Advent will be effortless.

No doubt the easiest way into these issues is an engaging PBS show--also available as a book--titled *Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic*. As the title suggests, we face epidemic levels of earning-and-spending: “a painful, contagious, socially transmitted condition of overload, debt, anxiety, and waste resulted from the dogged pursuit of more” (p. 2). We accumulate stuff we don’t need; we neglect the things that matter most. The solution they propose is voluntary simplicity, but enroute to that proposal the authors provide an accurate and thoughtful account of our culture, including a quick but reliable survey of American cultural history.

In a breezy, accessible manner, *Affluenza* delineates the scope and the significance of the problems we face. The issue is not pure-and-simple individual greed. The problem is a rootless society structurally dependent in a variety of ways upon ever-escalating levels of material acquisition at the expense of human happiness, community, and moral significance. The authors adeptly and repeatedly acknowledge that various religious traditions warn against what has become the American way of life. This recognition lends a depth to their accounts and generates a variety of picking-up places for parish discussion.

My local public library has two copies of the videotape; if yours doesn't, it can be purchased at a very steep discount from the production company, Bull Frog Films. Thanks go to the Pew Charitable Trusts for funding such fine work.

In *Dematerializing: Taming the Power of Possessions*, Jane Hammerslough explores the psychological needs into which consumerism taps. Our culture "exults in the tangible as a means of expressing the deepest feelings," she warns, and that's a set-up for spending (p. 44). We are tempted to feel that buying something will solace our suffering, satisfy our control needs, remedy the past, compensate for our sense of personal inadequacy, and so forth--through nine chapters, one illusion each. In this gentle and persuasive book, Hammerslough repeatedly acknowledges that spending is not always or exclusively motivated by such needs. But advertising incessantly urges such illusions upon us, and some of us, some of the time, do give in. That's a fact we all need to think about carefully. Her suggestions for further reading are superb: from Aristotle, Veblen, de Tocqueville and Thoreau to a select but sharp group of contemporaries.

Reading *Dematerializing*, I was reminded of a sales flyer I received one autumn a few years back. "Do you love your college student?" it asked; "do you miss them? Are they homesick? Nothing expresses a parent's love and support better than a package from home . . ." which of course they would send for me for a mere \$65 per month, shipping and handling included. For a couple of seconds, the fact that this would not be a package from *home* seemed hardly to matter: their sales pitch scored a direct hit in my new life as an empty-nester, despite the fact that none of my three students would be thrilled by a carton of cheap candy and greasy junk food. *Dematerializing* will help anyone to acknowledge the power of such manipulative appeals. Surely that's a first step toward meeting our own emotional needs in more reasonable, more authentic ways.

Robert Cialdini's *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion* complements *Dematerializing's* focus on individual psychology and spending decisions. Cialdini brings to bear a creative array of empirical social science to explicate the sociology of spending decisions. As social creatures, we do rely upon the behavior of others as a guide to our own decisions, and we do invest significantly in presenting a consistent

persona to those around us. These are deeply embedded, often unconscious shortcuts predictably shape our mundane decision-making. Empirical investigation into these shortcuts, however, has generated a stunning array of deeply manipulative sales strategies, strategies far more pernicious than those Vance Packard outlined in his 1957 bestseller, *The Hidden Persuaders*.

Despite that seriousness, however, this is also a very engaging book and a quick, easy read. *Influence* might be a useful book to recommend to people who find themselves chronically over-spent. I'm sure it would also be very popular with youth groups. And it might be interesting to challenge the vestry to decide whether it's ethical to use these techniques in a pledge campaign. According to Caldini's empirical data, some of the tricks are unnervingly successful. If these principles do shape the sociology of spending, is it possible to avoid them? What does it mean to be honest in asking for money?

In *Luxury Fever: Money and Happiness in an Era of Excess*, Robert H. Frank explicates the process whereby consumerism feeds on itself. The problem here, he contends, is that "as even the most ardent free-marketers have known all along . . . the choices of rational well-informed people simply do not always add up to a whole that meets their approval" (p. 8). Why not? That's the question he sets out to answer. Despite our unparalleled prosperity, he explains, we are commonly anxious, overcommitted, and frazzled because we spend time and money acquiring goods that testify to our status rather than making spending decisions that contribute to our enduring happiness. This competition for status yields diminishing returns as the ante is upped by other competitors: witness the skyrocketing escalation of what counts as a "big" house, a "impressive" car, or a "nice" watch. Furthermore, the thrill of status acquisitions wears off quickly. In no time at all, that \$100,000 car is just "the car," the fabulously expensive house is just "the house." Add these two factors together, and it's clear that status acquisition is doomed. Status that we buy is never secure. It melts away in the night, muttering "more is never enough, more is never enough."

But spending on what Frank calls "inconspicuous consumption"--time for relationships or commitments to simpler lives, cleaner air and healthier communities--yields measures of life satisfaction that grow with time. An old car is worthless; an old friend is

priceless. That's the difference between conspicuous and inconspicuous consumption. "Yet because inconspicuous consumption items typically are not offered for sale in the marketplace," Frank laments, "we do not hear a steady stream of advertising messages touting their benefits" (p. 175).

We may, of course, hear such counter-cultural messages in church. Merge his arguments and his data with some ordinary meditation on the virtues and you will have a rich stack of sermon ideas--or abundant material for a very interesting course. The treasure we lay up "in heaven" is not out of reach until end-time. It's the foundation of the kingdom of God right here, right now. It's not cheap, but neither is it for sale.

We have gotten ourselves into this predicament, Frank contends, because classic economic theory ignores the extent to which individual and group interests conflict. It may be serve my individual interest to work the insanely long hours that my professional peers work; it may be smart--at one level--to live in the expensive neighborhoods where "people like us" are expected to live. But it is not in our collective interest to live in a society where work consumes so much time, and mortgages consume so much money, that none of us has time or energy to be friends and neighbors of one another. Individual consumers are not free to move toward what would be in our collective interest, he explains, just as individual nations in an arms race are not free to cut military expenditures unilaterally.

But "free" is a very slippery concept here. Advertising and a consumerist culture undeniably stoke the fires of ambition and peer pressure. But spiritual disciplines and Christian community can have the contrary effect, especially if we realize that we are resisting a false and dangerous "lifestyle" that leave us miserable in the long run. If we are constrained from such healthier choices, perhaps that's not because we lack political freedom, but because we lack courage, wisdom, and social support.

Classic economic theory makes another important mistake as well, Frank contends. Rational-actor theory supposes that we make decisions by calm, essentially mathematical calculation of our own self-interest. But that's not how we make decisions, and especially not how we make decisions relevant to our own survival and our social status. Long evolutionary pressures upon herd animals have rendered human beings

acutely--and appropriately--sensitive to relative status. What matters is not what we earn absolutely; what matters is what we earn relative to those to whom we compare ourselves.

Once again, Frank's analysis testifies to the power of counter-cultural communities, it seems to me. Churches can be communities that confer status and uphold standards very different from those sold on television. This may require resisting the swagger and the deep pockets of the richest members. It may require a whole new approach to the budget. What if money is *not* the measure of who we are? Then what *is* the measure? Who are we? These are always good questions, but they may be especially powerful when the tin god of Net Worth is looking particularly hollow.

Frank's last chapter proposes a set of tax incentives and so forth that will serve the common good by breaking the hold of this "luxury fever." These proposals are interesting; whether they are technically solid I leave to those with training in economics to decide. Whether or not tax-law changes can break the hold of luxury fever, we can certainly take to heart the power of Christian community to shape perceptions and influences choices in healthy directions. If nothing else, conspicuous consumption testifies poignantly to the unmet spiritual hunger of our times: we yearn to know that we are known and loved for ourselves, not our stuff; we yearn to be assured that in the long run we do count for something beyond our quantifiable assets.

Robert Lane's *The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies* considers every possible way of defending economic orthodoxy. The problem he analyzes is this: If free-market consumers are free to buy what we want, and if by all available evidence we are satisfied by our purchases, then our current state of affairs seems quite inexplicable. There has been a three-fold rise in disposable income in the last sixty years, but this rise has not been accompanied by rising levels of subjective well-being. Instead, all around us we see skyrocketing levels of social dysfunction and the general collapse of civic organizations. Might it be that money doesn't buy happiness? And if it doesn't, what are we to do with the economic orthodoxy that the greatest good for the greatest number follows from each person buying as much as he can afford of whatever he wants to buy?

*The Loss of Happiness* is a much less readable, far less engaging book than *Luxury Fever*, but in its own somewhat ponderous academic way I found it quite fascinating. Its careful, data-based thoroughness lays to rest any lingering anxiety that concern about consumerism is just Puritanism in disguise, or reflexive left-wing opposition to business endeavors generally, or perhaps elitist lamentation about bourgeois buying habits. Like everyone else I have read on the topic, Lane cites the overwhelming evidence that human relationships are the key to the highest levels of subjective well-being. And yet, he puzzles, the ability to prefer building relationships to earning money presupposes that we know what we feel. Most of us don't, he contends. Furthermore, he points out morosely, we probably shouldn't try: introspection correlates positively with depression. Because we don't know what we feel, he concludes, we do not successfully make the choices that will make us happy in the long run. He has clearly reached this conclusion reluctantly, perhaps in amazement and only after scrupulously considering every other possibility.

But the most interesting unexamined assumption here is that people somehow should know what ultimately makes for human happiness. Of course we do know what we want, in the sense of recognizing immediate appetites. But happiness? Enduring happiness depends upon following the dictates of wisdom, which almost by definition is a rare gift. It seems to me that there's a false equation here between true happiness and mere appetite. As sages have taught from the beginning of time, our mere desires—our simple appetites—are apt to mislead us. The greatest good, the genuine good, is not the sum of appetitive desires. Authentic happiness and ordinary desires are two very different things.

But individual subjective unhappiness among the financially secure is only one dimension of the problem consumerism generates. One of the greatest dangers of rampant consumerism, it seems to me, is socioeconomic policies that make the rich richer and the poor yet more miserable. Barbara Ehrenreich's bestseller, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* ought to be required reading for any study of consumerism. In several different communities around the country, she tries for a while to live on the minimum wage. It can't be done. Strictly speaking, that's hardly news. But her vignettes bring to life the hundred of thousands people who are trying to survive in

such jobs. I guarantee that you will never calculate a tip or walk through a discount store in quite the same way again. In a culture beset by affluenza or luxury fever, many hard-working people who are employed full time nonetheless don't earn enough to pay the security deposit necessary to rent an apartment.

Roger Rosenblatt's collection *Consuming Desires* similarly complicates any discussion of America's obsession with status and with stuff. Novelists Jane Smiley and Bharati Mukherjee argue that labor-saving devices and American individualist traditions have freed women--especially immigrant women--from lives of endless drudgery and subservience. Wholesale condemnation of material comfort is the naive luxury of the upper class. Alex Kotlowitz, author of *There Are No Children Here*, portrays how status-conscious consumption drives youth culture in the impoverished, despairing inner city. He puzzles over the ways in which poverty youth-culture styles are mimicked by incomparably better-off suburban kids. In *The Missing Middle: Working Families and the Future of American Social Policy* (New York: Norton, 2000), Theda Skocpol in effect supports these three elegant essays with massive socioeconomic detail: the glitz of American consumerism masks the disproportionate suffering of the working class.

Other contributors argue that just as consumerist drives distort our individual lives, so also they distort our national priorities. André Schiffrin, the legendary editor at Pantheon, describes the devastating effect on book publishing of ownership by international communications conglomerates concerned primarily with profit margins. Other essays explore everything from environmental costs to the impact on Hollywood.

Juliet Schor, author of *The Overworked American* (1992) and *The Overspent American* (1998) argues in her essay that "the national consciousness remains enslaved to a liberal ideology that takes consumerism as unassailable. Nowhere is that liberal ideology so powerful as in the discipline of economics" (p. 37-38). Essays like these testify to cultural issues far wider than the excessive accumulation of stuff in the closets of the nation. There is a dangerous imbalance in market-driven cultures generally, an addiction that blinds us.

Unregulated markets and American-style consumerism are a cultural threat of global magnitude, as Benjamin Barber so adeptly argues in *Jihad Vs. McWorld: How*



*Globalism and Tribalism Are Reshaping the World* (New York: Random House, 1995). More recently, policy economists of international stature have been saying much the same thing: George Soros, *On Globalization* (New York: Public Affairs, 2001); and Joseph E. Stiglitz, *Globalization and Its Discontents* (New York: Norton, 2002). All three books have been widely reviewed, so I won't discuss them in detail. But their consensus is a grim one. Unregulated, unconstrained profit-seeking by the powerful has extraordinarily dangerous socioeconomic results.

In this cultural context, and especially when the economy is in a serious downturn, the church surely has good news to share. The desperate quest for power, for status, and for material goods is grounded in spiritual emptiness. Did we know that we are loved by God, our need for status might be more easily controlled or better directed. Did we have reference groups whose central values were not consumerist, we might be less swayed by advertising, by ambition, and by peer pressure in our workplaces. Any of us, all of us, poor and wealthy alike, are struggling to acquire what can only be had for free: the knowledge that we are loved, the assurance that we are ultimately significant. Were we secure in that love, we would be freer to share and more likely to face our problems honestly, decently building an economy in which all people can love and work with dignity.

When jobs are disappearing and markets are falling, the true cost of consumerism can be made painfully clear. And the true wisdom of the Gospel might be more easily proclaimed and heard: God's love is both free and abundant, and the Christian community does not--or should not--measure its members with the yardsticks of Wall Street.