



Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Theological Studies

Volume 3 | Issue 1

Article 6

5-2020

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Recommended Citation

Yano, Shayne (2020) "Divine Over Matter: The Idolatry of Consumerism," *Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Theological Studies*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/saysomethingtheological/vol3/iss1/6>

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Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

Divine Over Matter: The Idolatry of Consumerism

Shayne Yano

Abstract: Consumerism has evolved into a lifestyle in which people seek to find meaning in life through shopping and acquiring material possessions. Corporations like Apple use advertising to make buyers feel like they always need to have the latest and greatest in order to be happy, while websites like Amazon have made it possible to shop endlessly without even having to leave the couch. For many, these consumeristic habits have become commonplace, but there are potential dangers to this kind of lifestyle as it relates to a relationship with God. We are trained by clever marketing and advertisements to believe that material goods are the key to happiness—if you just buy our new product, your life will have meaning. One of the biggest dangers of consumerism is that it encourages people to shop not just for pleasure, but for meaning. Now more than ever, people are searching to discover the purpose and meaning of their lives, and big businesses are more than happy to have their products become that meaning. It is true that material possessions may grant temporary happiness, but they can never provide a person with a lasting and satisfactory sense of fulfillment. Consumerism is also dangerous because it acts as a distraction from that which is truly important: loving God and caring for those in need. It is easy to spend money on new clothes or a new phone, but the more we spend money on ourselves, the more difficult it becomes to give our attention and resources to our neighbors—to people who do not have the luxury of shopping for pleasure. This is why it is important to cultivate a desire for God and a genuine desire to help others above our desire for material possessions. By training ourselves to spend money on others, generosity gradually becomes a habit over time. This is by no means an easy task, but it is an important one for anyone who claims that they love God and their neighbors.

Keywords: Idolatry, Consumerism, Search for Meaning, Cultivating Desires, Enjoyment in God



Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

Introduction

Consumerism has become an integral part of the daily life and culture of human beings, especially in 21st century America. Malls are filled with shoppers who are eager to spend money on the latest and greatest outfit or Apple product, while companies like Amazon have made it easy to buy whatever you desire without ever having to leave the comforts of the couch. This culture of consumerism seems to enhance peoples' lives by providing a certain sense of joy and meaning while also contributing to a healthy economy and the creation of jobs.

However, below the surface, these consumeristic habits (perhaps even addictions) may not be providing the meaning and happiness that advertisements promise us. In fact, our unquenchable pursuit of material goods can be a dangerous distraction from what is most important in life: relationship with God and with other people. The consumerist mindset can easily become idolatry when worship is directed away from God and towards only that which we can touch and see. Consumerism trains us to seek ultimate satisfaction and enjoyment in material goods rather than finding meaning and fulfillment in love of God and love of neighbor.

I constantly find myself lured by the temptations of advertisements and online shopping, which in turn lead to selfishness. This work is meant to be an opportunity to acknowledge and analyze the dangers of consumerism in my own desires and habits, especially in the midst of a highly consumeristic and materialistic American society. This argument will seek to integrate both philosophy and theology in order to gain insight into the motivations of consumerism and how those desires can be redirected toward a healthier and more loving care for others.

I constantly find myself lured by the temptations of advertisements and online shopping. Upon deeper reflection, I can see how my consumeristic habits and desires lead to selfishness. With that realization in mind, this work seeks to acknowledge and analyzing the dangers associated with consumerism, especially in the midst this highly materialistic American society. The following pages integrate philosophy and theology in order to gain insight into the motivations of consumerism. The goal is to learn how to redirect those desires toward healthier and more loving care for others.

Stuck in the Cave

One of the fundamental motivations behind consumerism is the belief that success and satisfaction are to be found in material possessions. Advertising agencies want to convince everyone that a car or pair of shoes are the key to happiness. If you just buy this kind of phone or wear this brand of underwear, you will be a happier human being. If the material world really is all that matters, then perhaps these advertisements have a point—more stuff means more success. But what if there is more to a meaningful life than just the material world that we experience through our senses?

This is the question Plato depicts in his allegory of the cave. In *The Republic*, Socrates tells the story of prisoners who are born in a cave, spending their whole lives chained to the floor with their heads fixed toward a wall of the cave. Opposite this wall is a fire which the captors use to project images of various objects and animals onto the wall for the prisoners to see, even

Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

Volume 3, Issue 1, May 2020

Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles

making noises for those images which would naturally make noise. Socrates explains, “such men would hold that the truth is nothing other than the shadows of artificial things.”¹

For the prisoners who are stuck in the cave with their eyes fixed on the wall, those shadows passing by are all that they have ever known. They assume that this is as good as it gets. Although it has been more than two millennia since Plato wrote this allegory, it seems to be an accurate portrayal of the way that we have been trained since birth to think that whatever is material is what is most real. Those who are stuck in consumeristic habits are like the prisoners chained to the floor, with big corporations and marketing consultants happy to parade their products in front of them like shadows on a wall.

Shopping for Meaning

Our consumeristic habits are inevitably tied to the basic human need to make meaning out of life. We are constantly bombarded by advertisements telling us that this or that product will be the key to a meaningful life. Bruce Rittenhouse, in his book *Shopping for Meaningful Lives*, uses Paul Tillich' theology to examine the growing consumerism of our culture through a religious lens. Rittenhouse writes, “according to Tillich, the threat of meaninglessness to spiritual self-affirmation is the dominant anxiety of the modern age.”²

People both young and old are constantly searching for meaning in our society. On the surface, it may seem that shopping has no relation to this existential search. Most people are likely to view shopping as just another fun activity. The feeling of buying new clothes or the latest gadget elicits a feeling of excitement and accomplishment. This all seems harmless enough, but perhaps there is also something more serious going on below the surface.

According to Rittenhouse, people turn to consumerism not simply for pleasure but ultimately in order to find meaning. This search for meaning may often times be unconscious, yet that makes it no less powerful in its influence upon our consumeristic habits.³ In the search for meaning, we turn to consumerism because of convenience. It is challenging and time consuming to go out into the world and develop meaningful friendships, pursue a fulfilling career, or help people in need. Shopping, on the other hand, is easy; it provides instant results and gratification. With the swipe of a credit card or one click online, I get what I want when I want it. In a world where control and meaning are so elusive, shopping is the one thing where we feel totally in control.

Desiring God

Instead of looking for meaning in material things, the antidote to the threat of meaninglessness is to be found in knowing and loving God. The danger of consumerism is that it leads humanity to value material goods as ends in themselves, instead of as a means to the ultimate end: enjoyment in God. To have anything else besides God as the ultimate end of desire

¹ Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1968), 194.

² Bruce Rittenhouse, *Shopping for Meaningful Lives: The Religious Motive of Consumerism* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2013), 75.

³ *Ibid.*, 86.

is a form of idolatry. Consumerism can bring temporary relief and meaning, but the enjoyment and satisfaction are fleeting at best.

William Cavanaugh, in *Being Consumed*, argues that the true satisfaction of our desire for meaning and happiness can only be found in God and that consumerism serves only as a temporary distraction. He draws on Augustine's idea that the restless human heart can only be satisfied when it seeks ultimate satisfaction in God.⁴ God is eternal and perfect, and thus able to satisfy human desire in a way that finite, temporal goods cannot.

It is important to note that desire in and of itself is not an evil; just because we have a want for material things does not make us guilty of idolatry. Cavanaugh notes, "Desire is not simply negative; our desires are what get us out of bed in the morning. We desire because we live."⁵ Desire is what motivates us. It allows us to persevere despite obstacles and challenges in life. A problem only arises when our habits leave us stuck in a cycle of desiring the wrong things.

The Truly Hungry

It is not only the individual who suffers as a result of the restless pursuit of material goods. Consumerism keeps us from loving our neighbors. Overtime we become less concerned with the genuine needs of others as we grow ever more focused on our own excesses and wants. Cavanaugh observes, "Desire in consumer society keeps us distracted from the desires of the truly hungry, those who experience hunger as life-threatening deprivation."⁶ Perhaps the most detrimental aspect of the idolatry of consumerism is that it keeps us so wrapped up in ourselves that it prevents us from properly loving other people in need.

When we get trapped in the feeling of needing to have the latest gadget or get caught up in the chaos of Black Friday, it becomes easy to forget about those who actually lack material necessities. Consumerism keeps the individual focused on the self, while growing ever more comfortable ignoring the real needs of others. When acquiring material goods becomes our sole purpose in life, we ignore the reality that there are people in this world who lack basic necessities like food, clean water, clothing, and shelter. They do not have the luxury of shopping merely out of habit or pleasure.

Cavanaugh asserts, "The key to true freedom is not just following whatever desires we happen to have, but cultivating the right desires."⁷ The more we shop and buy material goods only for our own pleasure, the more difficult it becomes to give our money and resources to others, especially to those in need. However, if we train ourselves to spend money on others (i.e., paying for someone else's meal or donating to charity), then it gradually becomes something that we do out of habit. In this way, we can love others with our generosity instead of always spending our money on ourselves. The desires tied to consumerism will over time be replaced by

⁴ William Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 90.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 91.

⁷ Ibid., 11.



Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

a more genuine love of God and love of neighbor. However, this reorientation of desire does not happen magically overnight just because we wish for it. It is each individual's responsibility to cultivate a desire to love God above all else.

Concluding Remarks

The purpose of this argument is not to say that shopping and material goods are intrinsically dangerous and wrong and of themselves—I am not calling for an end to all shopping. Retail stores and online shopping services provide important services to our human society, especially for those who make a living from working at or owning such businesses. It is important to recognize the crucial role that these businesses play in people's livelihoods, and my goal is not to discourage people from shopping altogether. Shopping can even be used as a way to show love to our neighbors, such as buying a gift for someone going through a rough time, or supporting small, local businesses in need of customers. The danger and idolatry begin to creep in when we start to find our meaning and self-worth in these material pursuits.

What I am calling for is a more thoughtful and intentional effort to turn our consumeristic tendencies into loving care for others. The surrounding consumer culture exerts a pressure to believe that meaning and worth are measured by the brand of your clothes or the model of your smart phone. However, it is possible, and indeed necessary, to fight against this consumeristic pressure and direct our shopping habits outward towards others. This starts by being mindful of where we spend our money and who we spend that money on. I find that it feels natural for me to spend time and money ordering what I want on Amazon or shopping for myself at my favorite stores—I'll pay whatever I need to in order to get what I want. I tend to feel more hesitant to spend money when donating to charity, leaving a tip, or when I spot the man holding a sign at the end of the freeway ramp. My hope is to reverse these tendencies over time with intentional training, so that I habitually spend money on others without hesitation but think carefully when shopping only for myself.

Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

Volume 3, Issue 1, May 2020

Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles



Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies

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