

Lead Us Not into Temptation: Christian Responses to Consumerism

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Abstract:

Consumerism represents a way of structuring society and the economy that encourages and facilitates the ever-expanding acquisition of commodities. Consumption is now the principle aspiration and source of individual identity for growing numbers of those in Western society. However, inherent in consumerism is exploitation. The environment is exploited, producers and workers are exploited and the consumer is exploited. Protestant critiques of consumerism tend to focus concern on the Western individual, naming over consumption as a form of idolatry, often overlooking broader, global concerns. In contrast to this, Catholic critiques of consumerism examine the need for Christians to love the global neighbour. Both critiques remain somewhat abstracted from everyday life, highlighting a troubling tendency to separate belief from practice. Using Grounded Theory Method this study seeks to uncover practical steps to counter consumerism being undertaken in the believing community. The everyday practices and perspectives of participants committed to living in opposition to the values of consumerism can act as exemplars for the wider Christian community. A range of practices by the study's participants show them seeking to live both simply and sacramentally. They use rules to encourage faithful living, and engage in theological reflection that reflects a praxis cycle. Households of faith are an important support structure for resisting consumerist ideals. The study concludes that the individuals under examination reflect a prophetic call that rails against injustice and calls for oppression to cease. The wider church would do well to heed their call and follow their example.

Acknowledgements

I'm writing these acknowledgements seven years on from the Christchurch earthquake of February 22, 2011. At the time of the earthquake this thesis was being completed as part of a PhD programme in Religious Studies at Victoria University. On the day of the earthquake I had four interviews for the research lined up. I had completed two and rushed home to reprint a missing participant information form. I walked out of my study and the quake struck. A large brick fireplace collapsed into the study destroying the desk and chair where I had been sitting seconds before.

After this, my PhD was put on hold for eight months as the house was inaccessible. Eventually, I returned part time and then discovered, after not being able to have children, that I was pregnant. As the birth of our daughter approached, the thesis was put on hold once again. The birth was followed by severe post-natal depression and I made the difficult decision to stop the PhD entirely.

Later, I decided I still wanted to do something with the research and enrolled in a Masters in Theology at Otago University. It took me a while to realise that the material was still, in essence, a PhD. I am very grateful for the patience of my supervisor Murray Rae as he gave me time to get to that point. I am also thankful for the initial support of Geoff Troughton and Chris Marshall from Victoria University and latterly, David Tombs of Otago.

Thank you to all the participants in the study, your lives are inspiring and challenging. A big thanks to Paul for being supportive of a journey that we never imagined would take this long and to Eliza for her constant encouragement.

On this day I also remember the struggle for many in post-quake Christchurch, particularly those I knew whose own journey to mental health ended too soon.

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Introduction

Consumerism represents a way of structuring society and the economy that encourages the increasing acquisition of commodities. Within Western society, consumption is now the principle aspiration and source of individual identity for growing numbers of people. Western capitalist economies depend on people continually developing new wants and desires, people whose “basic sense of necessity” is always expanding.¹ They require that unnecessary consumption becomes an integral part of living for most of the population. Western economies are structured in such a way that if people were to consume only to meet actual needs the economy would collapse.²

The assessment of consumerism by Christian thinkers is condemnatory. Rodney Clapp comments that consumerism:

[S]uggests inordinate concern -some might even say addiction- with the acquisition, possession and consumption of material goods and services. Even more seriously, consumerism suggests a preoccupation with the immediate gratification of desire. It implies foolishness, superficiality and triviality, and the destruction of personal and social relationships by means of selfishness, individualism, possessiveness and covetousness.³

Portrayed in this way, consumerism constitutes a rival to the virtues espoused by Christianity and to a life of Christian discipleship. Christian teaching has

¹ Christian Smith, *Soul Searching* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 178.

² Rodney Clapp quoted in “All We Like Sheep,” Skye Jethani, *Leadership* Volume xxvii Number 3 (Summer 2006): 30. Australian Economist Saul Eslake conservatively calculates that one quarter of capitalist economies are built on the consumption of products unnecessary to meet basic needs. Eslake argues that “if everyone cut their spending back to basics... the result would be an almighty recession – indeed, a depression.” (Saul Eslake quoted in “What Would Happen to the Economy If We All Stopped Spending Money,” Jessica Haynes, *ABC News* (7 Mar 2017), <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-03-07/what-happens-to-the-economy-when-we-stop-spending-money/8297724> (10 Aug 2017).

³ Rodney Clapp, ed. *The Consuming Passion* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1998), 21.

traditionally emphasised virtues like patience, contentedness and self-denial,⁴ while consumerism is accused of encouraging selfishness, greed, impatience, envy, and the commodification of relationships.

However, secular consumerism critic Juliet Schor observes a conundrum. She argues: “a stance that just says ‘consuming is bad, don’t consume’ is a non-starter. People have to consume. Consuming is a very legitimate, and very important life activity.”⁵ Consumption is inextricably linked with human existence. Without the purchase of essentials such as food, clothing and shelter, humans cannot survive or thrive. It is also worth noting that consumption is the logical endpoint of many creative endeavours Christians would endorse. Schor maintains that critical views can, therefore, be somewhat simplistic. A belief that says ‘consumer culture is bad’ and assumes there’s another anti-consumerist culture that is ‘good’ is an insufficient positioning.⁶

So, while Christian critiques of consumerism do provide a useful censure of Western society’s love of consumer goods, they often do little to illuminate commendable consumption (actual or hypothetical) for those who claim the Christian faith. Laura Hartman wonders: “If one accepts Christian criticisms that consumerism places excessive value on consumption, encourages greed, and attaches idolatrous weight to the social value of conspicuous consumption, this raises a more basic question: what constitutes good, Christian consumption?”⁷

Areas often over-looked in Christian treatments of consumption, which need to be considered in any formulations of ‘good’ consumption, include the exploitation of growers and workers as well as the degradation of the environment in the production of goods. Attention must be given to the manufacturing processes of

⁴ Christian Smith, *Soul Searching*, 178.

⁵ Juliet Schor, in an interview with Jo Littler, “Tackling Turbo Consumption,” *Cultural Studies* Volume 22, Issue 5 (September 2008): 594.

⁶ *ibid.*, 591.

⁷ Laura Hartman, *The Christian Consumer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 8.

consumer goods whereby producers progressively offload all aspects of the actual manufacturing process by contracting the work, especially to factories in the third world where wages are lower and laws around worker and environmental protection are more lax. This process masks more troubling aspects of production such as the exploitation of workers through poor pay and working conditions as well as exploitative resource use.⁸ Christian critiques need to recognise that growing levels of over-consumption is the major cause of our global ecological crisis.⁹ Consumption depends, however indirectly, on the destructive exploitation of natural resources.¹⁰

This thesis acknowledges that many Christians have succumbed to the values of consumerism as their espoused religious beliefs and their practices fail to align fully. However, the research underpinning this work is based on the belief that there are Christians living faithfully within a consumer culture. Their lifestyle is marked by their concern for those oppressed by unjust labour conditions as well as the destruction of the environment caused by the rampant consumption patterns of the West. This study examines how they relate their beliefs to their practices. In doing so, it aims to provide a resource for other Christians seeking to live more faithfully in the face of consumerism.

Vincent Millar maintains that understanding the constructive theological moves undertaken in the everyday lives of these believers calls for an approach similar to the immersive methods of ethnography.¹¹ In light of Millar's assertion, I have undertaken a study of the beliefs and practices of a number of people living in creative tension with the demands of consumerism. Those studied were living their lives as ordinary citizens within consumer culture, while still engaging in practices that challenge dominant cultural values. I have examined these practices, the

⁸ Mark Paterson, *Consumption and Everyday Life* (London: Routledge, 2006), 198.

⁹ Kate Soper, "Alternative Hedonism, Cultural theory and the role of Aesthetic Revisioning," *Cultural Studies* vol 22 no 5 (September 2008): 567.

¹⁰ Jeremy Gilbert, "Against the Commodification of Everything" *Cultural Studies* vol 22 no 5 (September 2008): 553.

¹¹ Vincent Millar, *Consuming Religion* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 192.

influences on those that engage in them, and the theological considerations that inform their daily living. Such a focus acknowledges that it is in the arena of everyday life that critical ethical decisions must be made. Millar notes that this level of engagement with consumer culture is perhaps more mundane than theology is used to considering but is essential because the daily practice of consumption should be recognised as a formation in habits.¹² The thesis positions itself within the strand of Practical Theology as it formulates theological reflection on an aspect of everyday life. Practical Theology is explored in greater depth as the methodology for the study is unpacked.

Because this thesis begins its theological reflection with everyday life, rather than in abstraction from such experience, qualitative research methods have been used. Within a qualitative paradigm of research, human beings are recognised as creative agents who are actively interpreting situations and ascribing meaning and purpose to events. Analysing the fieldwork findings illuminates Christians' own interpretation of a good response to consumer culture.¹³ It identifies the resources, attitudes and behaviour shaping Christian engagement with issues of consumption. The constructive theological potential of current religious practice is of particular interest.¹⁴

To discover the beliefs and practices of Christians seeking to live in constructive tension with the ethos of consumerism, a series of unstructured interviews took place with interviewees who had been, at some point, associated with Evangelical Christian traditions. These individuals had lifestyles that indicated they were actively processing what it means to be a faithful Christian in the context of consumer culture. A 'snowball' approach was utilised to discover the interviewees. Because it was the practice of consuming differently, rather than thinking differently, that was of interest, these people marked themselves out to others and were

¹² *ibid.*, 192.

¹³ Martin Tolich and Carl Davidson, *Starting Fieldwork* (Melbourne: Oxford University, 1999), 7.

¹⁴ Vincent Millar, *Consuming Religion*, 227.

reasonably easy to identify. The examination of their beliefs and practices, as well as further reflections emerging from these, make up a significant portion of this thesis.

This study is divided into three parts. The first part provides a review of current literature concerning consumerism. Chapter One draws upon a sociological analysis of how consumerism functions in Western society as well as looking at different understandings of how it emerged. Attention is given to the processes at work that heighten both the exploitation of growers and workers in the Two-Thirds World and of the physical environment.

Chapter Two turns to consider Christian critiques of consumerism. It surveys the distinctive features of commentaries by authors from both Protestant and Catholic traditions. The chapter identifies key themes that emerge within each stream, noting that writings by authors within the Protestant tradition tend to be more focused on the individual within Western culture and are concerned with the spiritual peril that consumerism poses. Authors within the Catholic tradition are more likely to include consideration of the impact consumerism has beyond the individual. However, I shall argue that the authors from both Protestant and the Catholic traditions typically remain somewhat abstracted from everyday consumption practices.

Chapter Three seeks to broaden the scope of Christian critique of consumerism by exploring theological considerations of the environment and the economy. There is a growing tradition of theology that focuses on care of creation and describes a biblical mandate to nurture the physical world and be responsible in the use of its resources. Within critiques of the global capitalist economy, of which consumerism is an integral part, theological concern is expressed about the 'telos' of capitalism; it is suggested, in particular, that the aim of becoming rich is not faithful to scripture. Alongside this questionable telos, concern is also expressed about the global capitalist economy's failure to bring prosperity to all who are enmeshed within its systems. These understandings of creation care and the concerns expressed about the economy add to the resources available for Christians to draw on in their thinking about consumerism.

While the fourth Chapter recognises the wealth of resources available for Christians to aid them in a critical appraisal of consumer culture, it is noted that despite the availability of such resources Christians tend to display a gap between beliefs and practices. This is frequently evident in their response to consumerism. Reasons given by various theorists to explain the causes of this discrepancy are explored.

The second part of the thesis focuses on the research undertaken among participants seeking to live Christianly within a consumerist culture and reports on the initial findings. Chapter Five explains the research process utilised for the project. It explains the rationale for a Practical Theology approach which values the contributions of everyday people as they work out their faith in practice. It then explains the ideology of Grounded Theory Method, which is the qualitative research method used for this research.

Chapters Six and Seven collate the themes that emerge through analysis of the research data. They are stand-alone chapters in which the participants' voices are heard. The first of the two chapters focuses on the beliefs of the participants and considers the concerns that consumerism raises for the interviewees. These fall into two major categories. The first is how it impacts negatively on individuals within a consumer society. The second, and much larger, concern for the participants is the exploitation inherent within consumerism.

Chapter Seven considers the practices of participants and categorises them into seven themes including: meaningful work, avoiding consumption, ethical consumption, food, waste, energy, and avoiding advertising. Each of these areas is looked at in turn, utilising the comments from the participants.

The third and final component of the thesis is a reflection on the issues arising out of the fieldwork. In line with the Grounded Theory Method, these chapters develop the themes that have emerged from the research and generate theory.

In this thesis, theory is created to explain how Christians might combat consumer culture effectively. I will argue that constructive responses to consumerism must involve embodied practices. Specifically, there are five active responses common to Christians who successfully resist consumerism. This group of Christians: 1. Implement 'rules' for living; 2. Engage in a praxis cycle of action and reflection as they become aware of further concerns; 3. Utilise the support and challenge of close community; 4. Embrace a simple lifestyle; and 5. See the world sacramentally. I will also argue that as a result of these embodied practices this group of Christians interacts with the surrounding culture in a way best described as 'prophetic.'

The five active responses to consumerism are explored under the descriptions of the "process of change" and "postures towards consumerism." These chapters bring in alternative voices alongside the research participants to add breadth and depth to the themes under consideration. The ideas of different theorists are then utilised to enhance the themes being examined in each of these chapters.

Chapter Eight picks up on the notion that having coherence between beliefs and practices can be problematic, particularly in consumer culture. The strategies used by the participants to implement change in their lives, so that their lifestyle aligns with their convictions about consumer culture, are looked at. Notions around adhering to a 'rule' are considered, comparing them to Rules found in the monastic context. Concerns around legalism are acknowledged but challenged. The idea that practices can lead to the formation of new beliefs rather than practices always being the product of beliefs is also explored. A 'praxis' theological method is demonstrated in the way the participants of the study sought to link their concerns with issues of justice and exploitation to their practice. Finally, the importance of community in establishing new or alternate patterns is acknowledged. Those interviewed found support in 'households of faith.' These comprised couples, families, extended families and individuals who had intentionally committed to one another. These households provided support and accountability to live in resistance to the prevailing consumerist ethos. As a number of the participants were involved in

forms of intentional communities or 'new monasticism' this movement is explored in depth.

Chapter Nine describes and investigates the 'postures' taken by the interviewees as they engaged with the pressures of consumerism. These ways of viewing and engaging the world seem to be explanatory frameworks that underpin some of the practices witnessed in their earlier responses. Two key postures considered are: 'simplicity' and 'sacramentality.' The notion of Christian simplicity is not new, and a brief overview of historical exemplars is documented. A renewed interest in the topic emerged in the 1980s, but this interest was marked by a strong focus on the spiritual benefits accruing to individuals engaged in the practice. This is contrasted with the responses of the participants in my study, who typically adopted a simple lifestyle as a response to their care for the environment or concern about injustice. A second posture was less obvious in the replies. However, in a few instances, there was evidence of what might be called a 'sacramental imagination' at work in their interaction with consumerism. This way of viewing the world involves an ability to see God in even the most mundane and minute activity of everyday life. It appeared to be a useful resource as people chose not to buy into a consumerist mindset. Sacramentality is explored in greater depth in this chapter.

In the final chapter a range of strategies for engaging in society are considered. While somewhat outdated, the seminal work of Richard Niebuhr and his discussion of six ways of Christians engaging culture is discussed. The ideas of Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon, with their notion of Christians being 'resident aliens' within wider culture, is contrasted with Kathryn Tanner's idea that a separate Christian culture does not and cannot exist. I draw finally, however, on the work of Walter Brueggemann and his notion of the prophetic imagination. I argue that those who stand against the false values and exploitation inherent in consumerism are prophets, acting out an alternative, Christian ethic.

In concluding, the thesis calls for the church to foster an alternative community that reflects a prophetic resistance to the surrounding culture. The chapter questions whether churches have articulated a prophetic cry against the injustices inherent in consumerism clearly enough. It points to the prophetic motifs of Isaiah and Luke as important resources for this task. The conclusion re-emphasises the importance of supportive community as a way of nurturing a lifestyle that reflects biblical mandates to seek justice and care for the oppressed. It challenges the church to find ways to equip households to link beliefs to practices in a coherent way in the face of the exploitative values of consumer society.

PART ONE

Chapter One: Consumer Society

Western Society is now described as a consumer society in which ever-increasing consumption has become the: “principal aspiration, source of identity, and leisure activity for more and more of the population.”¹ In consumer society, the buying and selling of goods and services becomes the single most important social and economic activity. Within consumerism, the human physical needs, impulses, and fantasies have become welded to packaged goods. It is in the consumption of material things that satisfaction is found. This ideology is particularly embedded in the words and images of advertising that pervades almost every area of life, shaping people’s values. Alongside the pervasive acquisition of goods there is a corresponding "shift away from values of community, spirituality, and integrity, and toward competition, materialism and disconnection.”²

In a consumer society, the entire population becomes defined through individual acquisition and use of mass-produced goods.³ What people own is connected to their individual identity. “Driving a certain type of car, wearing particular designer labels, living in a certain kind of home, and ordering the right bottle of wine”⁴ creates a specific appearance. Scholars of consumerism observe that our position

¹ Frank Ackerman, “The History of Consumer Society,” in *The Consumer Society*, ed. Neva R. Goodwin, Frank Ackerman (Washington: Island Press, 1997), 109.

² Madeline Levine, "Challenging the Culture of Affluence," *Independent School* vol 67 no 1 (2007): 28-36.

³ Gary Cross observes that despite clashes of ideologies, two devastating world wars, and a forty-five-year cold war that ultimately made the United States the leading global power, the century did not culminate in the victory of American political ideas. Rather, the real winner of the century was consumerism. (Gary Cross, *An All-Consuming Century: Why Commercialism Won in Modern America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 1.

⁴ Juliet Schor, *The Overspent American: Why We Want What We Don't Need* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1999), 3.

within a social group, and a social group's position in relation to another group, is articulated through the consumption and display of key objects with symbolic value. Therefore, a key way that self-identity and social identity is established and maintained is through the consumption of particular goods and services.⁵ “Consumption is a critical aspect of giving meaning, status, and identity.”⁶ A prominent scholar of consumerism Juliet Schor notes:

It is now widely believed that consumer goods provide an opportunity for people to express themselves, display their identities, or create a public persona. The chairman of one of the world's largest consumer products multinationals well understands that “the brand defines the consumer. We are what we wear, what we eat, what we drive. Each of us... is a walking compendium of brands. The collection of brands we choose to assemble around us have become amongst the most direct expressions of our individuality - or more precisely, our deep psychological need to identify ourselves with others.” As the popular culture would have it, “I shop, therefore I am.”⁷

A central aspect of consumer culture is the pivotal role that shopping now plays, as commodities play an increasingly dominant part of everyday life. Judith Levine, who wrote a book about her year of buying nothing, noted the pervasiveness of shopping within Western Capitalist culture. She writes: “when we are happy, as when we are sad or angry or bored or confused or feeling nothing in particular we shop.”⁸

However, while this phenomenon is often derided as shallow and narcissistic, Western capitalist economies are now structured so that if people began suppressing their desires and consuming only what they needed those economies

⁵ Mark Paterson, *Consumption and Everyday Life*, 55.

⁶ Thomas Princen, Michael Maniates and Ken Conca, ed. *Confronting Consumption* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), 11.

⁷ Juliet Schor, *The Overspent American*, 57.

⁸ Judith Levine, *Not Buying It: My Year Without Shopping* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 1.

would collapse.⁹ “Mass-consumer capitalism must constitute masses of people as consumer selves who develop new wants and desires and whose basic sense of necessity always expands.”¹⁰ It insists that consumption becomes a way of life. “We need things” Lebow observes, “consumed, burned up, worn out, replaced, and discarded at an ever increasing rate.”¹¹

Sociological and Anthropological studies have considered questions of consumerism, particularly on the status and meaning of consumption in modern society. However, it is important to note that there is no single 'consumption theory' that exists as an identifiable body of knowledge. Rather, a number of complementary, overlapping and sometimes contradictory theoretical stances toward consumption characterise the developing area of scholarship.¹² In this chapter key traits of consumer society will be unpacked. A number of the theories that seek to explain consumerism's rise and the problematic elements of its expansion will also be explored in greater depth. These theories provide a framework for understanding the challenges it presents to a committed Christian.

History

There are two broad views in the discussion about the origins of consumerism. The first focuses on how production has driven the rise of consumer society. The second considers the consumer primarily. Each of these two views will be discussed in turn.

Changes in consumption patterns and the meanings associated with them are attributed, by some, to the broad transformations experienced by industrial societies. Cross (2002) explains: “Consumer society emerged when the ancient dual

⁹ Rodney Clapp in “All We Like Sheep,” Skye Jethani, 30.

¹⁰ Christian Smith, *Soul Searching*, 178.

¹¹ Victor Lebow, “Price competition in 1955,” *The Journal of Retailing* vol xxxi (Spring 1955), cited in Rodney Clapp, ed. *The Consuming Passion* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1998), 189.

¹² Rodney Clapp, *The Consuming Passion*, 222.

economy of mass subsistence and elite luxury gave way to an economy capable of delivering vast and diverse stores of goods to the general population.”¹³

In this view, it was technological innovation that allowed for the mass production of consumer goods. Only a few centuries ago very few people spent a significant amount of time or resources shopping for goods produced away from the home. Before the Industrial Revolution, the vast majority of each country's population lived in rural areas and worked in agriculture. Their clothing and household possessions were insignificant compared with what would be found in a typical Western household today. These possessions were usually made by family members or by artisans from the same village. There were no fashions or social pressure to make new purchases. Rather, individual items were used, and repaired when needed, for decades. Major items such as winter coats were often passed from one generation to the next.¹⁴

Meanwhile, a small elite engaged in higher consumption levels, buying luxury goods and services. This elite consumption created employment for a small number of artisans and merchants, but it was not significant enough to transform the largely agrarian economy.¹⁵

The Industrial Revolution transformed production. Previously, humans had been limited by their “weak capacity to harness energy, to accelerate and direct chemical processes, and to mold, assemble, and deliver labour-saving machines, shelter, clothing and nourishment.”¹⁶ In the late eighteenth century, the transition from manual labour to machine-based manufacturing occurred. It began with the mechanisation of the textile industry, progress in iron-making methods and the growing use of refined coal.¹⁷ These developments began in Britain and spread to

¹³ Gary Cross, *An All-Consuming Century*, 5.

¹⁴ Neva Goodwin, Julie A. Nelson, Frank Ackerman and Thomas Weisskopf, *Consumption and the Consumer Society* (Medford: Global Development and Environment institute, 2008), 5.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 5.

¹⁶ Gary Cross, *An All-Consuming Century*, 4-5.

¹⁷ Roger Beck, *World History: Patterns of Interaction* (Evanston: McDougal Littell, 1999).

Western Europe and North America during the 19th century, and finally spread throughout the world.

At the beginning of industrialisation, it was not evident that workers would automatically become consumers. Early British factory owners complained that their employees would only work enough hours to earn their traditional weekly income. They would then stop work until the next week. It appeared leisure was more important to the workers than increased income. This attitude was seen to be incompatible with an economy based on mass production and consumption. However, workers eventually began to see themselves as consumers. As a result, they chose to work full-time, or even overtime rather than stopping early to enjoy leisure time.¹⁸

Neva Goodwin and Frank Ackerman argue that in the United States, the "worker as consumer" worldview was "fully entrenched by the 1920s."¹⁹ At this time the labour movement stopped promoting a shorter work week, focusing instead on better wages and working conditions.²⁰ Mass consumption, and the consumerist attitudes that support such a way of life, became critical to the economic system.

Commodification

Other economic forces have supported the spread of a consumer society. Manno argues that economic and social development have, in fact, been distorted increasingly in the direction of increased consumption.²¹ He contends that individual consumer purchase of commodities has now become the primary means

¹⁸ Neva Goodwin et al, *Consumption and the Consumer Society*, 6.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, 6.

²⁰ *ibid.*, 6.

²¹ Jack Manno, "Commodification: Consumption Efficiency and an Economy of Care and Connection," in *Confronting Consumption*, ed. Thomas Princen, Michael Maniates and Ken Conca (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 69.

of satisfying almost all human needs and wants.²² Technological progress is overwhelmingly directed toward “increasing the amount, variety, and availability of goods and services for purchase.”²³

Captured in this phenomenon is the tendency to develop things that are the most suited to operating as commodities: things that can be bought or sold. As a result, personal care, relationships, culture, and artistic expression become transformed into marketable goods and services.²⁴ The tendency of consumer culture is to ‘materialise’ how we meet needs, even intangible needs.²⁵ These pressures, Manno observes, act over time to gradually expand the “number of commodities available, the geographic spread of their availability, and the range of needs for which ‘commoditized’ satisfaction exists.”²⁶

Manno adds that if the qualities associated with commodities are given priority in an economy, and if economic forces dominate a society, increasing amounts of that society's resources, creativity, and focus will be directed to the sole production of those qualities. By comparison, qualities linked with lower commodity capacity will become underdeveloped.²⁷ Because of this, personal and social needs are met through commodities. This becomes a self-reinforcing mechanism that results in people becoming increasingly dependent on commodities to meet their needs. Manno gives as an example the growth of suburbs and a subsequent dependency on cars instead of public transport, which becomes underdeveloped by comparison. This illustration demonstrates that it is not only individuals that depend on

²² *ibid.*, 68. It was the German sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920) who first spoke of the “iron cage” of bureaucracy, and foresaw the extension of processes of rationalisation into ever-new areas of modern life.

²³ *Ibid.*, 70.

²⁴ Thomas Princen, Michael Maniates and Ken Conca, ed. *Confronting Consumption*, 3.

²⁵ Kate Soper, “Alternative Hedonism, Cultural theory and the role of Aesthetic Revisioning,” 577.

²⁶ Jack Manno, “Commodization,” 73.

²⁷ *ibid.*, 73.

commodities, but societies also invest in an infrastructure that supports a commoditized lifestyle.²⁸

Manno concludes that in highly industrialised societies, where commoditization operates most strongly, “few aspects of human life have not been commoditized to some extent.”²⁹ Jeremy Gilbert agrees. Taking the argument further he examines the pressure to subject “every possible social relation to the norms of the consumer/provider transaction which is now both widely documented by social, politicians and cultural commentators and easily recognised by lay observers.”³⁰

Gilbert advances the idea that such consumer/provider transactions are being encouraged in social spheres where they do not come easily. He argues that one of the most obvious examples of the expansion of a consumerist ideology is in the use of the ‘consumer/producer paradigm’ on social service provision. He argues that that good health and education cannot be adequately understood as the outcome of a seller/buyer transaction. This conceptualisation overlooks the relational, rather than the financial, nature of the goals in areas such as health and education. Gilbert concludes that the transformation of social services into units of commodity exchange “is a process which is destructive simultaneously of human communities and of the capacity of democratic institutions to influence social outcomes.”³¹

Shopping

Many of the institutions that encourage mass consumption appeared at the end of the nineteenth century as economic practices increasingly gave consumers a central role. Shopping, credit and advertising all facilitated the consumption process.

²⁸ *ibid.*, 82.

²⁹ *ibid.*, 72.

³⁰ Jeremy Gilbert, “Against the Commodification of Everything,” 553.

³¹ *ibid.*, 553.

Department stores emerged in the late 1800s and came to play an ever-increasing role in the efficient distribution of consumer goods. New ways of packing goods in bags, cans, and bottles allowed easier transportation and distribution. This innovation made it possible to establish recognisable "brand names." The advent of the department store also encouraged the further development of consumer culture. A conspicuous example is the celebration of Christmas, which has been influenced by ideas that grew out of department store marketing. Gift giving at Christmas was almost unknown before the 1840s. However, promotion by the department store Macy's in the United States created the Christmas shopping phenomenon. F.W. Woolworth began to promote Christmas tree ornaments in 1888 and Christmas cards date from about the same period.³² New Zealand didn't wait long for its own department store interpretation of Christmas. In 1934 the Farmers Trading Company held the first ever Santa Parade on Auckland's streets.³³

The emergence of vast department stores was also significant in helping to fuel new desires to be satiated by a growing supply of products. As retailers' stock "became more extensive and alluring, it was easy for the shopper to suddenly 'discover' a need which he or she had previously been unaware of."³⁴

Department stores also shaped society through the increasing feminisation of shopping. Nineteenth-century feminist Elizabeth Cady Stanton fought for divorce reform and the right of women to work outside the home. However, her 1852 speech declared it was time for women to be given the right to spend the family's money. This particular reform was successful and by 1915, ninety percent of spending in the United States was controlled by women, and ninety percent of department store customers were female.³⁵

³² Frank Ackerman, *The Consumer Society*, 116.

³³ *Australian Women's Weekly Special Edition: Farmers Celebrating 100 Years 1909-2009*, 2009.

³⁴ Oliver James, *Affluenza* (London: Vermillion. 2007), 172.

³⁵ Pamela Klaffke, *Sprees: A Cultural History of Shopping* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2003), 166 -167.

Credit

Another institution that supported the growth of consumer society was expanded consumer credit. Cultural values about spending up until the early 1900s emphasised thrift, prudence, and ‘living within your means.’ In poorer households credit might be used for the necessities of life. Middle-class households might borrow for the purchase of homes and furniture, but spending for immediate gratification was frowned on.

However, with the mass production of automobiles and household appliances arrived the growth in institutions that provided consumer credit. By the 1920s, department stores had developed charge cards, while financing for automobiles was common. Economists argued that credit purchases were “vital to stimulating economic growth and that condemning luxury purchases was not possible because the definition of a luxury varied between individuals.”³⁶ The first bank issued credit cards emerged in the 1950s.³⁷

By 2013, 78 percent of adults in New Zealand had credit cards. While some individuals pay off their debt every month, up to 68 percent of cardholders use them as a form of borrowing, paying regular interest on the debt. By May 2013, the total amount of outstanding consumer credit in New Zealand topped \$5.6 billion.³⁸

Advertising

However, nothing has been deemed more effective in encouraging spending than the burgeoning advertising industry. Here the physical needs, desires, and fantasies of humans have become inseparable from packaged goods. Advertising has now

³⁶ Neva Goodwin et al, *The Consumer Society*, 10.

³⁷ *ibid.*, 10.

³⁸ Gareth Vaughan, “New Zealand Among the World’s Most Profitable Credit Card Markets,” *Personal Finance* (July 17 2013), <http://www.interest.co.nz/personal-finance/65421/new-zealand-among-worlds-most-profitable-credit-card-markets> (28 Nov 2016)

expanded into every aspect of our daily lives, promoting always expanding consumption. It is found not only in radio, television, print media, and increasing billboard space but also in classrooms, doctors offices, as well as in “telemarketing” calls into our homes. An interview with a child marketing executive reveals the position that the advertising industry now adheres to: “the moment a baby sees clearly, she becomes a consumer.”³⁹ Recent studies demonstrate the impact: children can discern brands as early as eighteen months, and by twenty-four months they can ask for products by brand name.⁴⁰ During their preschool years, children will request an average of 25 products a day. By the time they enter primary school, the average child can identify 200 logos.⁴¹ Children between the ages of six and twelve now spend more time shopping than reading, attending clubs, playing outside or spending time in household conversation.⁴²

Initial forms of advertising were just a matter of conveying facts about a vast range of emerging goods to potential buyers. However, between 1880 and 1930 this tactic was believed to have created a group of “harried consumers, inundated with information about products.”⁴³ It was in this era that the brother of a Methodist minister became convinced that a new flavoured soda could have widespread appeal. To describe the experience of drinking his product he apparently used the techniques he’d seen his brother use when talking about the joy of personal spiritual transformation. In this way Coca Cola was introduced to the general public and a new way of marketing also emerged. By the early 1900s, psychological consultants developed advertising methods designed to influence the consumer to associate images of physical, psychic, and social well-being with the acquisition of products.

³⁹Michael Brody, “Kids’ Popular Culture: The Selling of Childhood,” *Brown University Child and Adolescent Behaviour Letter* (Jan 1 2003), cited in Susan Thomas, *Buy, Buy Baby* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 20.

⁴⁰*ibid.*, 5.

⁴¹Mark Paterson, *Consumption and Everyday Life*, 211.

⁴²*ibid.*, 211.

⁴³ T.J. Jackson Lears, “From Salvation to Self Realization: The Therapeutic Roots of Consumer Culture,” in *Consumption and the Consumer Society*, ed. Neva Goodwin, Julie Nelson, Frank Ackerman and Thomas Weisskopf (Medford: Global Development and Environment institute. 2008), 171.

As one of the first products to be marketed in this way Coca Cola found, and continues to find, substantial success.⁴⁴

While Coca Cola may have discovered success in associating their product with pleasurable sensations, many other products were marketed to prey on people's feelings of inadequacy. As psychologists learned more about humans' subconscious desires, weaknesses and insecurities this information was increasingly used by advertisers as a tool.⁴⁵ With the emergence of Henry Ford's assembly line in 1913, which for the first time demonstrated that industrial output might swamp demand for goods,⁴⁶ millions of research dollars were poured into understanding the basic human drives of hunger, thirst, sex, and security.⁴⁷ After the Second World War the anticipated overproduction of goods eventuated where more products were produced than are needed. (More recently, it has been estimated that there is no necessity to buy as much as 40 percent of what is produced.)⁴⁸ In order to continue to sell these objects, advertising executives freely admitted that one of their main objectives was to create a sense of dissatisfaction with existing possessions so that consumers would want to buy new, "better" ones.⁴⁹ Making people feel deprived or anxious proved to be an effective strategy for selling the growing number of new products that hit the shelves every year.⁵⁰ Clive Hamilton and Richard Denniss sum up the process:

The unspoken role of marketing is to keep consumers in the richest societies

⁴⁴ Interestingly, research studies have found that when subjects are shown a bottle of Coca Cola the part of their brain which experiences pleasure sensations is activated. Hamilton and Denniss (2010) note that: "Coca Cola has found the holy grail of marketing. It has managed to embed in our culture such a powerful set of associations and meanings for its products that it can activate parts of the brain its competitors cannot reach." (Clive Hamilton and Richard Denniss, *Affluenza* (New South Wales: Allen and Unwin, 2010), 42.)

⁴⁵ Michelle Lee, *Fashion Victim: Our Love-Hate Relationship with Dressing, Shopping, and the Cost of Style* (New York: Broadway, 2003), xv.

⁴⁶ Gary Cross, *All Consuming Century*, 5.

⁴⁷ Michelle Lee, *Fashion Victim*, xv.

⁴⁸ Clive Hamilton and Richard Denniss, *Affluenza*, 16.

⁴⁹ Oliver James, *Affluenza*, 42.

⁵⁰ Clive Hamilton and Richard Denniss, *Affluenza*, 37.

in human history feeling deprived. To be successful in the long term, advertising must sell not only products but also a very particular kind of worldview - one where happiness can be bought, where problems can be solved by a product, and where having more things is the measure of success.⁵¹

Impact of Advertising

Some theorists see a direct link between the intention of marketing agents and perceptions of deprivation now evident amongst those living in consumer society. Twenty seven percent of households in the United States that earn above \$100,000 a year believe they cannot afford everything they really need.⁵² A comparative figure from Australia has 46 percent of those in the richest 20 percent of households saying they cannot afford to buy everything they really need.⁵³ Half of the population in the United States believe they cannot afford what they need (this is not just the poorer half), while 62 percent of Australians say they cannot afford to buy everything they really need. However, the reality is quite different. The average North American woman owns thirty pairs of shoes and nearly forty knit tops, while the average North American man owns twenty ties and more than twenty-five t-shirts.⁵⁴ It is estimated that between two-thirds to three-quarters of the population of Western capitalist societies can afford to buy unnecessary consumer goods and experiences.⁵⁵ Considering statistics such as these, Hamilton concludes that people in consumer societies have confused wants and needs.⁵⁶ He notes that Australian households, especially middle income and wealthy households, have “an inflated, perhaps grossly inflated, understanding of how much money they need to maintain

⁵¹ *ibid.*, 40.

⁵² Juliet Schor, *The Overspent American*, 6.

⁵³ Clive Hamilton and Richard Denniss, *Affluenza*, 59.

⁵⁴ Michelle Lee, *Fashion Victim*, 34.

⁵⁵ Robert Bocoock, *Consumption* (London: Blackwell, 1997), 76.

⁵⁶ Clive Hamilton and Richard Denniss, *Affluenza*, 60.

a decent standard of living.”⁵⁷

The explanation of consumer culture that focuses on the changes in production techniques and determined advertising campaigns outlined above can create an image of the consumer as a mindless dupe. Unaware of marketing pressures or even their own needs, hapless consumers end up racking up personal debt to buy goods that they do not need. This position sees consumers as being locked into patterns of behaviour that they haven’t chosen.⁵⁸ Stuck in a “consumption trap”⁵⁹ individuals are unwittingly compelled by the mass media to buy goods incessantly.⁶⁰ As an article in the Scotsman puts it:

Next time you dive in to a shop determined to grab just bread, milk and an evening newspaper and come out carrying nail varnish, Christmas crackers, six two-litre drums of ice cream and a case of wine, remember – it's not your fault, they made you do it⁶¹

Alternate View

There is an alternate reading of the emergence of consumer culture that considers the role of consumers themselves in its development. Traditionally economic historians have been interested in studying the arrival of a consumer culture by looking at developments in methods of production. This “supply-side orthodoxy” has been recently challenged by historians. Neil McKendrick argues that “the

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, 61. Statistics New Zealand figures showed that over the years 2011 to 2016 annual spend on credit cards rose from \$25.9 billion to \$33.3 billion. A significant portion of this spend occurs in the December holiday period which takes, “on average, 6-9 months for most people to pay off the debt incurred.” New Zealand Herald, “Kiwis Credit Cards facing \$100 million debt,” (Jan 11 2017) http://www.nzherald.co.nz/sponsored-stories/news/article.cfm?c_id=1503708&objectid=11768349 (2 Aug 2017).

⁵⁸ Clive Hamilton and Richard Denniss, *Affluenza*, 151.

⁵⁹ Thomas Princen, Michael Maniates, Ken Conca, (eds) *Confronting Consumption*, 11.

⁶⁰ Mark Paterson, *Consumption and Everyday Life*, 141.

⁶¹ *The Scotsman* (21 February 2001), 4, cited in Mark Paterson, *Consumption and Everyday Life*, (London: Routledge, 2006), 150.

consumer revolution was the necessary analogue to the industrial revolution, the necessary convulsion of the demand side of the equation to match the convulsion of the supply side.”⁶² This view seeks to answer the question of why people decided to seek pleasure in goods, rather than in leisure, beyond marketing manipulation.

Anthropological and archaeological evidence has found traces of luxury and symbolic consumption throughout history,⁶³ which suggests that a desire for comfort, satisfaction, and variety did not emerge recently.⁶⁴ Many scholars now focus on the role that consumption patterns play in an attempt to more accurately explain the emergence of consumer culture.⁶⁵ However, even applying this theory to consideration of consumer culture it is still apparent that the end result for consumers can be perceived in much the same light as a production oriented perspective. While it may provide an alternative explanation as to how consumer society emerged, the fact and criticisms of consumer society remain.

Grant McCracken suggests that in the sixteenth century and the early seventeenth century, the court of Queen Elizabeth impressed upon her subjects the need to be fashionable. Displaying new clothes and items in order to show one’s status as a nobleman or woman became the norm.⁶⁶ Dress evolved into both an art form and status symbol. Restrictive corsets, stiff fabrics, and high heels created a picture of their wearer: “he or she clearly did not work, and did not have to work.”⁶⁷ This way of dressing represented a new system of social competition. Alongside this, waiting for goods to age in order to gain prestige, which was the traditional way of gaining

⁶² Neil McKendrick, “The Commercialization of Fashion,” in *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England*, ed. Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and J.H. Plumb (London: Europa Publications Limited, 1982), cited in Peter Corrigan, *The Sociology of Consumption* (London: Sage, 1997), 9.

⁶³ Frank Ackerman, *The Consumer Society*, 109.

⁶⁴ Gary Cross, *All Consuming Century*, 4-5.

⁶⁵ Carole Shammas, *The Pre-industrial Consumer in England and America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

⁶⁶ Grant McCracken, *Culture and Consumption* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), cited in Mark Paterson, *Consumption and Everyday Life* (London: Routledge, 2006), 13.

⁶⁷ Michelle Lee, *Fashion Victim*, xvi.

status, no longer counted. The old system was turned upside down: family heirlooms were replaced by the new and exotic as signifiers of wealth, which was helped by growing trade networks around the world. New consumer demand propelled the importation of foreign commodities such as tea and coffee, tobacco, spices and fabrics.⁶⁸ It is through these developments, Corrigan argues, that the birth of one of the most important phenomena in all of consumer culture was seen: fashion.⁶⁹ The interest in new commodities and styles was not limited to the wealthy. The eighteenth century saw the beginnings of mass consumption, as opposed to the elite consumption characterising Elizabeth's court.⁷⁰

Imagining Pleasure

Seeking to understand more than just economic reasons for the emergence of mass consumption, Colin Campbell endorses the notion that the longing for pleasure is something that came before consumer society. He argues that changes in consumption patterns represented more than a change in technology but a change in values and attitudes.⁷¹ In his book, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumption*, Campbell sets out to identify and describe the ethic that drove, and continues to drive, consumerism. Modelling itself upon Weber's 1930 classic *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, which propounded the view that Protestant asceticism drove capitalism, Campbell is often credited with pursuing the 'intellectual origins' and the 'mental basis'⁷² of modern consumption.

Traditionally, Campbell maintains, people derived pleasure from social and cultural interactions. The body was central in these: "eating, drinking, sexual intercourse,

⁶⁸ Mark Paterson, *Consumption and Everyday Life*, 10.

⁶⁹ Peter Corrigan, *The Sociology of Consumption*, 4.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, 9.

⁷¹ Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 24-25.

⁷² Sharon Boden and Simon Williams, "Consumption and Emotion the Romantic Ethic Revisited," *Sociology* vol 36 no 3 (August 2002).

socializing, singing, dancing and playing games.”⁷³ Pleasure and fulfilment are achieved through bodily and sensory experiences. Yet, according to Campbell, this traditional type of enjoyment has been replaced by relishing imagined or envisioned emotions. Mental images are created and then “consumed for the intrinsic pleasure they provide.”⁷⁴ Campbell believes this process was a direct result of the emergence of Romanticism.

The historical significance of Romanticism centres on its re-enchantment of the individual psychic world. The Romantics’ philosophical framework espoused an emotionalist world view, the ‘cult of the self’ being at the forefront of human existence. Not only did a Romantic ethic initially create the capacity for modern hedonists to consume imaginatively, but it is argued that the ‘self’-centred legacies of Romanticism have continued to renew the spirit of consumerism ever since.⁷⁵

While appreciating that original Romantic artists and philosophers did not intend to endorse a consumerist ideology or ethic, their values, beliefs and way of living lead Campbell to insist that the Romantics “brought about a state of affairs generally conducive to modern consumerism”.⁷⁶ Campbell argues, in turn, that this worldview was also, ironically, fostered by the intensely personal, subjective experience found in the spirituality of the Puritans. Romanticism is, in part, Puritanism secularised.⁷⁷

The paradox of this thinking is that the better someone becomes at imagining emotions and sensations, ‘real’ consumption no longer delivers a comparable level of pleasure. This imagining sets up a pattern of frustration where actual consumption is no longer satisfying. This cycle of longing and disappointment has significant implications for the economy. “In the quest to experience the dramas of

⁷³ Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*, 69.

⁷⁴ *ibid.*, 77.

⁷⁵ Sharon Boden and Simon Williams, “Consumption and Emotion the Romantic Ethic Revisited,” 496.

⁷⁶ Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*, 208.

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, 132-33.

their imagination through material goods, consumers become ceaseless in their demand for original, novelty commodities.”⁷⁸

Boden and Williams explain that “Campbell’s romantic ethic helps us comprehend why consumers are consumed with consumption, take pleasure from pleasure, desire to desire and want to want.”⁷⁹ Campbell’s interpretation of the rise of consumerism provides one framework for understanding the rise of consumer demand before the arrival of the institutions now associated with a consumer society.

Middle Class Consumption

It was in the early 1790s that a minister in Scotland noticed that during the previous thirty years his parishioners had discarded the plaids and bonnets usually worn for coats made with English cloth and tricorne hats. Alongside this, servants began carrying pocket watches, an object that had previously denoted high status. In a nearby parish, the minister lamented that poorer members of his congregation were “vying with each other” to buy fashionable clothes that were “often above their station.”⁸⁰

In these new areas of consumption the middle and other lower classes began to imitate, it has been argued, the consumption patterns of higher classes.⁸¹ James notes:

The middle orders remained in thrall to the aristocracy and gentry, who continued to set the tone of society and to dictate taste and fashion. Even as they were moving towards a collective identity, based on their usefulness

⁷⁸ Sharon Boden and Simon Williams “Consumption and Emotion the Romantic Ethic Revisited,” 497.

⁷⁹ *ibid.*, 497.

⁸⁰ Oliver James, *Affluenza*, 171.

⁸¹ Peter Corrigan, *The Sociology of Consumption*, 9.

and sense of responsibility, the middle class continued to defer to their betters.⁸²

The pottery manufacturer Josiah Wedgwood was one of the first to capitalise on this pattern of consumption. In 1777, he credited the popularity of his black basalt 'Etruscan' vases to the fact that: "The great people had these vases in their palaces long enough for them to be seen and admired by the Middling Class of people, which class we know are vastly."⁸³ Mass production met a mass market, and for as little as 7s 6d, a tradesman's wife could have a vase similar to a countess' on her own mantelpiece. In newspaper advertisements of the time, retailers invited the 'nobility' and 'gentry' to examine their wares, implying that these people regularly patronised their shops. It is debatable whether these invitations were accepted but they "assured the new consumers that they were buying goods desired by those in the upper class."⁸⁴

The middle class became some of the most insatiable consumers. They came to spend as much time and energy spending money as they did earning it.⁸⁵ Toys and books were some of the first products that became available to those not in the upper class.⁸⁶ Later, the emergence of the first ready-to-wear suits in 1845, transformed clothing habits. Before ready-to-wear, Lee notes, "practically every home in America was a small clothing factory... Women spun yarns and wove cloth to make everything from nightshirts and underwear to suits and coats for the family."⁸⁷

⁸² Oliver James, *Affluenza*, 155.

⁸³ *ibid.*, 155.

⁸⁴ *ibid.*, 155.

⁸⁵ Pamela Klaffke, *Spree*, 4.

⁸⁶ *ibid.*, 28.

⁸⁷ Michelle Lee, *Fashion Victim*, 26.

Conspicuous Consumption

During the emergence of industrialisation in the United States 'good taste' was usually defined by the fashion system from Europe. Rich North Americans aspired to European aristocracy, utilising ideas from great castles in order to decorate their own properties. These items symbolised, for them, "heritage and exclusivity."⁸⁸ When a new industrial capitalist elite emerged patterns of consumption played an important role in their lives. It provided them with ways to distinguish themselves from lower classes.⁸⁹ Robert Bocoock observes that at the turn of the century:

A metropolitan, or nouveau riche, lifestyle in which the consumption of such things as clothes, personal adornments and expensive pleasurable pursuits was becoming central.⁹⁰

In 1899, well before Fordism or the excess of post-war production, American Sociologist Thorstein Veblen coined the phrase "conspicuous consumption" in his work *Theory of the Leisure Class*.⁹¹ In this book, he described the use of possessions among the newly wealthy in the United States. He observed the way in which they established social status and power through "ostentatious displays of possessions. Enormous homes, huge parties, expensive food, drink, clothing, cars and travel served not just as hedonistic excess but also as markers of class identity."⁹² According to his theory, individuals copied the consumption patterns of people higher up the social hierarchy to themselves. Veblen saw consumption as a way to establish and maintain social distinction between individuals rather than simply mark success.⁹³ As both high and low socio-economic classes started to consume

⁸⁸ Gary Cross, *All Consuming Century*, 22.

⁸⁹ Robert Bocoock, *Consumption*, 15.

⁹⁰ *ibid.*, 17.

⁹¹ Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Penguin Books, [1899] 1994).

⁹² Vincent Millar, *Consuming Religion*, 148.

⁹³ Colin Campbell "Consumption: The New Wave of Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences," in *The Consumer Society*, ed. Neva Goodwin, Frank Ackerman, 34. Bourdieu's main work, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* is a development and extension

products that were previously the strict reserve of the landed aristocracy, the elite looked to other fashions and products to justify their distinction.⁹⁴ Fortunately for them, there seemed to be an endless stream of new products that those seeking to display their good taste, or just their discretionary income, could choose to purchase.

Clearly drawing on Veblen's theory, Schor notes the impact of social comparison and the resulting need to "keep up" with others. She calls this process "competitive acquisition,"⁹⁵ where those in consumer societies purchase goods in order to 'keep up with the Joneses.' Spending becomes driven by a competitive process where people try to keep up with the spending patterns of a social group they want to identify with. Schor refers to such a social groups as a "reference group" and makes a salient observation of the types of comparison found in consumer society. She argues that in the past people compared themselves to others of similar financial means. She describes this as a 'proximate', or 'horizontal' norm, where people aspire to a way of living like other people in their immediate social grouping or economic bracket. However, she notes:

of Veblen's work. While Bourdieu relates semiotics to neo-Marxist thought to develop his understanding of consumer culture; like Veblen, he is primarily interested in the reproduction of class. Bourdieu argues, however, that it is taste rather than high or low incomes which structures the practices associated with consuming. Individuals seek to both identify with a social group and distinguish oneself from others, and these motivations generate a set of choices that constitute whole ways of life. These lifestyles are not random; rather they are systematic products of "habitus," which is an arrangement through which we surround ourselves with, and desire, certain objects and not others. The habitus of an individual is based on his or her socialisation into a group that has certain preferences and tastes which means certain cultural objects are acquired or consumed while others are not. An individual's identity is therefore influenced by the symbolic meanings of his or her own material possessions, and the way in which he/she relates to those possessions. These possessions serve as expressions of group membership as a means of locating others in the social-material environment. They also provide people with information about other people's identities. (Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1984), 173-5); (Andrew B Trigg, "Veblen, Bourdieu, and Conspicuous Consumption," *Journal of Economic Issues* (March 1 2001), 104.)

⁹⁴ Mark Paterson, *Consumption and Everyday Life*, 18.

⁹⁵ Juliet Schor, *The Overspent American*, 3.

Today's comparisons are less likely to take place between or among households of similar means. Instead, the lifestyles of the upper middle class and the rich have become a more salient point of reference for people throughout the income distribution. Luxury, rather than mere comfort, is a widespread aspiration.⁹⁶

As a result, the dynamics of consumer emulation have changed. They have come to focus much more on very high levels of consumption. In other words, the consumer norm has shifted to one in which a high end, affluent, media driven norm of consumption prevails.⁹⁷ Lee pithily observes:

We're not trying to keep up with the Joneses... we're trying to keep up with the Catherine Zeta-Joneses. ... we compare ourselves to people with unreachably high social standing and levels of wealth.⁹⁸

At this point, it is possible to see the convergence and overlap of both the production oriented and consumer oriented historical perspectives in terms of the negative consequences of the resulting consumer paradigm. Theories that describe the impact of the negative aspects of consumerism on individuals will now be considered.

Affluenza

Observing the comparisons made between people within a culture of consumerism, popular writer Oliver James notes:

Constantly comparing your lot with others, especially those who have more than you, is not a prescription for feeling safe. If you are always worrying

⁹⁶ Juliet Schor, "The New Politics of Consumption: Why Americans want so much more than they need." <http://bostonreview.net/BR24.3/schor.html#Anchor-49575> (15 March 2010).

⁹⁷ Juliet Schor, an interview by Jo Littler, *Cultural Studies*, 589.

⁹⁸ Michelle Lee, *Fashion Victim*, 44.

about whether you have enough money and the right possessions, or your appearance, or seeking fame, you are digging a hole for yourself which can never be deep enough⁹⁹

Hamilton, along with Oliver James, has dubbed the negative emotions that they believe result from both the consumerist pressures of competition and the feelings of deprivation “Affluenza.” Likening it to a virus, James argues that the affluenza virus “is a set of values which increase our vulnerability to emotional distress. It entails placing a high value on acquiring money and possessions, looking good in the eyes of others and wanting to be famous.”¹⁰⁰ The tendency towards upward social comparison is a defining feature of ‘Virus psychology,’ contends James. Individuals who value money, possessions, fame and appearances will show a heightened interest in others with more. This influences the types of magazines they read and the television programmes they watch.¹⁰¹ James believes that some within consumer society are more infected with the virus than others and he observes that the virus-stricken watch more television, with the heaviest watchers more likely to be dissatisfied with their lives than lighter ones. “The relentless exposure to images of wealth and beauty spill over and poison the lives of the infected beyond the sitting room. Since programmes are saturated with exceptionally attractive people living abnormally opulent lives, expectations of what is 'normal' are raised.”¹⁰² The resulting depression such exposure gives rise to is commented on by other writers also. Mark Paterson notes that involvement in consumer culture causes dysfunction in the forms of depression, anxiety, low self-esteem and psychosomatic complaints.¹⁰³ James argues that the high levels of depression in the United States (there are up to ten times more sufferers today than in 1950,)¹⁰⁴ and in Britain

⁹⁹ Oliver James, *Affluenza*, 23.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*, vii.

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*, 44.

¹⁰² *ibid.*, 41.

¹⁰³ Mark Paterson, *Consumption and Everyday Life*, 212.

¹⁰⁴ Oliver James, *Affluenza*, xvi.

(where nearly one quarter of the population suffer from emotional distress,)¹⁰⁵ are all related to Affluenza.

James cynically observes, however, that the widespread depression and anxiety created by the Affluenza Virus are, in fact, crucial for the Western Capitalist system which he dubs “Selfish Capitalism.”¹⁰⁶ To fill the emptiness and loneliness, and to replace our need for authentic, intimate relationships, individuals resort to the consumption that is essential for economic growth and profits. The more anxious or depressed people are, the more they must consume, and the more they consume, the more disturbed they become. Consumption continually holds out the false promise that an internal lack can be fixed by an external means.¹⁰⁷

Control

James argues that such a cycle is the explicit intention of the ‘Selfish Capitalist’ system. With this argument, he lines up with theorists who contend that capitalism promotes an “ideology of control” that effectively limits the powers of the individual. In this position, the State, the advertising industry and the mass media are all united in generating “false needs”, which are merely forms of social control.¹⁰⁸ The notion of the consumer mindlessly manipulated by larger forces stems from Marxist and neo-Marxist conceptions of the consumer and reconnects with theorists of the Frankfurt School and their deeply critical evaluation of consumption as the perpetuation of “false needs.”¹⁰⁹

Taking a particularly pessimistic view, Baudrillard argues that in a society where everything is a commodity that can be bought and sold, alienation is so total that it

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.*, xvii.

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*, 15.

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*, 15.

¹⁰⁸ Mark Paterson, *Consumption and Everyday Life*, 145.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 142. Allies of this critical approach are found in more recent ideas about consumption, such as the beginnings of consumer psychology, and retail psychology that consider the diverse ways that retail spaces are organised to make us consume more.

cannot be surpassed because it becomes “the very structure of market society.”¹¹⁰ In a similarly suspicious argument, Daniel Cook questions whether it is now possible to conceive of an ‘innocent’ child within consumer society who, were it not for the unscrupulous marketing executives, would remain untainted by consumer demand. He argues that children in consumer societies enter the world pre-configured as consumers. Although they cannot shop, they are already “embedded in the webs of commercial-material relations and envisioned as recipients and users of products at the outset of, and even prior to, their earthly existence.”¹¹¹ Consumption and consumer goods, Cook maintains, become part of a person's existence well before they gain the ability to understand the value of money or any notion of purchasing goods.¹¹² He concludes that in consumer societies, no one 'chooses' to be a consumer because it is impossible not to be one. We are born, he contends, into “regimes of consumption.”¹¹³ He argues that it is not merely childhood at issue when one considers the child as consumer, but the “commodification of the life course itself.”¹¹⁴ Cook, therefore, argues that consumption has ontological ramifications. Considering the implications of a consumer society Baudrillard posits “the end of transcendence” whereby individuals “can neither perceive their own true needs or another way of life.”¹¹⁵

Consumers as agents

However, while Baudrillard has a very bleak outlook, neo- Marxist thinker Daniel Millar, blends Simmel, Hegel, and Marx, to develop a theory which maintains that while consumption in modern industrial societies is alienating, it also allows the

¹¹⁰ Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (Newbury Park: Sage Publishers, 1998), 190.

¹¹¹ Daniel Thomas Cook, “The Missing Child in Consumption Theory,” *Journal of Consumer Culture* (2008; 8), 232.

¹¹² *ibid.*, 232.

¹¹³ *ibid.*, 236.

¹¹⁴ *ibid.*, 236.

¹¹⁵ Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society*, 190ff.

possibility of an escape from alienation.¹¹⁶ In this stream of thinking identity formation, as it relates to consumption, owes less to structured class groups, and more to choices and patterns of consumption that are “fleeting, capricious, and ephemeral.” We consume less to mark out our fixed social position, therefore, and more to indicate our aspirations, our intentions, our social trajectories at that time.¹¹⁷ Such an approach rehabilitates the status of the aspirations of lower classes as legitimate desires for a materially better, more enjoyable life.¹¹⁸

In his book, *Consumerism – As a Way of Life*, Steven Miles recognises the “consuming paradox” that the dominance of a consumer mindset creates in Western societies. “While consumerism appears to have a fascinating, and arguably fulfilling, personal appeal it simultaneously plays an ideological role in actually controlling the character of everyday life.”¹¹⁹ There appears to be no identifiable third way of understanding both the manipulation and control of the consumer and the consumer's expression of freedom and identity through consumption. Paterson notes that we messily use and misuse the commodities that are within reach of our spheres of everydayness, sometimes being co-opted and compelled, at other times consciously willing against consumerism, according to our level of awareness at the time.¹²⁰

Concerning Aspects of Consumer Society

Both the producer and consumer explorations of consumption focus almost entirely on the individual consumer and their experience of living in a consumer society. It has only been much more recently that broader concerns about endless consumption have come into play.

¹¹⁶ Colin Campbell, “Consumption: The New Wave of Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences,” 34.

¹¹⁷ Sharon Boden and Simon Williams, “Consumption and Emotion the Romantic Ethic Revisited,” 497.

¹¹⁸ Jeremy Gilbert, “Against the Commodification of Everything,” 566, 555.

¹¹⁹ Steven Miles, *Consumerism – As a Way of Life* (London: Sage, 1998), 5.

¹²⁰ Mark Paterson, *Consumption and Everyday Life*, 167.

Environmental degradation

Many people now accept that the pursuit of a consumerist way of living is the major contributor to the ecological crisis.¹²¹ Consumption depends, however indirectly, on the destructive exploitation of natural resources.¹²² Environmentalists have been warning for decades that continuing consumption at current levels will destroy the physical environment. From mining to manufacturing, shipping to retailing, overusing to disposing, these processes irreparably damage the natural world. This exorbitant use of our non-renewable global assets is recognised as being too high for the planet and its human inhabitants and it is increasing at an alarming rate. Globally we use twenty times the amount of resources than we did in 1990.¹²³ The biosphere cannot support a global consumer lifestyle like that found in Western countries, particularly the United States. Too many resources would be required and too much pollution and waste would be produced to sustain a liveable environment.¹²⁴ The Earth Council notes that if everyone in the world consumed at the rate that North Americans do, three planets would be required to sustain the global population.¹²⁵

One of the critical areas around the use of environmental assets is the recognition that environmental or natural capital has often not been incorporated into the market price. This practice allows goods and services to be sold below their real cost, in turn fuelling rapacious consumption.¹²⁶

¹²¹ Kate Soper, "Alternative Hedonism," 567.

¹²² Jeremy Gilbert, "Against the Commodification of Everything," 553.

¹²³ Judith Levine, *Not Buying It*, 3.

¹²⁴ Neva Goodwin, Frank Ackerman, ed. *The Consumer Society*, 11.

¹²⁵ Judith Levine, *Not Buying It*, 5.

¹²⁶ Juliet Schor, "New Analytic Bases for an Economic Critique of Consumer Society," in *The Consumer Society*, ed. Neva Goodwin, Frank Ackerman, 32.

Injustices in Global Trade

Alongside the destruction of the natural environment, ever increasing consumption has had an impact on producers. Exploitation of third-world workers, increased domestic unemployment and reduced domestic wages in developed nations, and the continual erosion of workers rights are all consequences of rapacious consumerism.¹²⁷

In the past, fashions stayed in vogue for years, even decades. Conspicuous consumption consisted of purchasing products recognisable to others. A product like Wedgewood pottery had origins and history that were well known and added to the value and desire to consume.¹²⁸ Now, only a matter of months or weeks after a trend has emerged, it has already started to look “tired” and has been replaced by something new.¹²⁹ In order for the majority of the population to be able to afford to keep up with the current speed of trends and fashions, the cost of consumer goods needs to be kept as low as possible, meaning production methods have needed to change. In her book *No Logo*, Naomi Klein describes the process whereby producers of consumer goods progressively offload all aspects of the actual manufacturing process by contracting out production, especially to factories in the third world where wages are lower and laws around worker and environmental protection are more lax.

An example of the move to offshore manufacturing can be seen through the history of the New Zealand shoe industry. It was not long ago in New Zealand when the origin of shoes, like most other things, was recognisable: Bata shoes came from Wellington, woollen rugs from Mosgiel, Crown Lynn cups from New Lynn, Berlei bras from Huntly. In 1962, 5,564 equivalent full time workers were employed in 129 factories making shoes. Ninety three percent of all shoes purchased in New Zealand at the time were made in New Zealand. By 1986 New Zealand was manufacturing

¹²⁷ Mark Paterson, *Consumption and Everyday Life*, 216.

¹²⁸ Michelle Lee, *Fashion Victim*, 27.

¹²⁹ *ibid.*, 33.

eight million pairs of shoes annually. Today only eight percent of all shoes purchased in New Zealand are made here, and in 2006 only 830 workers were employed in the industry producing just one and a half million pairs of shoes a year.¹³⁰ Commenting on New Zealand manufacturing, Judith Bell notes that in the previous era “an object was not a mere commodity, but a part of the story of the people who made it and the place where they made it, of local history and tradition.”¹³¹ However, the new “revolving lineup of quickly outmoded trends, has made sweatshops not only widespread but practically necessary.”¹³²

In his book which attempts to “discover the hidden world that keeps us in the state to which we have been accustomed,” Fred Pearce ponders the statistic that to produce the same lifestyle that the average household in Europe or North America has today would have required 6000 slaves in Roman times. He observes that while we rely on machines and cheap energy to do many of the things that servants would have done for the elite in a previous era, many of the servants are still there. “Though now,” he writes “rather than occupying the attics of grand houses, they are spread across the world, growing our food, making our machines and stitching our clothes.”¹³³ As Levine observes, “Our good life, requires that elsewhere - generally east and south of here, but also just down the street - life not be so diverting or convenient. Worldwide, workers, some of them children, pay for our cheap consumer items with miserable wages and working conditions, their air and rivers choked with chemicals.”¹³⁴

Thomas Princen examines the machinations through which this occurs by looking at two processes he names 'distancing' and 'shading.' In considering 'distancing,' Princen directs attention both upstream and downstream from what is the usual emphasis on individual choices of individualised consumers. Such an approach

¹³⁰ Judith Bell, *I See Red* (Wellington: Awa Press, 2007), 43.

¹³¹ *ibid.*, 92.

¹³² Michelle Lee, *Fashion Victim*, 171.

¹³³ Fred Pearson, *Confessions of an Eco Sinner* (London: Eden Project Books, 2009), 3-4.

¹³⁴ Judith Levine, *Not Buying It*, 5.

reminds us of the separation between primary resource extraction decisions and the ultimate consumption decisions.¹³⁵ Along this stream, key ecological and social feedback is severed. As a result the environmental impacts of consumption and production decisions are not always obvious or even known to decision makers.¹³⁶ He notes that:

.... consumer decisions based on incomplete information about the conditions of production are not likely to account for their long-term and environmental impacts, including both the use of the resource and the disposal of the endproducts. That is, commercial patterns that separate consumers from the consequences of their behavior are likely to weight consumption decisions toward narrowly self-interested consumption and away from long-term, intergenerational, and non-human concerns.¹³⁷

Princen's concept of 'distancing' highlights the isolated character of consumption choices because individual decision makers are cut off from seeing the ramifications of their choices, both upstream and downstream.¹³⁸ They are left with little basis for their decisions, except price.¹³⁹ Individual responsibility for everyday production and consumption decisions diminishes as distance increases. "Even the most committed environmental altruist and the broadest thinking global citizen," Princen believes, "cannot know of, or have influence on, production and selling decisions at a distance."¹⁴⁰ He observes that in his own purchasing decisions he has no way of knowing if his consumption is supporting or undermining farmers in poorer nations both economically and ecologically. With no feedback or with uncertain feedback he

¹³⁵ Thomas Princen, Michael Maniates and Ken Conca, *Confronting Consumption*, 15.

¹³⁶ *ibid.*, 116.

¹³⁷ *ibid.*, 116.

¹³⁸ *ibid.*, 16.

¹³⁹ *ibid.*, 116.

¹⁴⁰ *ibid.*, 127. In reality the separation of primary production decisions from consumption decisions through large, often highly integrated corporate food networks results in continuous pressure to convert land, to specialise, to plant "fence to fence". Farmers are compelled to intensify production with monocultures and external inputs. The long-term costs include depleted soils, poisoned ground water, and often economic ruin for the farmer.

writes: "I can only assume and, as with most of us, prefer to assume, that my purchases are supportive."¹⁴¹

The second key area of concern for Princen is what he terms 'shading' whereby some producers choose to ignore, or avoid, or misrepresent certain information, including that which reveals the long-term negative costs of a consumption decision.¹⁴² Princen observes that in our current consumer driven market place firms have a significant incentive to reduce costs, which many meet through externalising cost.¹⁴³ Through this process, the full environmental and social costs of production are not passed onto the consumer, rather they are rendered as 'invisible.'¹⁴⁴

Because of the ever expanding, rapidly changing, economic climate this is not difficult to do.¹⁴⁵ The continuous creation of new products, new processes of production, as well as new markets, leads to information lags between the full costs of manufacture and final consumption.¹⁴⁶

Commodity Fetishism

Paterson comments that by separating the two worlds of production and consumption, which can be seen as third-world sweatshop labour and first-world mass consumption, we are perpetuating the exploitative relationships within capitalism. By keeping the two worlds separate, Paterson argues, we exacerbate a form of 'commodity fetishism.'¹⁴⁷ This is a term Marx first coined to describe the tendency within capitalism to subordinate social relations among people to relationships between humans and objects. Producers can only see their

¹⁴¹ibid., 118.

¹⁴²ibid., 118.

¹⁴³ibid., 104.

¹⁴⁴ibid., 108.

¹⁴⁵ibid., 115.

¹⁴⁶ibid., 115.

¹⁴⁷ Mark Paterson, *Consumption and Everyday Life*, 218.

relationship with the objects they produce and are unaware of the people who will ultimately use that object. Similarly, consumers can only see their relationship with the objects they use and are also unaware of the people who produced that object. Any relationship between producer and consumer is obscured. Commodity fetishism, therefore, ensures that neither side is fully conscious of the economic and social position the other occupies.

As a result, people begin to treat commodities as if value was found in the objects themselves, rather than in the amount of actual labour expended to produce the object. The connection to the actual hands and experiences of the labourer are removed, as well as any connection to the sources of the materials used to create them. Lee writes:

We rarely associate clothes with their sources: the poor silkworms that must toil away to make one's ties, the now-hairless sheep that produced only part of a cheap sweater, the baby cow that lived a short existence to supply leather for a belt, the petroleum products sucked from the earth then processed to craft a rayon skirt.¹⁴⁸

In their book, *The Ethics of What We Eat*, Peter Singer and Jim Mason relate the same principles to food. They note that:

Shoppers are not presented with relevant information about the ethical choices that surround food. Instead, the food industry spends billions annually trying to make us crave their products. That buys an avalanche of advertising that sweeps down on us from all sides but tells us only what the advertiser wants us to know.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸ Michelle Lee, *Fashion Victim*, 56.

¹⁴⁹ Peter Singer and Jim Mason, *The Ethics of What We Eat* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2006), 1.

In all our purchasing decisions Raj Patel argues we have been ‘anaesthetised.’ We don’t look for answers about what we consume, about where it comes from, who grew or produced it or the environmental impact this process might have had. “We are dissuaded from asking hard questions.”¹⁵⁰

Consumption as an activity of everyday life now largely relies on the view of the product as an intangible object. Such reasoning is analogous to Baudrillard’s concept of the ‘commodity sign.’ Combining semiological studies, Marxian political economy, and Veblen’s notion of ‘conspicuous consumption’ to explore the system of objects and signs which forms our everyday life, Baudrillard observes that commodities are now valued for their symbolic meanings rather than for their use and in many cases, only the meanings are consumed.¹⁵¹ It is this process that results in the masking of more troubling aspects of production such as unequal labour relations, sustainability, and the depletion of the Earth’s resources.¹⁵²

The Brand

The brand, Paterson contends, is perhaps the most elevated example of the commodity fetish; “an insubstantial graphic mark which obscures the whole history of production, the human labour and the exploitative relations involved.”¹⁵³

Naomi Klein expands this concept stating that from the mid 1980s “successful” corporations decided to primarily produce brands as opposed to products. “Ever since,” she writes, “a select group of corporations has been attempting to free itself from the corporeal world of commodities, manufacturing and products to exist on another plane.”¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁰ Raj Patel, *Stuffed and Starved* (Melbourne: Black Inc, 2007), 8.

¹⁵¹ Colin Campbell, “Consumption: The New Wave of Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences.” 34

¹⁵² Mark Paterson, *Consumption and Everyday Life*, 198.

¹⁵³ *ibid.*, 217.

¹⁵⁴ Naomi Klein, *No Logo* (London: Harper Perennial, 2005), 22-33.

Anyone can manufacture a product, they reason. Such menial tasks, therefore can and should be farmed out to contractors and subcontractors whose only concern is filling the order on time and under budget (ideally in the Third World, where labour is dirt cheap, laws are lax and tax breaks come by the bushel). Headquarters, meanwhile is free to focus on the real business at hand – creating a corporate mythology powerful enough to infuse meaning into these raw objects just by signing its name.... With this wave of brand mania has come a new breed of businessman, one who will proudly inform you that Brand X is not a product but a way of life, an attitude, a set of values, a look, an idea. And it sounds great – way better than that Brand X is a screwdriver.¹⁵⁵

The C.E.O of the brand Gucci explained this process: “Luxury brands are more than the goods. The goods are secondary because first of all you buy into a brand, then you buy the products.”¹⁵⁶ The result of this process is that the cost of a product is no longer related to its component parts or even the labour costs of manufacturing.

Hamilton observes that this is particularly obvious in goods such as shoes. Non-branded footwear often uses the same methods of construction and materials as branded footwear. Alongside this, it is often sourced from exactly the same factory as branded footwear. If it were not for the brand image most consumers would not be able to tell the difference between the products. However, the commercial reality is that along with brand recognition comes a premium price. ¹⁵⁷ A prime example that Paterson quotes is Nike who, in 1992, paid Michael Jordan \$20 million to put his name, 'creativity' and 'final touches' on Nike shoes. “His pay amounted to more than the total wages of the women in South East Asia who actually made the shoes.”¹⁵⁸

Companies now must manufacture the feeling of knowing the product and its

¹⁵⁵ibid., 22-33.

¹⁵⁶ Clive Hamilton and Richard Denniss, *Affluenza*, 13.

¹⁵⁷ ibid., 38.

¹⁵⁸ Mark Paterson, *Consumption and Everyday Life*, 217.

producers, instead of actually manufacturing products. What gives a product most of its value today is no longer the commodity itself, rather it is the brand, making marketing the foundation that large corporations are now built on.¹⁵⁹ Through branding, the commodity has now concealed every trace of its relationship between people¹⁶⁰ rather, it has become the “embodiment of suspended, obfuscated or arrested sociability.”¹⁶¹

In her consideration of the impact the process has on objects, Lee concludes that the result of removing any knowledge of the context of goods, and replacing that with a manufactured feeling, eventually removes all sense of appreciation for the objects themselves.¹⁶² She argues that the current process of fast fashion, where trends rapidly change, particularly with clothing, further diminishes any value of the object.

Conclusion

Lee comments that the hunger within consumer culture for more products and the latest trends, together with the emphasis placed on presenting oneself well to the surrounding world, has undermined our self-esteem, our health, the environment, our finances, and our morals. However, she laments, we continue to be as ravenous as ever.¹⁶³ Destruction to the environment as well as the lives of growers and producers continues as the true reality behind the manufacture of goods is hidden from consumers. Prior to the emergence of widespread global markets it was more common for producers and consumers to maintain a relationship. Globalised capitalism and the fast production and consumption of a vast array of goods have contributed to the severing of producer-consumer relationships, which, in turn, has encouraged the dehumanising of growers and manufacturers. Goods, extracted from

¹⁵⁹ Clive Hamilton and Richard Denniss, *Affluenza*, 38.

¹⁶⁰ Sam Binkley and Jo Littler, “Cultural Studies and Anti-consumerism: a Critical Encounter,” *Cultural Studies*, vol 22 no. 5 (September 2008), 21.

¹⁶¹ *ibid.*, 21.

¹⁶² *ibid.*, 56

¹⁶³ Michelle Lee, *Fashion Victim*, xv.

the environment that created them, and separated from the hands that crafted them, are somewhat abstracted within consumerism. Marketing and branding fill the information void but seek to appeal to the senses of individual consumers. In this way, consumerism has been accused of encouraging selfishness and greed.

The devastating effects of consumerism are apparent to many commentators, Christian included. It is to the area of theology that we now turn to consider insights towards and critiques of consumerism.

Chapter Two: Christian Critiques of Consumerism

As consumerism has developed, criticism of its tenets has emerged within Christianity. As early as 1907, Baptist preacher Walter Rauschenbusch commented that “Competitive commerce spreads things before us and beseeches and persuades us to buy what we do not want.” He believed that its proponents “try to break down the foresight and self-restraint which were the slow product of moral education, and reduce us to the moral habits of savages who gorge today and fast tomorrow.”¹ This comment is representative of the kind of critique of consumerism that has emerged particularly within Protestant quarters, which primarily focuses on the danger to individuals that consumerism represents.

In this chapter the range of critiques of consumerism that have emerged within Christianity will be explored. During this examination some differences that commonly characterise thinkers from Protestant and Catholic traditions are surveyed. While there are areas of convergence between critiques found within Protestant and Catholic traditions, this overview will particularly highlight the points of difference. It will then turn to consider theories that seek to explain this difference in focus, looking particularly at the relationship between Protestantism, capitalism and particularly consumerism.

Condemnation of consumerism often found within Protestant Christianity addresses the idea that consumerism, and specifically the accumulation of possessions, represents a form of idolatry and encourages people to worship material goods. Skye Jethani, in his book *The Divine Commodity*, makes the claim that “Christian critiques of consumerism usually focus on the danger of idolatry – the temptation to

¹ Walter Rauschenbusch quoted in Rodney Clapp, “Introduction: Consumption and the Modern Ethos,” in Rodney Clapp, *The Consuming Passion: Christianity and the Consumer Culture*, 11.

make material goods the centre of life rather than God.”² Authors from within the Protestant tradition who tackle problems relating to consumerism use Scripture as the primary source for this critique. They focus on passages concerned with the use of possessions and wealth. Censure of consumerism also centres on the perils posed for an individual’s virtue as it encounters the consumer system. The tensions between the ethos of Christianity and the ethos of consumption are noted by a variety of authors who draw attention to the way in which the values of consumerism stand in opposition to values espoused by Christianity. The overall tone of critiques emerging within Protestantism emphasises the individual and, I would argue, actually embodies the individualistic mindset that dominates consumer culture. Because of this focus, criticism within Protestantism has often lacked in-depth exploration of consumerism beyond consideration of personal morality and the impact of consumerism on the inner spiritual life of Christians.

In contrast to this, critiques of consumerism emerging within the Catholic tradition often come from a more communally oriented perspective. Catholic thinker Alberto Munera argues, “At the basis of [consumerism]... there is an interpretation of the world and of the human being: a philosophy, a religious perspective, a theology and it is at odds with Catholic justice theory because it dignifies greed, destroys God's earth, has no sense of companionship with the rest of nature, and has no effective concern for the poor.”³ Moreover, critiques by authors within Catholicism are more likely to consider the machinations of consumer culture and its direct effects on the poor, particularly factory workers in the Two Thirds world where many of the goods on offer in wealthier nations are produced. Critiques draw on Liberation Theology with its emphasis on God’s preferential option for the poor. There is evidence of engagement with Marxist thought particularly around commodification and the commodity fetish. Like Protestant critiques, scripture is quoted, but, rather

² Skye Jethani, *The Divine Commodity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 12.

³ Alberto Munera, “New Theology on Population Ecology, and Overconsumption from the Catholic Perspective,” in *Visions of a New Earth*, ed. Harold Coward and Daniel Maquire (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 69.

than being focused on passages that consider the proper use of possessions and wealth, focus often is placed on loving one's neighbour, where 'neighbour' is interpreted as those who grow, process, and make the goods we consume. Greater emphasis within Catholic critiques is also placed on how consumerism operates as a formation system within Western culture.

Protestant Critiques

When considering consumerism, critiques from within Protestant quarters are wholly condemnatory. However, within Protestant writings consumerism is not a frequent topic for in-depth study. While consumerism is often referred to in passing, few works are dedicated solely to the topic. The late 1960s and 1970s brought the topic to light through popular works such as Ron Sider's *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, John Taylor's *Enough is Enough* and Bruce Birch and Larry Rasmussen's *The Predicament of the Prosperous*. At a similar time the very popular works *Christian Counter Culture* by John Stott and *The Celebration of Discipline* by Richard Foster engaged with the issue secondarily. Four decades later three anthologies including the voices of a range of authors have emerged on the topic. *The Consuming Passion* edited by Rodney Clapp was published in 1998, *Christ and Consumerism* edited by Craig Bartholomew and Thorsten Moritz was published in 2000, while in 2003 Baylor University Press dedicated their annual reflection on ethical issues to the topic. In more recent times other books targeting the popular audience committed to the topic have also included: *Christians in a Consumer Culture* by John Benton, 1999, *The Trouble with Paris* by Mark Sayers, 2008, *The Divine Commodity* by Skye Jethani, 2009, *Rescuing the Church from Consumerism* by Mark Clavier, 2013, an insightful chapter on shopping in *Twenty Four* by Kris Kandiah, 2007.

In their discussion of consumerism a number of authors do point out a three-fold concern around: individual spirituality, justice in the face of global poverty, and environmental degradation.⁴

Concern for the plight of those who are desperately poor in the world is present in statements made by Evangelical groups in the early 1970s. The Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern, 1973, noted that “Before God and a billion hungry neighbors, we must rethink our values regarding our present standard of living and promote more just acquisition and distribution of the world’s resources.”⁵ A year later the Lausanne Covenant proclaimed that: “Those of us who live in affluent circumstances accept our duty to develop a simple life style in order to contribute more generously to both relief and evangelism.”⁶ This criticism was particularly present in the writings of authors in the 1960s and 1970s. While still somewhat present it is not as apparent in more recent work.

However, despite the seeming weight given to these topics, even from those who specifically name them as concerns, in reality, the emphasis in discussion predominantly focuses on the dangers of idolatry through the worship of material goods. Questions centre around ‘how much is enough?’ regarding ownership of goods. How the proliferation of goods impacts an individual’s spirituality is also considered. There is evidence of a strong ascetic strain in contemporary critiques where all consumption, not just consumerism, is viewed with skepticism. Consideration of the appropriate stance towards possessions and wealth is considered and these two areas are often conflated.

⁴ John Benton, *Christians in a Consumer Culture* (Fearn: Christian Focus Publications, 1999); Ron Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977). 11; Thorsten Moritz, “New Testament Voices for an Addicted Society,” in *Christ and Consumerism*, ed. Craig Bartholomew and Thorsten Moritz (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2000); Laura Hartman, *The Christian Consumer*, 2011).

⁵ Evangelicals for Social Action, “Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern,” <http://www.evangelicalsforsocialaction.org/about/history/chicago-declaration-of-evangelical-social-concern/> (10 Nov 2016).

⁶ “Lausanne Covenant” <https://www.lausanne.org/content/covenant/lausanne-covenant> (10 Nov 2016).

Possessions and Wealth

When considering consumerism, authors within Protestantism style the West's love of possessions as 'idolatry.' This is a term used in most of the critiques of consumerism found in Protestant quarters.⁷ Thorsten Moritz, editor of *Christ and Consumerism* contends that while consumerism may be a phenomenon of the 'new world', the issue of a person's attitude towards the acquisition and use of commodities was not unknown in the New Testament world. He concludes that it was as normal then as it is now to use possessions for the purpose of making sense of the self in relation to society. Because of this he draws on New Testament passages⁸ to critique the idolatry he sees inherent within consumerism. ⁹ Like Moritz, many authors draw parallels between a love of goods in biblical times and in society today and so draw heavily on biblical texts to critique a consumer mindset.

Richard Foster in *The Celebration of Discipline* utilises Old Testament verses to condemn "idolatrous attachment to wealth". He quotes the Psalms and proverbs: "If riches increase, set not your heart on them," (Ps 62:10), "The wise sage understood that 'He who trusts in his riches will wither' (Prov 11:28)," while also noting the tenth commandment which condemns covetousness.¹⁰ Likewise, Mark Medley warns that while consumer culture tempts us to take delight primarily in what the world has to offer we are called to desire the one true God alone (Ps 42:1).¹¹

⁷ Laura Singleton writes "Stuff-love seems rooted in the brand of idolatry described in Romans 1:25—worship of created things rather than the Creator." (Laura Singleton, "Stuff-Love" in *Consumerism*, ed. Robert B. Kruschwitz, (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2003), 12) John Benton agrees, noting the relevance of Romans 1 which "tells us that in our fallen state we tend to worship the creature, material things, rather than the Creator." Christians in a Consumer Culture (John Benton, *Christians in a Consumer Culture*, 24.)

⁸ These include warnings against the accumulation of goods such as the parable of the Rich Fool (Luke 12: 13-21), as well as specific injunctions against loving money (Matt 6: 24 and 1 Tim 6: 10).

⁹ Thorsten Moritz, "New Testament Voices for an Addicted Society," 66.

¹⁰ Richard Foster, *The Celebration of Discipline* (London: Hodder Stoughton, 1989), 102.

¹¹ Mark Medley, "Discovering Our True Identity," in *Consumerism*, ed. Robert B. Kruschwitz (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2003), 37.

Considering the teachings of Jesus, John Stott concludes that material comfort is a false preoccupation. Stott argues that such a concern is unproductive, unnecessary, but especially unworthy. He maintains it conveys a view of human beings that sees them as no more than a collection of their physical needs. Reflecting on Jesus' teaching, he raises the questions: "is physical wellbeing a worthy object to which to devote our lives? Has human life no more significance than this?"¹²

In a similar vein, Craig Gay directs the reader to Jesus' questions: "What good will it be for a man (sic) if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Matt 16:26). Gay argues that, according to Jesus, imagining that humans can create or sustain themselves through their possessions or consumption habits is mistaken. "It is also stupid." He writes, "For such things have no lasting future."¹³ Because consumerism's plausibility depends on the apparent permanence of life in this world, Christians must, instead, remind themselves continually that this world is passing away (1 Cor 7:30-31).¹⁴

These and other authors focus on condemning material possessions. Craig Blomberg links material possessions to the biblical word "mammon" and points out that Jesus declared, "You cannot faithfully serve both God and Money" (Matt 6:24).¹⁵ Utilising the same passage Foster claims "Jesus declared war on the materialism of his day. (And I would suggest that he declares war on the materialism of our day as well.)"¹⁶ Moritz likewise concludes that commitment to Jesus in a consumer society needs to be associated with a "radical re-evaluation of material wealth."¹⁷

¹² John Stott, *Christian Counter-Culture* (Nottingham: Intervarsity Press, 1978).

¹³ Craig M. Gay, "Sensualists Without Heart," in *Consuming Passion*, ed. Rodney Clapp (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1998), 37.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, 39.

¹⁵ Craig Blomberg, "Mastering Mammon," in *Consumerism*, ed. Robert B. Kruschwitz, (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2003), 19.

¹⁶ Richard Foster, *The Celebration of Discipline*, 102.

¹⁷ Thorsten Moritz, "New Testament Voices for an Addicted Society," 66.

Alongside their use of scripture, a number of authors look to Christian history to draw on the lives and teachings of those who argued for a life unconcerned with material goods. The Desert Fathers, the Puritans and especially John Wesley are all used to bolster the argument against the accumulation of possessions.

Turning to Christian wisdom through the ages, Gay notes that one of the Desert Fathers, St. Nilos the Ascetic (d. 430), is said to have advised his disciples to stay within the limits imposed by basic needs and to “strive with all their power” not to go beyond them. “For once we are carried a little beyond these limits in our desires for the pleasures of this life,” Nilos warned, “there is no criterion by which to check our onward movement, since no bounds can be set to that which exceeds the necessary.”¹⁸ Meanwhile, Rodney Clapp points out that while we might “suffer no crisis of conscience” about consuming goods or experiences solely for relaxation and amusement, the Puritans and other Christians understood that consumption for pleasure was “sinful indulgence.”¹⁹ Puritanism was against opulence, viewing it as “vain ostentation,” and fearing any enjoyment stemming from possessions. The ordered and disciplined life promoted by Puritanism, instead, led to the rejection of “indulgences, wasteful expenditure and worldly pleasure.”²⁰

In a similar vein to the Puritans, Wesley, it is noted, wrote “As . . . for apparel, I buy the most lasting and, in general, the plainest I can. I buy no furniture but what is necessary and cheap.”²¹ Wesley Willmer notes favourably John Wesley’s advice to “despise delicacy and variety, and be content with what plain nature requires.”²² Ron Sider also observes that one of John Wesley’s frequently repeated sermons was

¹⁸ Craig M. Gay, “Sensualists Without Heart,” 36.

¹⁹ Rodney Clapp, “The Theology of Consumption and the Consumption of Theology,” in *The Consuming Passion* ed. Rodney Clapp (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1998), 172.

²⁰ Peter Sedgwick, *The Market Economy and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 85.

²¹ Richard Foster, *The Celebration of Discipline*, 110.

²² John Wesley, *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley vol. 2*, ed. Frank Baker (Nashville, Abingdon, 1985), 274 cited in Wesley K. Willmer, *God and your Stuff: The Vital Link Between Your Possessions and Your Soul* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), 73.

on Matt 6:19-23 (“Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth”). Christians, Wesley said, should give away all but “the plain necessities of life” Rather, Wesley wanted all income given to the poor after bare necessities were met. “Any ‘Christian’ who takes for himself (sic) anything more than the plain necessities of life,” Wesley insisted, “lives in an open, habitual denial of the Lord.” As a result this Christian has “gained riches and hell-fire.”²³

Foster agrees with Wesley’s principles, writing:

Consider your clothes. Most people have no need for more clothes. They buy more not because they need clothes, but because they want to keep up with the fashions. Hang the fashions! Buy what you need. Wear your clothes until they are worn out. Stop trying to impress people with your clothes and impress them with your life. If it is practical in your situation, learn the joy of making clothes. And for God’s sake (and I mean that quite literally) have clothes that are practical rather than ornamental.

Despite the favourable reading given these thinkers, concern emerges over the danger of falling into ascetism. Authors such as Foster, Sider and Singleton contend that “Neither unbridled asceticism nor unbridled acquisition is a proper response to the challenges of consumerism. God, after all, created much stuff for us to enjoy, pronouncing it “good” when the work of creation was finished. On the other hand, God commanded limits on our possessiveness. The forbidden fruit itself was both edible and delicious, but God placed it beyond the boundary of our appropriate gathering.”²⁴ Concern is raised that thinking that condemns the material world is, in fact, a form of dualism.²⁵

²³ Ron Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, 184.

²⁴ Ronald J. Sider *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, Revised ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 105. Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 104. Laura Singleton, “Stuff-Love,” 16.

²⁵ Bruce C. Birch and Larry L. Rasmussen trace the notion that the physical world is to be reproved from the influence of Greek dualism of body and spirit. From here the church developed a disdain for the things of the body and regarded the material world as evil, as

This re-affirmation of possessions becomes confusing in light of the condemnation surrounding the accumulation of too much stuff. Moritz wonders whether, if possessions are not evil, they can become evil once a certain degree of wealth is achieved. Alternatively, he wonders, maybe it depends on the power that possessions might have over those who own them.²⁶

The conclusion a few authors draw from this line of questioning is that the proper response to possessions is to remain detached from them. The notion that: “Spiritual triumph comes when the eyes are liberated from their downward cast and lifted to heaven”²⁷ is said to address the problem of idolatry. It is clear from these critiques of consumerism that materialism, as the desire for material goods, and consumerism, with its complex issues such as distancing, are not differentiated. However, the argument to focus on the spiritual rather than the material appears to run contrary to the notion of enjoying God’s good creation and instead reinforces, again, a form of dualism. Rodney Clapp, while not wholly condemning this approach also points out another danger:

“flesh”. Christian thinking relegated the material world to the lowest rungs on the cosmic ladder, with God, who was Pure Spirit, at the top; the closely related hold of hierarchical thinking in which humanity was above nature, spirit above body, and male (the more rational and spiritual) above female (the more emotional and base). (Bruce C. Birch and Larry L. Rasmussen, *The Predicament of the Prosperous* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1978), 48). Countering the Greek influence John Benton proclaims: “we must realise that Christianity is a materialistic religion. Unlike some of the heretics we find in the New Testament (1 Tim 4, for example) who said, ‘Don’t marry, don’t touch this food’, because they believed that material things are evil, we believe that the material world was made by God and therefore there is a goodness about it. Furthermore, we believe that at the end of time, God will not do away with the material universe but will cleanse and renew it. Hence material reality is fundamentally good. So we need to be careful how we approach the whole area of possessions. We need not be completely negative about it.” (John Benton, *Christians in a Consumer Culture*, 14.)

²⁶ Thorsten Moritz, “New Testament Voices for an Addicted Society,” 66.

²⁷ Wesley K. Willmer, *God and your Stuff: The Vital Link Between Your Possessions and Your Soul* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), 68.

One of the most popular and enduring responses to Christian worries over materialism has been the counsel that the Christian may hold any amount of possessions so long as he or she has the right attitude—an inner detachment—toward those possessions. There is surely much value in this approach, but we have at the same time left the assessment of genuine inner detachment up to the isolated, individual Christian. (Ask yourself how much you actually know, in some detail, about any other believer’s salary or tithing.) Thus any authority the faith has in regard to our economic behavior is entirely privatized.²⁸

An alternative response to the idolatry of ‘stuff’ worship has been to use one’s possessions or wealth on behalf of others. This is the response found in the likes of Ron Sider and Arthur Simon. Katie Cook affirms that following a path which avoids both asceticism and bad stewardship requires that Christians seek to “live responsibly, fully caring for all our neighbors sharing this globe.”²⁹ Craig Blomberg reframes it: “The question for Jesus’ followers is never how much personal property or possessions they own but how they are using them; if not in God’s service, then their “mammon” remains at least implicitly in Satan’s domain.”³⁰

A key concern in this line of thinking is how generous Christians are being with what they have. Arthur Simon’s book asks the reader to consider how comfortable and luxurious their lives currently are. He maintains that it is a scandal how little Christians give to others in desperate need around the world. Simon maintains Christians, rather than adopting a vow of poverty, should give out of their abundance, and live more simply so that others might have their basic needs met.³¹

²⁸ Rodney Clapp, “The Theology of Consumption & the Consumption of Theology Toward a Christian Response to Consumerism,” 200.

²⁹ Katie Cook, “From Francis to Fezziwig” in *Consumerism*, ed. Robert B. Kruschwitz (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2003), 74.

³⁰ Craig Blomberg, “Mastering Mammon,” 22.

³¹ Arthur Simon, *How Much is Enough? Hungering for God in an Affluent Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books), 2003.

Such writing echoes the earlier writings of Sider who argues in persuasive language that “We still live with more than a billion desperately poor neighbors. Another two billion struggle in near poverty with very little hope for a decent life.” He goes on “God’s special concern for the poor [hasn’t] changed. Hundreds of biblical texts tell us that God still measures our societies by what we do to the poorest. Jesus’ words still remind those with abundance that if they do not feed the hungry and clothe the naked, they go to hell.”³²

Within many Protestant critiques, concern for the poor is expressed through condemnation of greed and a lack of generous sharing of resources. In a consumer society money is spent on goods rather than given to those in need. There is little connection made between the poverty of those outside of the West and the economic structures encouraged by consumerism that may contribute to or even cause financial suffering.

The scriptural focus of this critique is biblical texts that remind the Christian of their need to show concern for those experiencing poverty. Blomberg and Howard Synder point to Jesus’ blessing the poor in Luke’s ‘Great Sermon,’ Jesus’ famous Nazareth “manifesto” (Luke 4:16-21) announcing good news for the poor, as well as the parable of the sheep and goats where those who will be allowed to enter God’s presence for eternity are “those who have helped the materially needy, especially fellow Christian brothers and sisters, thereby demonstrating true discipleship (Matt 25:31-46).”³³

However, all authors acknowledge that despite biblical injunctions to share with the poor, or to put hope in God rather than wealth, Christians are by and large hopelessly attached to ‘things.’ Bill McKibben bemoans, “We profess to believe that we cannot worship both God and mammon. We profess to worship someone who

³² Ron Sider, *Rich Christians*, xiv.

³³ Craig Blomberg, “Mastering Mammon,” 23; Howard Synder, *Kingdom Lifestyle* (Basingstoke: Marshall Pickering, 1985), 73.

told us to give away, not accumulate. We profess to follow a tradition that in its earliest and purest forms demanded communal sharing of goods and money. But we have by and large bracketed off those central portions of the message.”³⁴

Instead, these authors conclude, Christians are shaped and conditioned by the same values as the rest of society. As a result Christians live in ways that are indistinguishable from those who do not profess a Christian faith. A number of authors explore the causes and implications of this capitulation.

The focus within much Protestant thought on the dangers of material goods being a form of idolatry and the perils this poses for an individual’s spiritual growth offers little more than a critique of materialism. It does not address concerns that are specific to consumerism beyond the individual consumer.

Consumerism as an Alternate Religion

Concern is raised by some Protestant authors about the way in which consumerism operates as a religion in the Western world; this concern often draws on sociological insights. A key in such an analysis is advertising. Marketing is identified as a critical factor at work within idolatrous consumerism. Advertising, while not wholly blamed, is considered to exacerbate humanity’s tendency towards idolatry. In discussing advertising authors commonly use expressions such as ‘brainwashing’ and ‘deceiving’³⁵ to describe the process at work.

³⁴ Bill McKibben, “Returning God to the Center,” in *Consuming Passion*, ed. Rodney Clapp (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1998), 45; Wesley K. Willmer *God and your Stuff*, 8; Robert Wuthnow, *God and Mammon in America*, (New York: Free Press, 1994), 151. Robert Wuthnow has found through his research, that Christians today find little connection between faith and possessions: “There is a kind of mental or emotional gloss to contemporary religious teaching about money that prevents them from having much impact on how people actually live their lives.” Robert Wuthnow, *God and Mammon in America*, 151.

³⁵ Krish Kandiah, *Twenty Four* (Milton Keynes: Authentic Book, 2007), 60.

Laura Singleton contends that “advertisements work because they exploit something that is in us already and can be exploited.... We like having stuff.”³⁶ Sider also observes that our inherent bent toward idolatry gives advertisers the power to “convince us that more gadgets and bigger bank accounts are an easy way to meet our needs.”³⁷ John Benton stresses more clearly the role advertising plays in the process of capitulating to consumerism. He maintains that advertising cultivates dissatisfaction. “The sinful hearts of fallen men and women will always know an emptiness, for we were made for God and are now cut off from him... That is what is being played on in advertising... to make us discontent with what we already have and encourage us to get more. We live in a culture specifically geared to speaking to the sinful nature.”³⁸ However, advertising is seen as part of the much wider cultural dominance of consumerism. Sider quips “The increasingly affluent standard of living is the god of twenty-first century North America, and the adman is its prophet.”³⁹

A common theme in criticisms of consumerism is the pervasiveness of its ethos and how it has taken root, unchallenged both in society and in the shaping of individual lives.⁴⁰ Colin Greene observes that Christians “become so used to our consumer culture that it seems natural and right, and we allow it to reshape all aspects of our lives.”⁴¹ Considering this further, some Christian writers draw on social theorists to examine how consumerism operates like a religion in Western Capitalist culture. They conclude it is a rival religion to Christianity.⁴² Summarising this argument well, Mark Clavier writes “Reading sociological discussions of consumerism caused me to begin considering whether consumerism is best understood as a religion ...

³⁶ Laura Singleton, “Stuff-Love,” 14.

³⁷ Ron Sider, *Rich Christians*, 26.

³⁸ John Benton, *Christians in a Consumer Culture*, 103.

³⁹ Ron Sider, *Rich Christians*, 23.

⁴⁰ Bill McKibben, “Returning God to the Center: Consumerism & the Environmental Threat,” 45.

⁴¹ Colin Greene, “Consumerism and the Spirit of the Age” in *Christ and Consumerism*, ed. Craig Bartholomew and Thorsten Moritz (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000), 14.

⁴² W. Fred Graham, “America’s Other Religion,” *Christian Century* (March 17, 1982): 306-8; Craig Bartholomew and Thorsten Moritz, ed., *Christ and Consumerism*, (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2000), 177.

Consumer culture makes the same claims on identity as any religion... Like any religion, consumerism shapes individual and collective lives, preaches an all encompassing worldview, has its own rituals and offers happiness as an ultimate reward for the initiated."⁴³

Looking for illustrations of how consumerism might be conceived of as a religion, a number of authors consider the roles various institutions play in society. Mark Sayers notes that malls and movie theatres resemble churches. Celebrities resemble saints, shopping becomes a sacrament, and gossip magazines become scripture. Even conversion takes on a new form within consumerism. "We believe" he notes, "that by changing our surfaces we are undergoing conversion."⁴⁴

One of the key challenges of this rival religion comes in its systematic formation of character. Drawing on cultural theorists, such as Jean Baudrillard, Sayers states that consumerism "is a framework, a formation system, an entire worldview. It tells us how to live and how to act. It speaks to our sense of identity. It shapes our personality. It tells us what to love, what to commit to, and what to have hope in."⁴⁴ Sayers notes that we are effectively being disciplined by consumerism. Individuals are told what is important, what to value, what to put effort into, and what to find meaning in.

Benton raises similar concerns about consumerism shaping people's values and spirituality, specifying some key areas where Christian character is impacted.

Many of the open values of consumer culture cut directly across Christian virtues. We know that the fruit of the Spirit includes patience (Gal 5:22-23).

⁴³ Mark Clavier, *Rescuing the Church from Consumerism* (London: SPCK), 2013, <https://books.google.co.nz/books?isbn=0281070393> (4 May 2012)

⁴⁴ Mark Sayers, *The Trouble with Paris* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008). Comparing the shopping experience to a religious one Medley maintains that malls are like 'cathedrals of consumerism' to which we make 'pilgrimage' in order to practice consumer religion. Mark Medley, "Discovering our True Identity," 33.

But the ethos of the credit card society says, 'Why wait? Get what you want now!' Again self-denial is part of Christian discipleship. Jesus tells us that we must deny ourselves, take up the cross and follow him. But consumer society tells us not to deny ourselves anything; rather, before anything else, life is about enjoying yourself.⁴⁵

Benton's critique represents one of the most common and strident critiques of consumerism amongst Christian authors namely that the consumerist outlook now found in Western societies erodes Christian virtues such as commitment, generosity, patience, temperance, contentment, gratefulness, service, sacrifice and self-denial. Protestant authors who oppose the consumer mindset argue that in the place of Christian virtues consumerism fosters dispositions such as selfishness, greed, impatience, dissatisfaction, lust, envy and covetousness.⁴⁶

Rodney Clapp is a good representative of this critique. He writes:

The consumer way of life fosters a number of virtues at loggerheads with many Christian virtues. Can we simultaneously seek and to some degree realize both instant gratification and patience? What about instant gratification and self-control? Is gentleness cultivated in an ethos that must become ever more coarse and gross to excite overloaded, jaded consumers, or joy cultivated by an economic system that deifies dissatisfaction?

⁴⁵ John Benton, *Christians in a Consumer Culture*, 167.

⁴⁶ Rodney Clapp, "The Theology of Consumption and the Consumption of Theology," 188, 192. Mark Medley "Discovering Our True Identity," 33; Jeremy D. Lawson, Michael J. Sleasman and Charles A. Anderson, "The Gospel according to Safeway," in *Everyday Theology*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 73; Mark Sayers, *The Trouble with Paris*, 34; Thorsten Moritz "New Testament Voices for an Addicted Society," 79; Syke Jethani, *The Divine Commodity*, 118; Ron Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, xvi; Krish Kandiah, *Twenty Four*, 68; Craig Gay "Sensualists Without Heart," 36; Christian Smith, *Soul Searching*.

Smith, likewise, notes that because “mass-consumer capitalism” must constitute masses of people as consumer selves who develop new wants and desires, their basic sense of necessity always expands.” This results in consumption that militates against all sorts of Christian virtues, such as patience and contentedness and self-denial. Craig Gay juxtaposes the modern obsession with acquisition, grasping and possessing with the Christian virtues of gratitude, generosity and hope. He observes that far from encouraging us to accumulate and consume as much as we possibly can, the Scriptures “exhort us to view our lives as gracious gifts from God for which we are to be grateful.”⁴⁷

Extending the critique, Skye Jethani draws on Dietrich Bonhoeffer to illustrate the comparison of Christian virtue with consumer vice. Bonhoeffer states, “When Christ calls a man (sic), he bids him come and die.” But this invitation, Jethani notes, is not present in the gospel of Consumer Christianity. It promises joy and new life, a healthier marriage, more obedient children, a more balanced life, and less anxiety about the future—but nowhere do these promises carry the price of death. Never are we asked to deny ourselves. That is a value utterly at odds with the foundation of consumerism: the sanctity of personal desire.⁴⁸

Alongside the damage done to the individual by consumerism, there are two further areas where consumerism’s influence is noted. The first impact is on relationships while the second is the impact on the church. These concerns mirror the secular theory of commodification, which sees a consumption ethic entering the realm of personal relations.

Consumerism is condemned for the damage it does to human relationships because it focuses attention on the individual. The individual’s needs, rights and wants

⁴⁷ Craig Gay, “Sensualists Without Heart,” 36.

⁴⁸ Syke Jethani, *The Divine Commodity*, 118.

become the central point around which society arranges itself.⁴⁹ Krish Kandiah argues relationships have become disposable. He illustrates: “if something breaks, it is more often than not cheaper and easier to buy a new one than to have it fixed.”⁵⁰ This mindset is then carried into other areas of life. As a result, rather than spend time working problems through, it is “becoming more acceptable and easier to dispose of the broken relationship and start a fresh one.”⁵¹ Extending this, Kandiah observes, our attitude to church can be a bit like choosing a shampoo. We will stick with it until it doesn’t do the job for us anymore, then we will switch to a new one.⁵²

In agreement with Kandiah, Sayers argues that whenever individualism reigns supreme, community is easily “sacrificed for personal preferences. Churches, friendships, families, and groups splinter as individuals walk away rather than struggle for ways to bridge differences, reconnect, forgive, reconcile, and heal. Individualism” Sayers argues “fosters an impatience with people and institutions; we can always join another church, find new friends, or get another job.”⁵³

The disquiet about the impacts of consumerism on the church is profound amongst Protestant commentators.⁵⁴ Part of the critique focuses attention on the individual Christian who is accused of treating church as another commodity. Stephen J. Nichols notes: “We have been taught to buy, and we’re quick learners. We have come to view our faith as a commodity, and at times we make Christ into one too.”⁵⁵ From here the church is impacted. “Because the church is made up of individuals, if those individuals are influenced, it will also begin to influence the church. In this

⁴⁹ Barry Bryan, “Relationships in the Age of Consumerism,” in *Consumerism*, ed. Robert B. Kruschwitz (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2003), 27; Barry Harvey, “Which Kingdom?” in *Consumerism*, ed. Robert B. Kruschwitz, (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2003), 83; Mark Sayers, *The Trouble with Paris*, 41

⁵⁰ Krish Kandiah, *Twenty Four*, 65.

⁵¹ *ibid.*, 65.

⁵² *ibid.*, 65.

⁵³ Mark Sayers, *The Trouble with Paris*, 43.

⁵⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 1; Walter Brueggemann, *Bible and Postmodern Imagination* (London: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), 27.

⁵⁵ Stephen J. Nichols, *Jesus, Made in America* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 193.

way, key tenets of consumerism can begin to rule God's flock, rather than the Word of God."⁵⁶

The criticism is extended further by arguing that the church is capitulating to the consumerist desires of existing and potential members. Martin Robinson contends the church often succumbs to the temptation to present the Christian faith as something which is 'relevant' to the present age. "After all," he asks, "who would wish to be accused of being irrelevant?" But, he maintains, the temptation to present the church as relevant to contemporary culture can lead to a presentation of the faith as a product to be desired, experienced and consumed.⁵⁷ In 1998 the then Bishop of London also criticised the tendency to treat God and Christianity as a commodity to be marketed to potential consumers.⁵⁸ Colin Green points to such trends:

It can be raves in the nave for the young and trendy, charismatic sweet-talking with Jesus for the hurt and self-indulgent, austere ritualism for the aloof and conservative, evangelical Biblicism for the out-of-sorts moralisers and complainers, self-help meditation for the introverted and confused, syncretistic mysticism for the effete and intelligentsia, and radical social action for the disillusioned and disenchanting.⁵⁹

Syke Jethani also notes that Christians have succumbed to consumerist ideals in the way churches are run. "We manage our churches with repackaged secular business principles and methodologies pioneered by marketers."⁶⁰ Green contends that the

⁵⁶ John Benton, *Christians in a Consumer Culture*, 170.

⁵⁷ Martin Robinson, "Foreword," in *Christ and Consumerism*, ed. Craig Bartholomew and Thorsten Moritz, (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2000).

⁵⁸ Richard Chartres, quoted in *The Church of England Newspaper* No. 5407, April 17 (1998), 5.

⁵⁹ Colin Greene, "Consumerism and the Spirit of the Age," 25.

⁶⁰ Syke Jethani, *The Divine Commodity*, 19.

resulting danger of all these trends is the ‘ultimate blasphemy’ of making a commodity of God.⁶¹

The wider problem of commodification is a concern explored briefly, but perceptively by a few authors. Walter Brueggemann notes that we have allowed everything and everyone, including ourselves to be viewed not just as a commodity, but as a “means to an end and an object of control.”⁶² Medley notes that viewing others as commodities, allows us to see them as “objects to be exploited for our benefit. It abusively turns the freedom of the market into a freedom from each other or a right to exploit one another for the sake of self.”⁶³ Agreeing, Sayers concludes that the result of turning people into objects whose only purpose is to “deliver happiness and pleasure robs them of their humanity.”⁶⁴ Jethani writes:

In a commodity culture we have been conditioned to believe nothing carries intrinsic value. Instead, value is found only in a thing’s usefulness to us, and tragically this belief has been applied to people as well. Divorce rates have skyrocketed as we’ve come to see marriage as disposable. When a spouse is no longer useful he or she can be abandoned or traded. Abortion, the termination of an “unwanted” pregnancy, is believed to be morally justifiable because an unborn child is not a person. Personhood is a legal status reserved for those who are deemed useful. Pornography, prostitution, and child sex trafficking are the result of sexuality being commodified. Modern people may express outrage at the horrors of the African slave trade or the Holocaust, but in truth the commodification of human beings that made those atrocities possible is more prevalent today than ever before.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Colin Greene, “Consumerism and the Spirit of the Age,” 25.

⁶² Walter Brueggemann, *The Bible and Postmodern Imagination*, 53.

⁶³ Mark Medley, “Discovering Our True Identity,” 36.

⁶⁴ Mark Sayers, *The Trouble with Paris*, 102.

⁶⁵ Syke Jethani, *The Divine Commodity*, 37.

Critique of Concerns found within Protestantism

Various themes that emerge within Protestant authors' critiques of consumerism highlight key concerns for those of faith in the face of a consumer culture. These can also be criticised themselves for operating within an individualistic mindset, which sees the primary concerns of consumerism as related to the individual within that society. Little attention is given to some of the broader processes at work within consumerism and the economic practices at work that sustain a consumption focused way of living, beyond occasional concern for the environment. A website dedicated to helping North American consumers shop in line with their values: 'Faith Driven Consumer' rates companies according to concerns such as "respecting individual employees' personal religious practices." Companies that show a concern for climate change are criticised on the site, referring viewers to an evangelical statement refuting climate change. The working conditions of overseas manufacturers come second to whether company policy supports evangelical conceptions of marriage.⁶⁶

However, a tendency of Protestant authors' critiques to concern themselves with the individual, rather than global concerns is not missed by a handful of thinkers. Craig Bartholomew comments that a central tenet of modernity is the privatisation of religion, which "restricts religion to the private lives of citizens and keeps it out of the great public areas of economics, education, and politics. This century," he mourns, "too much evangelical spirituality has been of this privatized sort, with spirituality and the implications of the word reduced to quiet times and evangelism and with virtually nothing to do with public life."⁶⁷ Craig Blomberg observes this playing out at the popular level of evangelical writing and notes that the vast

⁶⁶ <http://www.faithdrivenconsumer.com> (10 Nov 2016).

⁶⁷ Craig Bartholomew, "Consuming God's Word: Biblical Interpretation and Consumerism" in *Christ and Consumerism*, ed. Craig Bartholomew and Thorsten Moritz, (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000), 91.

majority of books dealing exclusively with individual Christian behaviour, present a concept of Christianity as completely privatised.⁶⁸ Sider likewise laments:

Neglect of the biblical teaching on structural injustice or institutionalized evil is one of the most deadly omissions in many parts of the church today. Christians frequently restrict ethics to a narrow class of “personal sins. In a study of over fifteen hundred ministers, researchers discovered that theologically conservative pastors spoke out on sins such as drug abuse and sexual misconduct, but failed to preach about the sins of institutionalized racism and unjust economic structures that destroy just as many people. ... In the twentieth century, evangelicals have become unbalanced in their stand against sin, expressing concern and moral outrage about individual sinful acts while ignoring, perhaps even participating in, evil social structures. But the Bible condemns both.

Such observations highlight a problematic relationship between consumerism and Protestantism. Exploring the connection between the two is of interest to a number of authors. Rodney Clapp observes that while there are obvious points of tension between the ethos of Christianity and the ethos of consumption, Christians have not always been quick to recognise them. Instead, he argues, Christians have, in some ways, been “avid architects of consumerism.”⁶⁹ Craig Gay notes that “we have not been tricked into a mindset which invites us to locate the sum total of human happiness here and now,” rather “we actually chose this path several hundred years ago and continue to choose it on a daily basis.”⁷⁰ Authors draw on the classic theories of Max Weber in his well known work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* to look at ways in which Protestantism was the precursor for Capitalist society and later consumerism, and provided the necessary value system for it to flourish.

⁶⁸ Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*, 25.

⁶⁹ Rodney Clapp, *The Consuming Passion*, 8.

⁷⁰ Craig Gay, “Sensualists Without Heart,” 20.

The Protestant Ethic is said to have provided the “psychological justification for the organizational spirit of rational capitalism; a drive toward systematic control of the inner self eventuated in a drive toward the systematic mastery of the outer world.”⁷¹ In this setting, analytical and mathematical reason was not content to deal solely with physics or astronomy; rather it extended its operation to human behavior as well as work and wider society. From here the modern science of economics was born. Missiologist Lesslie Newbiggin argues that, as a result, economics was no longer part of ethics. “It was not concerned with the purpose of human life. It was no longer about the requirements of justice and the dangers of covetousness. It became the science of the working of the market as a self-operating mechanism modeled on the Newtonian universe.”

Therefore, Protestantism developed a “systematic, carefully calculated programme for organizing and shaping the whole lives of an entire people.”⁷² This programme allowed the rationalisation of time and an emphasis on industriousness which were both necessary for capitalism to thrive. By rationalising and submitting all of life to the criterion of efficiency and portraying money making as noble, the early Protestant Ethic is said to have laid the ground work for what eventually became consumerism.⁷³

Alongside this, as the division of labour began to dominate, the market became the central apparatus linking separate producers with each other and with consumers. In an earlier age, farming and crafts were mainly utilised by the family or local community. The market, where money was the means of exchange, was only a marginal part of the economy. However, with increased division of labour this

⁷¹ Rodney Clapp, *The Consuming Passion*, 176.

⁷² *ibid.*, 176.

⁷³ *ibid.*, 176.

changed, insulating individuals from their communities as producers and consumers.⁷⁴

Clapp takes the concept further, applying it specifically to the experience of faith. He argues that Protestantism isolated, or individualised, believers by turning the believer's attention inward, toward introspection, further encouraging an individual or consumerist mindset. Particularly influential in this, he argues, were Evangelical Christians, who emphasised the "intensely personal, subjective experience of faith."⁷⁵ Considering specific developments of this subjective experience of faith, Clapp claims Pietism laid an emphasis on enjoyment of salvation in this life, meanwhile Puritanism introduced the idea that success in one's labours was a reassuring sign of God's election. Methodism placed emphasis on emotion and taught that certainty of salvation rested on an intense feeling at a conversion that could be pinpointed to an exact moment, meanwhile, Baptists would play up the role of individual conscience and so further tendencies to introspection.⁷⁶ Clapp also contends that by "popularizing a pattern of self-transformation that would prove easily adaptable to advertisers' rhetorical strategies, evangelical revivalists... played a powerful if unwitting part in creating a congenial cultural climate for the rise of national advertising."²¹ The example of Coca Cola's advertising strategies being drawn directly from evangelistic techniques highlights this for Clapp. Therefore, Clapp maintains, Evangelicals, acting out of particular Christian understandings and motivations, played an important role in the creation and growth of a consumer mindset.

⁷⁴ Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 29.

⁷⁵ Rodney Clapp, *The Consuming Passion*, 178.

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, 177.

Contrasting Catholic and Protestant Critiques

In contrast to the approach prevalent within the Protestant tradition, which is critiqued for fostering consumerism, Catholic social thought offers a different vision. Instead of highlighting a privatised, individualistic view of the world Catholic critiques typically reflect a Communal view. While key biblical texts used within a Protestantism highlight concepts around wealth and possessions and personal spirituality, Catholic sources offer explicit examples of Christian thought that considers love of neighbour when judging consumption.⁷⁷ This focus results in greater attention being paid to the concrete operations of consumer culture. They pay attention to the context of production of consumer goods and look at the impact on the manufacturers, as well as the environment which they originate from.

This sentiment is reflected in Pope John Paul II's *Centesimus Annus* written in 1991 which also raised many concerns about consumer culture particularly as it related to the earth and all of its inhabitants. The points he raised included: the inequitable distribution of the earth's goods, the "domination of things over people," the marginalization of the least powerful, the "senseless destruction of the natural environment," "the fragmentation of the family, the seduction of consumerism where people are ensnared in a web of false and superficial gratifications," the alienation of work, and the overpowering of cultural and moral life.⁷⁸ Likewise, Pope Francis' *Laudato Si* criticised the "consumerist model of life" as well as a "technocratic paradigm" for the widespread environmental destruction they have wrought.⁷⁹

Catholic thinkers who have critiqued consumerism include: the Dominican, Christopher Kiesling, who wrote an article 'Liturgy and Consumerism' in 1978, John

⁷⁷ Laura Hartman, *The Christian Consumer*, 85.

⁷⁸ Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus* (1991) http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus.html (10 May 2016).

⁷⁹ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si* (2015).

Kavanaugh who wrote *Following Jesus in a Consumer Society* in 1981, Tom Beaudoin who penned *Consuming Faith* in 2003, and Vincent Millar who wrote *Consuming Religion* in 2004, while the more prolific Catholic author William Cavanaugh wrote *Being Consumed* in 2008. Michelle Gonzalez, wrote a book *Shopping* in 2010 while an anthology *Distant Markets, Distant Harms*, edited by Daniel Finn, was published in 2014.

Seeking to explain the difference between Protestant and Catholic concerns with consumerism, John Tropicman notes that the “Catholic Ethic” has a more communally oriented conception of the public good than the “Protestant Ethic,” which is more acquisitively oriented.⁸⁰ The Catholic Ethic, which constructs a self which is defined “through and in family and community, approaches life more cooperatively, wants to be sure that everyone has enough, sees status as malleable, seeks enough rather than “the most” and provides help based on condition and need.”⁸¹ Catholic author Michelle A. Gonzalez invokes the Catholic notion of the ‘common good.’ According to which, humans are social by nature and therefore interdependent. Humans do not exist as highly isolated individuals, rather as the community that is humanity. Gonzalez points to the notion from Genesis that we are all created in the image and likeness of God as the foundation of concepts of the common good.⁸²

Within Catholic tradition principles of justice must govern economic life in society. Liberation Theologian Alberto Munera quotes “the great Protestant theologian,” Emil Brunner, who wrote in 1949 that “while the Catholic Church, drawing on centuries of tradition, possesses an impressive systematic theory of justice Protestant Christianity has had none for some three hundred years past.”⁸³ This emphasis on justice is seen in ‘Catholic Social Teaching’. An embodiment of the themes within Catholic Social Teaching can be seen in the theological literature,

⁸⁰ John Tropicman, “Catholic and Protestant Ethics,” in *The Consuming Passion*, ed. Rodney Clapp, (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1998), 76.

⁸¹ *ibid.*, 81.

⁸² Michelle A. Gonzalez, *Shopping*, 57.

⁸³ Alberto Munera, *New Theology*, 66.

which came to be known, following Gustavo Gutiérrez's pioneering work, as 'liberation theology'.⁸⁴ Latin American liberation theologians speak of the 'preferential option for the poor,' calling Catholics to view the world through the eyes of the poor and privilege their perspective. It is grounded in a Christian vision of humanity where the last comes first.⁸⁵ In other words: "God sides with the oppressed against their oppressors and calls believers today to do the same in working for a more humane society on this earth."⁸⁶

Liberation Theologian Alberto Munera writes:

A Catholic approach... must be taken from the same perspective that Jesus clearly demonstrated in his daily dealing with the poor, the oppressed, the marginalised, the weak, the rejected, and those considered the debris of this world. This approach calls for a perspective of deep knowledge of the concrete situations and a religious reaction of justice-love that requires an effective praxis capable of transforming... terrible realit[ies]. Liberation theology's justice theory requires all of this.⁸⁷

Consumerism as Religion

Like Protestant authors, Catholic critics of consumerism highlight its similarity to a Religion. However, while in Protestant writing there is a strong link between the idea of idolatrous materialism and consumerism, Catholic critiques are nuanced differently. Consumerism is often viewed as having a distinctly spiritual, rather than material, outlook. Michelle Gonzalez argues that "consumerism is not the rejection of spirituality for materialism; consumerism can be a type of spirituality."⁸⁸ She

⁸⁴ Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*, 21.

⁸⁵ Michelle A. Gonzalez, *Shopping*, 56.

⁸⁶ Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*, 22.

⁸⁷ Alberto Munera, "New Theology," 66.

⁸⁸ Michelle A. Gonzalez, *Shopping*, 14.

points out that both Christianity and Consumerism teach that material objects will never ultimately satisfy. “Consumerism seduces us constantly, giving us new objects to desire, so that we are never satisfied with what we have. Christianity warns us that this will always be the case, for we are looking for satisfaction in the wrong places.” Both consumerism and religion say that objects cannot quench our desire.⁸⁹

The earliest example of this type of argument is seen in the thinking of John Kavanaugh. He wrote that “the notion that an economic way of life might be seen as a religious surrogate was first suggested to me when I read Karl Marx... The term he coined to express how we have perversely related to material objects was “fetishism of commodities.”⁹⁰ Kavanaugh goes on to liken consumerism to a gospel because the buying and consuming of material things has taken on, he believes, religious and even theological significance. It serves as a “way of life,” a truth about “the real world,” a method of achieving meaning and fulfilment in our existence.⁹¹ He argues that it “occupies every piece of territory in our personal and social lives.” He comprehends it as a total worldview, affecting not just the way we shop. “It affects the way we think and feel, the way we love and pray, the way we evaluate our enemies, the way we relate to our spouses and children.”⁹² Ultimately for Kavanaugh: “The consumer society is a formation system: it forms us and our behaviour.”⁹³

Kavanaugh likewise states, “Consumerism is an important subject for theology because it is a spiritual disposition, a way of looking at the world around us that is deeply formative.”⁹⁴ Like Kavanaugh, he also goes on to argue that consumer culture operates as a powerful system of formation in the Western world, “arguably more

⁸⁹ *ibid.*, 79.

⁹⁰ John Kavanaugh, *Following Christ in a Consumer Society*, 25th Anniversary edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 26.

⁹¹ *ibid.*, 25.

⁹² *ibid.*, 31.

⁹³ *ibid.*, 4.

⁹⁴ William Kavanaugh, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 35.

powerful than Christianity.” He notes that while Christians may spend an hour a week in church, in contrast, they may spend more than twenty-five hours a week “watching television, on the internet, listening to the radio, shopping, looking at junk mail and other advertisements.”⁹⁵

Catholic author Tom Beaudoin also utilises the religion metaphor to explain consumerism in Western society. He argues that while the economy, as a spiritual discipline, is not consciously “spiritual” or “religious,” it operates with a “dynamic similar to classic spiritual disciplines, providing a worldview as pervasive as the scriptures or any traditional religion.”⁹⁶ Interested particularly with the role of branding, Beaudoin explains that the ‘branding economy’ offers a “consistent, coherent identity, in which you are told about your true self; it offers membership in a community; it issues an invitation to unconditional trust; it offers the promise of conversion and new life.”⁹⁷ For Beaudoin, the branding economy forms the imagination. He writes that “without being able to influence our imaginations, the economy cannot shape our perceptions of our true self, our relation to a community, our investments of trust, and our hope for a new life. Indeed, without the power... to shape our imaginations, the economy would fail as an anonymous spiritual discipline – and the branding economy itself would buckle, collapse, and disintegrate.”⁹⁸

These critiques are similar to Protestant critiques. But, rather than viewing individuals within consumer society as being formed primarily to worship goods or act in ways that mitigate against Christian virtues, Catholic critiques point to a wider

⁹⁵ *ibid.*, 47.

⁹⁶ Tom Beaudoin, *Consuming Faith* (Lanham: Sheed and Ward, 2003), 44. This notion of Branding as religion is also found in secular discourse. Douglas Atkin, author of *The Culting of Brands: When Customers Become True Believers*, states plainly that “Brands are the new Religion... [They] supply our modern metaphysics, imbuing the world with significance... Brands function as complete meaning systems.” (Douglas Atkin, *The Culting of Brands: When Customers Become True Believers* (New York: Portfolio, 2004), xi, cited in Skye Jethani, *The Divine Commodity*, 54.)

⁹⁷ *ibid.*, 3.

⁹⁸ *ibid.*, 50, 51.

structural issue, namely the perpetration of injustice against the world's poor.

Vincent Millar states that:

As we eat, wear clothes, listen to music, sit at a desk, and use a computer we are being formed to think in certain ways. A trip to the supermarket trains us in the mental habits of commodification. We choose our food from a vast array of items that compete with each other for our attention.... The commodities offer themselves up to our credulous gaze. But like all seductions, they veil as much as they reveal."⁹⁹

Millar points out that we "open, prepare, and consume a can of beans without a thought of the calloused hands and stooped backs of the workers who harvested them in the hot sun." Rather, "Commodities appear on the scene," he writes, "as if descended from heaven, cloaked in an aura of self-evident value, saying nothing about how, where, and by whom they were produced."¹⁰⁰

This system of formation is part of a process of abstraction, where goods are considered solely for their use to the consumer and no thought is given to their origins. Millar contends that as the market has become the means by which we satisfy most of our needs, everyday existence has become a constant exercise in taking this abstraction for granted. "Our eating, clothing, shelter, labor – all confirm us in this abstraction."¹⁰¹

The notion of abstraction in the buying process is picked up by Cavanaugh who notes: "The products we buy are mute about their origins, and the people we buy them from can tell us little. Products say nothing about where they come from and

⁹⁹ Vincent Millar, *Consuming Religion*, 38.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*, 38.

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*, 2.

how they are produced, and we scarcely bother to wonder.”¹⁰² Cavanaugh acknowledges that we spend the equivalent of two days' wages for women who harvest coffee on a cup of coffee for ourselves without giving it a second thought.¹⁰³ He believes we do so, not necessarily because we are greedy and indifferent to the suffering of others, but largely because those others are invisible to us. Likewise, Michelle Gonzalez observes that much of what we consume is an abstraction. We have no connection to who makes it or where it comes from, with little awareness of the labour that goes into the everyday things in our lives.¹⁰⁴ “I can only stare blankly around my home and wonder about the many faceless hands, the months that go into the things that surround me. When we purchase goods in stores we are far removed from those who produce them.”¹⁰⁵

Seeking to explain why consumer culture has achieved this, Cavanaugh borrows from Karl Marx's concept of the commodity fetish. He notes that “Entrusting our identity to dead objects, we take on their characteristics and imagine ourselves to be mere things without capacity for listening, feeling, or truly communicating.... With our worth and purpose dependent upon the commodity, we ourselves are reduced to the qualities of commodity: quantifiably measurable, non-unique, price-valued, replaceable objects.”¹⁰⁶ “And, what is more,” he writes, “As this is done, we increasingly relate to each other as if we were mere things, bereft of our humanity.... Thus we become estranged from our very selves, from each other, and even from the living and true God.”¹⁰⁷

The result of this ‘Commodity Form’ system, for Cavanaugh, is “a life of fragmented relatedness. We know not how to give ourselves to the other since it is an empty fortress we call the self.... The lost interior person, whose consuming and producing

¹⁰² William Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed*, 45.

¹⁰³ *ibid.*, 43.

¹⁰⁴ Michelle A. Gonzalez, *Shopping*, 17.

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.*, 18.

¹⁰⁶ John Cavanaugh, *Following Christ*, 54.

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*, 27.

has become self-destructive, is capable only of injurious relationships.”¹⁰⁸

Illustrating this Cavanaugh writes:

Most of us would never deliberately choose our own material comfort over the life of another person. Most of us do not consciously choose to work others to death for the sake of lower prices on the things we buy. But we participate in such an economy because we are detached from the producers, the people who actually make our things. Not only are the people who make our things often a world away, but we are prevented from learning about where our products come from by a host of roadblocks.¹⁷

Catholic authors commonly condemn the reality of marketers withholding information about a product from consumers, or diverting their attention to evocative images unrelated to the product itself. They also note that this “disequilibrium of knowledge” manipulates consumers.¹⁰⁹

Beaudoin writes of his own experiences as he sought to seek information from various companies who “produced” some of the commodities he enjoyed. What he found was that companies threw up almost every imaginable “firewall, evasion, and euphemism” to keep from revealing even minimal information.¹¹⁰ “I was,” he explains, “perhaps naively, stunned to learn that this company refused to take responsibility for living wages for their coffee farmers through a series of distancing

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.*, 9-12.

¹⁰⁹ Beaudoin points to the process of Branding as particularly illustrative of this process. A brand is able to conjure up a “personality” with which consumers can identify, while also drawing attention away from how it was produced. (Tom Beaudoin, *Consuming Faith*, 11.) Beaudoin notes that the identity associated with a brand becomes more important than the quality of the product itself. Because people are buying the image or identity associated with the brand as much as, or more than, the quality of the product. Corporations are able to use this to their advantage. The trust people place in brands Beaudoin believes is overwhelmingly evident in people's refusal to ask critical questions about where our branded products come from and how they were produced. (Tom Beaudoin, *Consuming Faith*, 55.)

¹¹⁰ Tom Beaudoin, *Consuming Faith*, 11.

measures, by employing layers of midlevel 'independent' operators to relate to farmers. Through a deft business mechanism they pronounced themselves unaccountable to the workers they depend on the most."¹¹¹ Beaudoin reveals that with only one exception, none of the companies he contacted was proud, forthcoming, or transparent about its labour practices outside the United States.¹¹²

Cavanaugh picks up on the paradox within the free market economy, which hinges on the insistence that exchanges be voluntary and informed. However, he notes that Friedman was confident that the price system in a free-market economy transmits all the information needed to make exchanges informed. Indeed, "the price system transmits only the important information and only to the people who need to know."¹¹³ In this system, marketing is portrayed simply as an information provider where consumers can make choices that are seemingly both informed and voluntary.

As a means to critique this idea, Cavanaugh considers the practice of transnational corporations shopping around the globe for the most "advantageous wage environments," that is, those places where "people are so desperate that they must take jobs that pay extremely low wages, in many cases wages insufficient to feed and house themselves and their dependents." 'Why do companies pay such wages?' Cavanaugh asks, "because they can" is his answer. It is considered good business practice to maximise the disparity of power between employer and employee in order to increase the profit margin of the corporation.¹¹⁴ Locations of production have become interchangeable, their merits evaluated according to considerations of labour price, availability of raw materials, and laxity of environmental oversight. The new order is not loyal to workers, products, factories, businesses, communities, or even nations. The chair of Gulf and Western observes: "All such allegiances are viewed as expendable under the new rules. You cannot be emotionally bound to any

¹¹¹ *ibid.*, xv.

¹¹² *ibid.*, 10.

¹¹³ Milton Friedman, *Free to Choose* (New York: Avon, 1981) 7.

¹¹⁴ William Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed*, 21.

particular asset.”¹¹⁵

Likewise, Daniel Finn critiques these practices, inherent in the system of consumerism, by drawing on Thomas Aquinas’ notion of a ‘just price.’ Aquinas explicitly states that we are not to take advantage of others’ extenuating circumstances to extend to them an unfair price.¹¹⁶ However, within consumer economics, the very notion of a just price has become trivialised. Because interactions between buyer and seller are considered voluntary, with both parties technically being able to walk away from any market transaction, any price that receives mutual agreement is considered fair. If a party considers a proposed price unjust, it is up to them to decline the offer. Finn points out that this principle completely ignores a number of wider issues. It overlooks the context in which individual transactions are made. In particular, the principle assumes a balance of power and resources between buyer and seller that usually does not exist, particularly when the need for the transaction is much greater for one party than for the other. In this situation, the party with the greater need may be forced to accept a trade that is actually exploitative.¹¹⁷

Finn notes that the freedom to buy the level of goods consumed in Western nations depends on the production of these goods by people earning far less than would be paid in wealthier nations for similar labour. “Were the workers in those other places not making so little,” he observes, “a lot of the products we buy would perhaps not even be made. But,” he argues, “maybe products like the iPhone should not be made, if making them entails an unjust wage.”¹¹⁸

Gonzalez wrestles with the same issue, writing:

¹¹⁵ *ibid.*, 62.

¹¹⁶ Daniel K. Finn, ed. *Distant Markets, Distant Harms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 8.

¹¹⁷ Milton Friedman, *Free to Choose*, 6.

¹¹⁸ Daniel K. Finn, *Distant Markets, Distant Harms*, 8.

We are told to shop until we drop, but it is the workers that drop, often from malnutrition, poor ventilation, or an excessive amount of consecutive hours in a factory or field. More and more American corporations are turning to work forces abroad because the labor is cheaper and seemingly endless. This is perhaps one of the more difficult issues we need to wrestle with. Through our consumerism we participate in global slavery, whether we admit to it or not.¹¹⁹

Cavanaugh names the reality of how goods are brought to the market in a consumer culture as an abuse of power. He argues that in the absence of “any objective concept of the good” within the free market economy the one and only end becomes profit and the aggrandisement of the corporation. He quotes Augustine who saw, in the absence of any substantive ends, the triumph of the sheer lust for power. Such an exploitative quest for power is evident in the way in which products are produced and brought to the market for Cavanaugh.¹²⁰

Munera observes that while it is true that some people, in many countries, have acquired great prosperity because of the free market, It is also true and tragic that the cost of the prosperity of the few rich is the poverty and death of millions of the poor.¹²¹ Beaudoin concludes: “unbridled global American capitalism remains devastating news for much of the world's poor.... Our branded economy depends on the violent branding of the world's labouring poor... violence for which most of us in the West share responsibility, and violence for which globalization continues to provide a false sense of innocence... Christians and all people of good will have yet to feel this stranglehold for the violence that it is, not to mention voicing sufficient protest against and imagining different worlds in the face of it.”¹²²

¹¹⁹ Michelle A. Gonzalez, *Shopping*, 23.

¹²⁰ William Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed*, 22.

¹²¹ Alberto Munera, “New Theology,” 68.

¹²² Tom Beaudoin, *Consuming Faith*, ix-x.

Love of Neighbour

Shaping a response to the exploitation of the poor is a strong theme concerning the love of neighbour in writings by Catholic authors. Hartman observes that Catholic sources offer the “best, most explicit examples of Christian thought that considers neighbor-love in judging consumption.”¹²³ Gonzalez uses a text about material possessions to draw attention to this concern. Matthew chapter 6, she notes, has various teachings on wealth, material objects, and how they affect humanity’s relationship with the sacred. In a sense, a preoccupation with the material is seen to be at odds with a focus on the sacred.¹²⁴ However, she goes on, a relationship with the sacred is defined by how people relate to their fellow human beings. How someone treats others is a reflection of how he or she loves the sacred. As part of that, someone’s relationship with the poor is related to his or her relationship with the sacred. A commitment to fellow human beings, Gonzalez argues, necessitates giving the poor a privileged place. Their poverty creates an urgency within the human condition. “Because the very act of buying a piece of clothing, for example, in a large retailer in the United States, in this globalized economy, can link you to a poor factory worker in the global South our relationship with the sacred therefore relates to how we shop and how we value shopping in our lives.”¹²⁵

Gonzalez uses the story of the rich man and Lazarus to illustrate a predicament for Christians in a consumer society. She notes that the rich man was blind to the poor. He walked by Lazarus every day but never truly saw him. Christians in a consumer society likewise do not see the poor. This can undermine their ability to love their neighbour. Gonzalez believes that the rich therefore do not see themselves in any way complicit in the web of global poverty. “But,” she concludes “we all contribute

¹²³ Laura Hartman, *Consumer Christian*, 85.

¹²⁴ Michelle A. Gonzalez, *Shopping*, 32.

¹²⁵ *ibid.*, 37.

to the global consumerist culture built on the broken backs of the poor, whether or not we accept this fact.”¹²⁶

She argues that Christians should all become more educated about the conditions under which their goods are made, and recognise that the shopping habits of those in wealthier nations concretely shape the lives of millions of individuals globally. “We can admit,” she proposes “that disposable clothing requires disposable people. These disposable people are the millions of faceless poor that make the goods that I devour and discard.”¹²⁷

Cavanaugh also considers love of others in his critique of consumerism. He contends that for the Christian the ultimate question in shopping is not whether the acquisition of a product will enhance his or her life, but whether the product’s growth or manufacture has enriched others’ lives. Good consumption, in the Christian understanding, he believes is a kind of “self-emptying, a decentering of the self into a larger web of participation.”³⁵ The goods people buy are embedded in relationships of production and distribution that bring the consumer into contact, for better or worse, with other people's lives.³⁶ Christians must, therefore, understand where their goods come from and how these things are produced. Cavanaugh writes that if “detachment from particular places and communities has contributed to the depersonalization of the global economy, then a proper aesthetic of the particular would place the human person back at the centre of economic relations.”¹²⁸ He concludes:

The Christian task in a consumer society, then, is to create economic spaces that underscore our spiritual and physical connection to creation and to each other. We must strive to demystify commodities by being informed about where they come from, who makes them, and under what conditions.³⁷

¹²⁶ *ibid.*, 85.

¹²⁷ *ibid.*, 38.

¹²⁸ William T Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed*, 86.

Conclusion

There is a marked difference in the themes considered by both authors within Protestant and Catholic traditions in their critique of consumerism. While Protestant authors generally concern themselves with the risk consumerism poses to an individual within that culture, Catholic critiques typically concern themselves with the damages being done to the working poor who produce the goods for wealthier nations to consume. Protestant critiques focus on scriptural passages that concern idolatry while Catholic critiques look to passages concerned with loving the neighbour. Explanation for this difference is provided by historical processes which have seen Protestant cultures move away from a more communitarian ethic. Catholic critiques have also been shaped by Liberation theology, which has noticeable Marxist influences. Both critiques recognise the way in which consumerism operates like a religion in Western society.

This chapter has focused specifically on the critiques of consumerism provided within Protestant and Catholic theological traditions. However, concerns about consumerism presented in the first chapter tend to extend into areas that consider exploitation of the environment and offer critiques of the globalised capitalist system. A range of separate theological writings pick up on these two themes. Unease around the exploitation of the environment is expressed in the theological stream of 'Creation Care.' Meanwhile critiques of the way the globalised capitalist system operates are also present within theology. Because these theological streams provide further resources to strengthen Christian critiques of consumerism they will be examined in more depth in the following chapter.

Chapter Three: Secondary Critiques: The Environment and the Global Capitalist Economy

There are two areas that deserve further exploration in mounting a Christian critique of consumer culture. The first is the growing body of theological literature on environmental protection, often termed ‘creation care.’ While secular writing often makes the link between consumerism and environmental destruction explicit, this occurs less frequently in religious writings where the treatment of the two subjects is often separate. Secular author Gary Gardner argues that religious thinkers regularly fail “to see the intrinsic connection between environmentalism and consumerism.”¹

The second area that is worth further consideration is a theological critique of the current global capitalist economic system. It is only because of current global trade practices and agreements that the ability to grow and manufacture items in one region of the globe, for mass consumption in another, is possible. As seen in the first chapter, the distance between production and consumption means exploitation of workers and the environment is hidden from consumers, masking the realities of how the capitalist economic system is operating in the world today. Once again, in theological writing, this focus often occurs independently from examinations of consumerism. Therefore, theological reflections on the global capitalist economy add a further dimension to critiques of consumerist culture.

This chapter brings theological thinking on creation care and the global capitalist economy into the discussion on consumerism. It draws attention to voices from both

¹ Gary Gardner, “Transforming Cultures from Consumerism to Sustainability,” in *Blessed are the Consumers*, ed. Sallie McFague, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013).

Protestant and Catholic traditions in order to broaden the exploration of the critiques of consumerism found within theological writing.

The Environment

Research in the United States has found that a majority of pastors there continue to down play environmental concerns such as climate change.² Meanwhile, one evangelical group known as the Cornwall Alliance calls the environmental movement “radical” and claims “this so-called green dragon is seducing your children in our classrooms,” while “millions [are] falling prey to its spiritual deception.”³ Despite this, there are a few ‘Ecotheologians’ who have recently emerged who express concern about the role consumerism plays in the destruction of the environment.⁴ Methodist environmental writer Bill McKibben writes, “The American way of life, insofar as it revolves around consumption, drives our environmental problems.”⁵ All of the following problems have grown worse due to the overconsumption of wealthy nations: the depletion of the ozone layer, global warming, acid rain, the loss of biodiversity and farmable land, the amount of toxic chemical waste, deforestation, pollution of the sea, depletion of available energy resources and the overall deterioration of human health.⁶ Injustice around consumption of global resources is also noted as twenty percent of the world’s

² Melissa Steffan, “Most Pastors Don’t Believe in Global Warming,” *Christianity Today* (April 2013). <http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2013/april/most-pastors-dont-believe-in-global-warming.html> (19 Nov 2016).

³ Cornwall Alliance, “Resisting the Green Dragon,” YouTube video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vAA2sLtzXJM> (15 Oct 2010) cited in Daniel Brunner and Jennifer Butler, ed. *Introducing Evangelical Ecotheology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2014), Chapter 2 para 5 Kindle Edition.

⁴ See, for example, Sallie McFague, *Blessed are the Consumers*; Bill McKibben, “Returning God to the Center: Consumerism and the Environmental Threat,” Dave Bookless, *Planetwise* (Nottingham: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 12.

⁵ Bill McKibben, “Returning God to the Center,” 44.

⁶ Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Possessions* (Downers Grove: IVP Press, 2000), 18.

population consumes eighty percent of the world's resources. David Bookless calls this "an issue of justice for the world's poor."⁷

Bill McKibben argues:

This is a powerful moment for rehabilitating Christ the crank. What are the atmospheric chemists telling us? What are the climatologists saying? In many ways, the same things we have heard from Christ and his disciples: Simplicity. Community. Not because it is good for our souls or for our right relation with God, but because without simpler lives, the chances of stabilizing the planet's basic workings are slim.⁸

However, voices such as McKibben's traditionally have not been given much attention within the church. This has led to the complaint, by some, that Christian theology is actually responsible for the current environmental ills. In his 1967 article in *Science* magazine, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," historian Lynn White Jr. claimed that "Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt" for the current ecological crisis. White argued that Judeo-Christian thinking was "the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen" and argued that this religious heritage provided the major impulse in the West for the conquest of nature through technology.⁹

⁷ Dave Bookless, *Planetwise*, 117.

⁸ Bill McKibben, "Returning God to the Center," 45.

⁹ Lynn White Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155 (March 10, 1967): 1203-7, cited in Daniel Brunner and Jennifer Butler, ed. *Introducing Evangelical Ecotheology*, Chapter 4 para 2 Kindle Edition.

However, there have been a number of theologians who have disputed White's reading of history and culture. New Zealander Selwyn Yeoman notes "the reality of serious environmental degradation in contexts quite untouched by Biblical ideas or the Christian tradition." He also explores the sustained attention given by Patristic and Medieval theologians to the responsible habitation of creation. The ecological concerns of these writers exerted a considerable influence during the period White writes about and yet these writings are completely ignored in White's critique. (Selwyn Yeoman, "Is Anyone In Charge Here?" A Christological Evaluation of the Idea of Human Dominion Over Creation. (Ph.D.

Francis Schaeffer was one of the first Christian apologists to answer White's accusation. "So far as ecology is concerned, we must admit that [White] is right: much 'Christianity' has treated nature with less restraint than animism, not because Christianity does not have an answer but because we have not acted on the answer; not because Christianity does not have a view that gives a greater value to the tree than the animist can give it but because we haven't acted on the value that we know it has, or should know it has, as a creature of God."¹⁰

Schaeffer set out to counter White's argument by laying out a theology for creation care. Key in Schaeffer's argument is the notion that creation is good. He contended that Platonic concepts have coloured Christian thinking leading Christians to view material as 'low' or of little value. However, Schaeffer argued that Christianity cannot think of the material world as low in light of the belief that God made it.¹¹

Since Schaeffer's work a number of theologians have also responded to White's criticisms from a theological perspective, although more defensively than Schaeffer. Key to these writings is the view that the correct biblical interpretation of creation and "stewardship" calls humans to partner with God in the care and conservation of creation, rather than justifying exploitative practice.¹² Theological attention is now being given to an appropriate Christian understanding of issues such as pollution the destruction of habitats, particularly through deforestation and desertification and the accompanying loss of species and biodiversity. Climate change is particularly highlighted.

diss., University of Otago, 2012) cited on
<https://ourarchive.otago.ac.nz/handle/10523/2225> (29 July 2017))

¹⁰ Francis Schaeffer, *Pollution and the Death of Man* (London: Hodder Stoughton, 1970), 44.

¹¹ *ibid.*, 40.

¹² See Alister McGrath, "The Stewardship of the Creation," in *The Care of Creation*, ed. Robert J Berry (Leicester: Intervarsity Press, 2000), 88.

A 1994 document titled “An Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation” and its accompanying anthology *The Care of Creation* edited by Robert Berry, sought to outline “five Christian affirmations relevant to discernible violations of creation, identifies four spiritual responses, and then calls upon all Christians to seek to apply these responses.”¹³ Key in this document is a concern to articulate a comprehensive theology for the care of creation. It includes concepts such as: the acknowledgement of God as sovereign over creation; the failure of sinful humans to care for creation; and the God given responsibility of humans, made in the image of God, to steward environmental resources responsibly.¹⁴

Since the publication of this resource, biblical reflection on environmental care continues. Recently ecotheologian Sallie McFague writes: “We read in Genesis that God looked at creation and said: “It is good” ... [therefore] We should relate to the entities in nature in the same basic way that we are supposed to relate to God and other people—as ends, not means, as subjects valuable in themselves, for themselves.”¹⁵ Likewise, Dave Bookless notes:

When we read the Genesis creation account, the first thing that strikes us is that creation is good. After making the land and seas, God stopped, looked at what he had made, and ‘saw that it was good’. He said the same after making plants and trees, creating the sun and the moon, and fish, birds and animals. Finally, after making people, he stopped and looked at everything he had made, ‘and it was very good’ (Genesis 1:31). It is astonishing how often we overlook the simple truth that creation is good. It reflects the goodness and character of God. He made it, he loves it, and that settles it: we should love it too. Physical matter matters, because it is important to God. Whatever has happened since, God made a good world.¹⁶

¹³ Robert J Berry, ed. *The Care of Creation* (Leicester: Intervarsity Press, 2000), 17.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, 18-22.

¹⁵ Sallie McFague, *Super, Natural Christians* (London: SCM Press, 1997), 1.

¹⁶ Dave Bookless, *Planetwise*, 25.

This reframing of how creation is viewed is also now reflected in recent conceptions of salvation and eschatology. David Bookless writes that Jesus' death on the cross effectively restored every relationship that had been broken by the fall and it brings the whole of the created order back into a restored relationship with God.¹⁷

Along with a creation-positive salvation narrative, a minority biblical interpretation that proposed the ultimate annihilation of the earth is also being challenged. It has been believed that the world will be destroyed at Jesus' return. Some of those who hold that view have often read environmental destruction positively as a sign of Jesus imminent return, as opposed to a crisis humans must take responsibility for.

Michael Northcott observes that those who hold a belief in the earth's destruction at Jesus' return scorn all efforts to "correct the ills of society or to inaugurate any programme of social betterment would be to thwart the divine purpose and to delay the advent of Christ."¹⁸ Now, the environmentally conscious theologian emphasises passages such as Isaiah 65: 17-25 that speak of God creating 'new heavens and a new earth.' This focus calls humanity to seek for the care of creation in the here and now as a means of seeing "God's kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven."

Two representative documents that embody the new attention to environmental concern within Christian thinking have emerged in the last few years. As some of the most recent works, the message of these will now be considered. The first document is *Laudato Si*, the Papal Encyclical written by Pope Francis in 2015, which builds on previous encyclicals and the concerns raised about environmental destruction. The second document, the "Cape Town Commitment," came out of the Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization – a global evangelical gathering held in 2010,

¹⁷ *ibid.*, 71.

¹⁸ Michael Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 59, cited in Robert J Berry, ed. *When Enough is Enough* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2007), 14.

which focused on environmental concerns. A follow up compendium of writings entitled *Creation Care and the Gospel* was published in 2016 to explore the issues raised in the Cape Town Commitment.

Laudato Si

In *Laudato Si* Pope Francis, using poetic imaginary of the earth and creation as family, contends that current environmental problems “have caused sister earth, along with all the abandoned of our world, to cry out, pleading that we take another course. Never have we so hurt and mistreated our common home as we have in the last two hundred years.”¹⁹ Pope Francis explicitly links the damage being done to the environment to a “consumerist model of life,” although this is mentioned in passing only a couple of times. He quotes Pope John Paul II drawing attention to the warning that human beings frequently seem “to see no other meaning in their natural environment than what serves for immediate use and consumption.”²⁰

Pope Francis connects the problems of environmental destruction with the tendency to “make the method and aims of science and technology an epistemological paradigm which shapes the lives of individuals and the workings of society.” The impact of adopting this model is evidenced in the destruction of the environment. Pope Francis calls for a distinctive way of looking at things. He wants “an educational programme, a lifestyle, a spirituality,” as well as policies that would generate a degree of struggle against the technocratic paradigm. Such liberation from the dominant technocratic paradigm is possible, Pope Francis contends, when people opt for a non-consumerist model of life. This response, he contends, will be more effective than a “series of urgent and partial responses to the immediate

¹⁹ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, 2015 (10 May 2016).

²⁰ John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis* (4 March 1979), 15: AAS 71 (1979), 287 cited in Francis *Laudato Si*, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html#_ftn4 (10 May 2016).

problems of pollution, environmental decay and the depletion of natural resources.”²¹

Lausanne statement

Once again, linking environmental destruction explicitly with consumerism, the “Cape Town Commitment” states that love for God’s creation “demands that we repent of our part in the destruction, waste, pollution of the earth’s resources and our collusion in the toxic idolatry of consumerism.”²²

Unpacking the Cape Town Commitment further Colin Bell and Robert White call for:

A new commitment to a simple lifestyle. Recognising that much of our crisis is due to billions of lives lived carelessly, we reaffirm the Lausanne Commitment to simple lifestyle (Lausanne Occasional Paper 20) and call on the global evangelical community to take steps, personally and collectively, to live within the proper boundaries of God’s good gift in creation, to engage further in its restoration and conservation, and to equitably share its bounty with each other.²³

There is a common thread in both these documents. In advocating a concern for the environment, the link between environmental degradation and injustice for the poor is made. Quoting Bolivian Bishops, Pope Francis notes that: “Both everyday

²¹ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, 2015 (10 May 2016).

²² The Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization, “The Cape Town Commitment: A Confession of Faith and a Call to Action” (Lausanne Movement, 2010) I-7-A, cited in Colin Bell and Robert White, ed. *Creation Care and the Gospel* (Peabody: Lausanne Library, 2016)

²³ Colin Bell and Robert White, ed. *Creation Care and the Gospel* (Peabody: Lausanne Library, 2016), 8.

experience and scientific research show that the gravest effects of all attacks on the environment are suffered by the poorest”.²⁴

Likewise, the Creation Care compendium makes the comment that “Jesus announces that his gospel (good news) is for the poor (Luke 4). Within the kingdom of God, preferential treatment is due to the poor. In today’s world, the poor more than any suffer the consequences of resource depletion, deforestation, unsustainable agricultural practices... and climate change. Issues of environmental degradation and social justice cannot be separated.”²⁵

A key theme from these writings is the need for “urgent and prophetic ecological responsibility.”²⁶ Interestingly, while the Cape Town Commitment makes reasonably explicit the link between consumerism and environmental destruction, in the subsequent book the link is not as plainly stated. Despite compelling arguments outlining why Christians should be concerned about environmental protection there are few suggestions of concrete actions offered that might reflect the whole lifestyle change needed to embody an earth loving ethic.

In his accusation that Christians are failing “to see the intrinsic connection between environmentalism and consumerism,”²⁷ secular author Gardner comments that “consumerism—the opposite side of the environmental coin and traditionally an area of religious strength—has received relatively little attention so far. Ironically,

²⁴ Bolivian Bishops’ Conference, “Pastoral Letter on the Environment and Human Development in Bolivia El universo, don de Dios para la vida” (23 March 2012), 1, cited in Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html#_ftn4 (May 10 2016).

²⁵ Colin Bell and Robert White, ed. *Creation Care and the Gospel*, 12.

²⁶ “Cape Town Commitment,” I.7. A. cited in Colin Bell and Robert White, ed. *Creation Care and the Gospel* (Peabody: Lausanne Library, 2016), 8.

²⁷ Sallie McFague, *Blessed are the Consumers*, ix.

the greatest contribution the world's religions could make to the sustainability challenge may be to take seriously their own ancient wisdom on materialism."²⁸

Bookless observes "Obviously creation will be harmed when we live unsustainably or overconsume: when we chop down forests without replanting or pollute the atmosphere beyond its capacity to absorb."²⁹ But he goes on with a challenge: "How different do Christian lifestyles look from the secular materialistic lifestyles of their neighbours? Can you spot Christians by the cars they drive (not just the bumper stickers), the contents of their shopping trolleys or the amount of waste they send to landfill? If we really believe that this earth is God's and not ours, then the lifestyles of Christians ought to be radically different from many of our neighbours."³⁰

In considering this accusation, it is possible to see that, along with other areas of theology accused of being too abstracted, this area potentially suffers from not grounding discussion in everyday realities. In *Creation Care and the Gospel*, many hundreds of pages look in depth at theological ways to think about creation care. However, it is only in a very short appendix at the back of the book that a small handful of practical steps towards change to encourage practical creation care are outlined. These are rather weak and vaguely worded suggestions. For example, "Actively seek ways of living more lightly, either finding more environmentally friendly alternatives, or by living a more simple life and doing without what is unnecessary. Be aware how much the world encourages us to engage in consumerism." Or: "Try to waste less."³¹

The resources outlined above are just a few examples of the many works that provide rich and varied theological rationale for the care of creation. Many of them counter the perceived reluctance of Christians to include creation care as an integral

²⁸ Gary Gardner, "Transforming Cultures from Consumerism to Sustainability," in *Blessed are the Consumers*, ed. Sallie McFague, x.

²⁹ Dave Bookless, *Planetwise*, 42.

³⁰ *ibid.*, 117.

³¹ Colin Bell and Robert White, ed. *Creation Care and the Gospel*, 302.

part of their faith. However, while these documents provide a clear call for environment care, further work is needed to establish a practical grounding for everyday life and to clarify the steps to be taken to achieve this.

The Global Capitalist Economy

Like Christian concerns about the environment, Christian theology has often been criticised for overlooking concerns with the economy. Kathryn Tanner observes that traditionally Christianity has only offered a “very small number of rather secondary Christian claims [that] have anything to do directly with economic issues.”³² She identifies a few sources such as the church’s criticism of usury (interest bearing loans), although, Tanner notes, that this criticism tended to fall away after the Reformation. Tanner points out that minority Christians in the Radical Reformation held up the ideal of commonly held property based on their reading of primitive communism of the early church. The forerunners of the monastic tradition, the desert fathers and mothers were Ascetics. They withdrew to the desert in the first few centuries, directly attacking money and the lavish lifestyles of the Roman empire. The members of the early Franciscan movement also critiqued, through their alternative way of living, profligate wealth held by some in society.³³ However, despite a vow of poverty being an integral part of becoming a monk or nun, monasteries themselves often accumulated considerable wealth. By the time of England’s dissolution of monasteries under Henry the VIII these religious communities held more wealth than the King making them the wealthiest institutions in medieval Britain. It would seem that orders like the Franciscans and the Poor Clares were notable for their exception to the standard of the day.

Despite a “scattered attention to economic questions,” Ronald Preston notes that in the nineteenth century Christian thinking usually legitimised the *laissez-faire*

³² Kathryn Tanner, *Economy of Grace* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 2.

³³ *ibid.*, 3.

doctrines underpinning capitalism.³⁴ It would seem that negative consequences that might raise concerns for Christians were not immediately apparent during the emergence of capitalism.

Capitalism, as described by Adam Smith in the eighteenth century, had at its core the assumption that individual economic agents should be guided by individual self-interest, and seek to maximise their own profits.³⁵ Proponents of the free market capitalist model argue that what is best for the individual is, ultimately, best for the whole society. This phenomenon is referred to as the “invisible hand of the market” whereby individual self-interest is mysteriously co-ordinated to bring about prosperity for all.³⁶

While markets of various shapes and sizes have existed for some time the advent of capitalism marked the beginning of the market becoming central to the life of the household and society.³⁷ James Fulcher observes: “Markets, like merchants, are nothing new, but they are central to a capitalist society in a quite new and more abstract way. Instead of being a place where you can buy some extra item that you do not produce yourself, markets become the only means by which you can obtain anything.”³⁸

What makes this system remarkable in the current age is the technological innovations which have transformed the size and scope of the market into one which is global in reach. Satellite communication, the flow of global data, the internet and the electronic world stock exchanges, along with the massive reduction

³⁴ Ronald Preston, *Religion and the Ambiguities of Capitalism* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1991), 40.

³⁵ Albino Barrera, “Economic Justice” in *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity and Economics*, ed. Paul Oslington, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 540.

³⁶ Rebecca Todd Peters, *In Search of the Good Life* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 59.

³⁷ Daniel Bell, *The Economy of Desire* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 22.

³⁸ James Fulcher, *Capitalism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 16, cited in Daniel Bell, *The Economy of Desire* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 22.

in the cost of the transport of information, goods and people, have encouraged the transition from national economies to a single global economy.³⁹ Driven by this technological advance the world has been turned into a single workshop in which parts are designed and manufactured in different continents and then assembled as a completed product at predesignated sites for distribution throughout the world.⁴⁰ Albino Barrera notes that with this comes more intense competition between potential suppliers and the need to keep production costs down, especially labour costs. Now, owners of capital scour the world for cheap, but politically stable, production sites creating the phenomenon of international vertical specialisation where chains of subcontractors spread across the globe supply the major consumer markets of wealthy nations. But Barrera notes that in this global capitalist system workers are often treated merely as factors of production, no different from capital, equipment, and raw materials. Employers view workers as expendable and often look out for more cost-efficient production sites, usually in another country that is even poorer and even more desperate for jobs.⁴¹

While the capitalist system initially raised little concern among Christian thinkers, as it has spread and become globalised its critics have emerged. Of concern is both the underlying premise of the global capitalist economy as well as its outcomes. Both critiques from Protestant and Catholic writers concerning these two factors will be explored below as a means of expanding the resources available that might influence Christian thinking on consumerism.

³⁹ Hans Kung, *A Global Ethic for Global Politics and Economics*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1997), 161.

⁴⁰ Albino Barrera, "Economic Justice," 537.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, 538.

Protestant Critique

Within Protestant circles responses to a growing global capitalist economy have been mixed. Mainline Protestant traditions have been noted for a relatively proactive approach, particularly in their call for oversight of the marketplace.⁴² In 1937, the ecumenical Oxford Conference on “Church, Community and State” said capitalism encouraged acquisitiveness and the use of irresponsible economic power, and frustrated a sense of vocation, while its individualism and inequalities led to a “lack of fraternity.”⁴³ On the other hand, evangelicals have often been noted for their pro-market economic thinking.⁴⁴ Daniel Bell notes that “evangelical Christians are some of the most ardent advocates of capitalism and its advance.”⁴⁵ However, even within evangelicalism, there has emerged a critique of capitalism. In 1982 during a “Consultation on the Relationship Between Evangelism and Social Responsibility” evangelicals considered the 800 million people “oppressed by the gross economic inequality from which they suffer and the diverse economic systems which cause and perpetuate it.”⁴⁶ They identified the oppressive global system amongst other things as a challenge needing to be addressed.

At around the same time, popular evangelical author Richard Foster critiqued the global capitalist system directly in his observation that “In Christian theology,... the only ‘invisible hand’ is God’s, and once we grasp it we discover that it leads away from self-interest to justice and compassion for the poor and oppressed.”⁴⁷ In a similar vein, Howard Synder called for Christians to provide serious analysis of economic systems, grounded in Scripture, not in narrow North American self-interest. He wrote that “We must see that free-enterprise capitalism is not just an

⁴² *ibid.*, 536.

⁴³ Ronald Preston, *Religion and the Ambiguities of Capitalism*, 45.

⁴⁴ Albino Barrera, “Economic Justice,” 536.

⁴⁵ Daniel Bell, *The Economy of Desire*, 83.

⁴⁶ Lausanne Committee for World Evangelism, *Evangelism and Social Responsibility and Evangelical Commitment* (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1982), 16, cited in Jayakumar Christian, *God of the Empty Handed* (Monrovia: MARC, 1999), 65.

⁴⁷ Richard Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), 174.

economic theory; for many it is a theology. In place of God is an 'invisible hand' (the mystery of the marketplace) which promises to benefit everyone ultimately if each person seeks his or her own self-interest." He strongly noted the contradiction between this and biblical teaching.⁴⁸ Tony Campolo contends that there is now a significant segment of the evangelical community raising serious questions about the biblical legitimacy of laissez-faire capitalistic practices.⁴⁹

Catholic Critique

As we have seen, there have been strong criticisms of capitalism, within Catholic social thought.⁵⁰ For example, in 1984, the Roman Catholic bishops of the United States issued a proclamation to their churches declaring that when capitalism was only concerned about profits and unresponsive to the needs of the poor, it was contrary to the will of God.⁵¹

Influential in their critique of the global capitalist economy are Catholic Liberation Theologians who have called it "the unpardonable exploitation of the wealth of the poor countries by the international corporations."⁵² They draw heavily on Marxist ideology to critique the global capitalist economy and its impact on the poor of the two thirds world. Applying Marx's condemnation of the exploitation of workers by the owners of the means of production John Eagleson wrote:

The working class is still subject to exploitation and its attendant conditions: that is, malnutrition, lack of housing, unemployment, and limited possibilities for further education and cultural development. The cause of this situation is

⁴⁸ Howard Synder, *Kingdom Lifestyle*, 102.

⁴⁹ Anthony Campolo, *Partly Right* (Waco: Jarrell, 1985), 59.

⁵⁰ Albino Barrera, "Economic Justice," 536.

⁵¹ Anthony Campolo, *Partly Right*, 59.

⁵² Geevarghese Mar Osthathios, "The Reality of Sin and Class War" (Maryknoll, N. Y: Orbis Books, 1980), 71-79, cited in Deane William Ferm, ed. *Third World Liberation Theologies* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1986), 346.

specific and clear. It is the capitalist system, resulting from domination by foreign imperialism and maintained by the ruling classes of this country.⁵³

Deane Williams notes that the global capitalist system, characterised by private ownership of the means of production, encourages ever-growing inequality in the distribution of income. "It turns the worker into a mere cog in the production system, stimulates an irrational distribution of economic resources, and causes an improper transferal of surplus goods to foreign lands."⁵⁴ Gustavo Gutierrez concludes that because poverty, injustice, and exploitation are elements inherent in a global capitalist system a liberated society "cannot be reached by capitalist paths."⁵⁵ Instead, Christians should identify themselves with the oppressed and the downtrodden, and encourage the "conscientisation" of the poor to aid the development of their sense of dignity and worth.⁵⁶

Two Key Themes

Within the critiques of capitalism within both Protestant and Catholic streams of Christianity two key themes emerge. The first is that the global capitalist economy is functionally bankrupt because its claims to be able to eliminate poverty through economic growth have not been realised. The second theme is that capitalism is morally bankrupt because it privileges the accumulation of wealth over the well-being of people and the planet.⁵⁷

⁵³ John Eagleson, ed. *Christians and Socialism* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1975), 3-6. cited in Deane William Ferm, ed. *Third World Liberation Theologies*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1986), 12.

⁵⁴ Deane William Ferm, ed. *Third World Liberation Theologies*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1986), 12.

⁵⁵ Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N. Y: Orbis Books, 1988), 53, 55.

⁵⁶ Geevarghese Mar Osthathios, "The Reality of Sin and Class War", 71-79.

⁵⁷ see John B. Cobb Jr., *An Earthist Challenge to Economism: A Theological Critique of the World Bank* (London: Macmillan, 1999); and Sallie McFague, *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), cited in Rebecca Todd Peters, *In Search of the Good Life* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 109.

Representing the argument that the global capitalist economy is functionally bankrupt Catholic theologian Hans Küng notes that global companies are increasingly paying less tax, which puts pressure on the social infrastructure of nation states.⁵⁸ Christian social ethicist Rebecca Todd Peters notes that because their profits are not going back into the local economies of the “two-thirds” world where the goods are being produced, it is generally transnational corporations rather than local or national business interests that are reaping the material rewards from increased production. The majority of profits being made in the current global capitalist system are being extracted and “deposited in banks in Geneva, New York, or London or they end up in the bonus and dividend checks of the CEOs and stockholders,” who generally live in the “first” world.”⁵⁹

It is also noted that the current wealth of transnational corporations is greater than the world’s smaller countries. In the context of a global capitalist economic order, this wealth carries with it an enormous amount of power, influence, and authority for corporate business leaders and their institutions. The global capitalist economy allows these institutions to be in a position to replace nation-states as a dominant political force of the twenty-first century.⁶⁰ Corporations are now recreating many of the problems once associated with colonial powers. Through their trading practices, corporations can force small farmers and producers out of business, causing them to sell or abandon their land and become dependent on wage labour. This radically changes the traditional ways of life in rural communities.⁶¹

Todd Peters illustrates this dysfunction through the impact of genetically modified biotechnology on farming in the “two-thirds” world. Transnational biotech corporations that have invested millions of dollars in the research and development

⁵⁸ Hans Küng, *A Global Ethic for Global Politics and Economics*, 164.

⁵⁹ Rebecca Todd Peters, *In Search of the Good Life*, 148.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, 149.

⁶¹ *ibid.*, 149.

of their “new” seeds are trying to make it illegal for farmers to save seeds. She cites Monsanto’s “Terminator,” seed which can be spliced into the gene sequence of any seed, allowing the production of a seedless crop.⁶² This makes communities in the two-thirds world reliant on the global market for their farming practices while contributing to the erosion of traditions and cultures.⁶³ Todd Peters points out the absurdity of this process noting that the World Bank has stated that “smallholders in Africa are outstanding managers of their own resources—their land and capital, fertilizer and water.”⁶⁴ She asks: “Then why modernize agriculture and push the smallholders into the slums? The answer, as the report fully admits, is that subsistence farming is incompatible with the development of the market.” She wryly notes that even Adam Smith argued that local communities should produce what they can in order to meet their needs and only trade for the rest.⁶⁵

Another area where the global capitalist economy is not currently functional is in its use of resources. The realities of climate change, depleting fish stocks, lack of fresh water supplies, and clean air, and the reduction of tropical forests represent a whole set of issues and problems that, both Barrera and Kung note, can only be effectively addressed at a global level. “Even as markets have transcended borders, we have lagged in our capacity to formulate and agree on collective rules for a global market. We have yet to come up with effective and timely responses to global disequilibria.”⁶⁶ This means that the current system has no effective way of solving the misuse and overuse of resources currently occurring within the global capitalist economy.

⁶² *ibid.*, 117.

⁶³ *ibid.*, 139.

⁶⁴ Edward Goldsmith, “The Last Word: Family, Community, Democracy,” in *The Case Against the Global Economy*, ed. Jerry Mander and Edward Goldsmith (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1997), 509, cited in Rebecca Todd Peters, *In Search of the Good Life* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 125.

⁶⁵ Rebecca Todd Peters, *In Search of the Good Life*, 126.

⁶⁶ Albino Barrera, “Economic Justice,” 539; Hans Kung, *A Global Ethic for Global Politics and Economics*, 164.

Reflecting on the unjust practices inherent in the current global capitalist system Theologian Hannah Skinner notes, “Such gruesome illustrations of the way in which we strive for prosperity, or at least the outward appearance of wealth, feeds off the poor, vulnerable and marginalized, highlight a striking link between narcissism and consumerism.”⁶⁷

The second accusation from Christian authors when considering the global capitalist economy is that it is morally bankrupt. Daniel Bell argues that the global capitalist economy doesn’t just fail by not bringing prosperity to all people but rather it fails because of what it achieves when it does succeed in bringing prosperity.⁶⁸ Alasdair MacIntyre has noted: “Although Christian indictments of capitalism have justly focused attention upon the wrongs done to the poor and the exploited, Christianity has to view any social and economic order that treats being or becoming rich as highly desirable as doing wrong to those who... succeed in achieving them.... Capitalism is bad for those who succeed by its standards as well as for those who fail by them.”⁶⁹ Bell concludes, with MacIntyre, that even if the global capitalist economy works and does produce an abundance of goods, it is still wrong because of the “ways it deforms human desire and so warps relations with oneself, others, and God.”⁷⁰ Pope John Paul II, in *Centesimus Annus*, wrote:

[The global capitalist economy] corrupts desire so that it no longer flows according to its proper, created end; it twists desire and in so doing obstructs our friendship with God, one another, and creation. In other words, the problem with capitalism is not simply that it doesn’t work, even if it made

⁶⁷ Hannah Skinner, “Going Public with Public Theology: Developing Meaningful Discourse with the Wider World,” in *Through the Eye of a Needle*, ed. John Atherton and Hannah Skinner (Werrington: Epworth, 2007), 18.

⁶⁸ Daniel Bell, *The Economy of Desire*, 84.

⁶⁹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Marxism and Christianity*, 2nd ed. (London: Duckworth, 1995), xiv.

⁷⁰ Daniel Bell, *The Economy of Desire*, 29.

everyone on the planet a millionaire tomorrow, it is still wrong and is to be opposed because of what it does to human desire and human sociality.⁷¹

Prophetic Alternatives

The all encompassing nature of the globalised capitalist economic system is daunting. However, there are clear practical paths of prophetic resistance that are emerging as part of the Christian critique.

One area of work which challenged the global capitalist economy came in the “Jubilee 2000” movement first articulated by evangelical Martin Dent, a retired lecturer in politics, who linked the notion of biblical Jubilee to a modern debt relief programme in the early 1990s.⁷² The year 2000 became the deadline for widespread debt cancellation, and pressure was applied to international creditors to meet the goal. The campaign was successful in mobilising millions globally, with more than 21 million people signing a petition. According to the World Bank, the campaign resulted in clearing approximately \$100 billion of debt that was owed by more than 35 countries to foreign creditors.⁷³

Alongside this, Tony Campolo notes that around the world new models for economic production are being developed which embody biblical concerns for human dignity and which are manifestations of the ethical requisites of the Kingdom of God. He points to evangelical missionaries who are “attempting to find ways to help the people in poor, struggling nations to escape the grinding poverty that has become far too normative.”⁷⁴ Schemes that Campolo refers to are often dubbed micro-

⁷¹ John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus* 4.30-31, cited in Daniel Bell, *The Economy of Desire* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 88.

⁷² <http://advocacyinternational.co.uk/featured-project/jubilee-2000> (22 Aug 2016); https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jubilee_2000 (accessed on Aug 22 2016).

⁷³ <http://advocacyinternational.co.uk/featured-project/jubilee-2000>, (22 Aug 2016).

⁷⁴ Anthony Campolo, *Partly Right*, 164.

finance, whereby donors provide low interest loans to individuals or co-operatives in the two-thirds world enabling them to establish businesses. Some of the first instances of this type of system were championed by 'Compassion' also known as 'Tear Fund,' an evangelical aid and development organisation. Campolo points out that these organisations create both meaningful and useful work; they utilise appropriate technology in production which allows the workers to own the machinery they use; and they reject notions of "trickle-down" theories, but instead embrace the idea that if enough can be done at the micro level the benefits will "trickle up" and influence the entire socioeconomic order.⁷⁵

The critiques of the global capitalist economy that have been considered parallel, in many ways, the critiques of consumerism. There is concern, particularly from authors within Catholicism, around the exploitation of workers. Two other themes that emerge from the critiques, the failure to bring prosperity to all those involved in the the global capitalist economy, which is considered to be a failure of function; and the moral failure of the global capitalist economy, whereby the aims of capitalism are deemed to be in direct conflict with the values espoused within the Bible.

Conclusion

Like theological reflection on the care of creation, these critiques of the global capitalist economy strengthen and deepen the concerns about consumerism. They provide further resources to challenge and reshape the thinking of Christians as they seek to respond to consumerism. However, theological considerations of environmental care and the global capitalist economy remain rather abstracted. Theological thinking about the environment has generally been concerned with biblical conceptions of the importance of caring for the environment but is short of

⁷⁵ *ibid.*, 175.

practical suggestions about how that might be achieved. For these theological critiques to play a role in challenging the hold consumerism has on the minds and lives of Christians, there is a need to examine what a faithful Christian response to consumerism might look like in terms of concrete actions.

Chapter Four: Integrating Faith and Practice

At the start of his consideration of consumer culture, Beaudoin poses the question, “How deeply ought I integrate who I am in faith with what I buy?”¹ His discussion leads him to conclude that in the lives of Christians, beliefs and practices need to be fully assimilated. Nevertheless, Beaudoin, along with other authors, acknowledges the failure of Christians to live in a way that is faithful to Christian teaching in the face of consumer culture. Gonzalez notes “the carefree manner in which American Christians purchase, for example, clothing and coffee, knowing well that said items are often produced by exploited workers, is baffling.... We have a vague awareness of the injustice surrounding their work. In spite of this we continue to buy and spend, supporting those companies and corporations that exploit these very workers.”²

In this chapter the imperative for Christians to integrate their faith and practice is discussed. A range of reasons that seek to explain why this proves challenging are introduced. Of particular interest to this study is the idea that theological discourse is often abstracted from everyday life. However, arguments are put forward that maintain there are ways for individuals to resist the pressures of consumerism and seek to live in a way that is consistent with their beliefs.

Despite the rich scriptural and historical arguments concerning the perils of consumerism; the need to care for creation; and the bankruptcies of capitalism explored in the previous two chapters, observation by most authors in this area emphasises the concern that Christians do not generally engage with consumer culture any differently than their secular counterparts. Craig Blomberg contends that historically, Christians have distinguished themselves considerably from their surrounding cultures by championing concern for the poor in ways that other world

¹Tom Beaudoin, *Consuming Faith*, 13.

²Michelle A. Gonzalez, *Shopping*, 3, 41.

religions and ideologies typically have not.³ However, “In most affluent or suburban Western communities, it is impossible to detect any outward differences between the expenditures of professing Christians and the religiously unaffiliated who surround them in their neighbourhoods.”⁴ Social scientists have found that those with deep religious beliefs are no more concerned about assistance and development for the poor than are persons with little or no religious commitment.⁵ Ecotheologian Bill McKibben concludes that Christians “profess to believe that we cannot worship both God and mammon. We profess to worship someone who told us to give away, not accumulate. We profess to follow a tradition that in its earliest and purest forms demanded communal sharing of goods and money. But we have by and large bracketed off those central portions of the message.”⁶

Researcher Robert Wuthnow has found that Western Christians today find little connection between faith and possessions: “There is a kind of mental or emotional gloss to contemporary religious teaching about money that prevents [the teaching] from having much impact on how people actually live their lives.”⁷ John Benton laments this fact. He observes that despite decades having passed since the publication of John’s Stott’s famous work *Christian Counter-culture* there seems to be no counter culture. “How are Christians different?” he asks. “We seem frequently to be as much enmeshed and immersed in the promise of happiness that is held out by consumerism as anyone else.”⁸

Meanwhile, commenting specifically on Catholic living, Munera argues that “one of the most serious problems in the Catholic world today is incoherence of Catholics in their moral behavior.” He notes that while Catholicism may have helpful and inspiring doctrines, the moral practice of most believers is based on different

³ Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*, 21.

⁴ *ibid.*, 20.

⁵ *ibid.*, 39.

⁶ Bill McKibben, “Returning God to the Center,” 44, 45.

⁷ Robert Wuthnow, *God and Mammon in America*, 151.

⁸ John Benton, *Christians in a Consumer Culture*, 44.

structures, which are the product of the specific cultures and circumstances of the different moments of history. “In consequence,” he contends, “many Catholics follow in their moral practise the religion of the market and not the religion of Jesus.”⁹

Illustrating this conundrum in his book *You Are What You Love*, theologian James Smith describes his realisation of how far his own beliefs were from his practice. He became more and more persuaded, through the beliefs and actions of his wife and through his reading, that the dominant forms of food production are both “unjust and unhealthy.”¹⁰ However:

... a funny thing happened on the way to the grocery store: I discovered a significant gap between my thought and my action. This hit home to me one day while I was immersed in reading Wendell Berry’s delightful anthology *Bringing It to the Table*. For a while, this was my take-with-me book, the book I would keep with me in case I ever had thirty seconds of downtime somewhere. I enthusiastically gobbled up this book, highlighting and underlining and riddling it with checkmarks and “Amen!” affirmations in the margins. As I paused to reflect on a key point, and thus briefly took my nose out of the book, an ugly irony suddenly struck me: I was reading Wendell Berry in the food court at Costco.

But here I was, munching on one of those Costco footlong hot dogs (almost certainly not from ‘happy’ pigs) while nodding in agreement with Wendell Berry. What was going on?¹¹

Other authors also document their own disconnect in the area. In the book *Serve God, Save the Planet*, Christian Medical doctor Matthew Sleeth explains his experience of taking an honest inventory of his family’s impact on the environment. Through

⁹ Alberto Munera, “New Theology,” 74.

¹⁰ James K A Smith, *You Are What You Love* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), 59.

¹¹ *ibid.*, 59.

doing this, he discovered that in practice he was nowhere near the environmentally concerned citizen, he imagined himself to be.

How could I say that I was being a good steward when I was causing so much damage to God's creation. How could I say that I cared about my neighbor when the poorest people are most affected by the climate change that I was causing: My lifestyle was not reflecting my espoused concern. I was a hypocrite. After my assessment, I knew my family had to make some drastic changes.¹²

Julie Clawson, a "regular" Christian concerned to see justice for the poor through everyday actions, observes in her book *Everyday Justice*:

It took a number of years after I first became aware of these issues before I even started making changes at all. I managed to tweak a few things in my life early on: I bought fair-trade coffee and joined the tomato pickers' boycott, but I did little else to change. The complexities of where to find ethical food and the questions of cost were the constant excuses I gave for not doing more. I realized, however, that eventually I'd have to take the plunge and make some more difficult changes.¹³

Clawson's experience is mimicked by Presbyterian minister Graig Goodwin who penned *Year of Plenty*. He notes that despite years of having heard Christians such as Ron Sider present a vision for integrating faith and consumption that reflects the "drama of God's redemption,"¹⁴ his family had never acted on it fully.

A concern about integrating faith and practice is not new to the current age. An emphasis on putting faith into practice began long before the twentieth century and has a very long history in all faith communities. In the Christian tradition, it finds

¹² Matthew Sleeth, *Serve God Save the Planet* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 23.

¹³ *ibid.*, 112.

¹⁴ Craig Goodwin, *Year Of Plenty* (Minneapolis: Sparkhouse, 2011), 13.

expression in the biblical injunction found in the letter of James that the faithful should “be doers of the word and not hearers only” (James 1.22).¹⁵ Meanwhile Old Testament prophets (for example: Isaiah 58, Micah 6) constantly call the people of God back to a faith lived out in everyday practices. Despite such injunctions, it appears that within Christianity it has become commonplace to claim adherence to various beliefs without those beliefs necessarily having any impact on practice.

Various writers have contemplated a number of possible explanations of why a disconnection between faith and practice seems so entrenched. Several have particular relevance to the discussion around consumerism. These will now be explored in turn.

Sacred and secular split

A number of authors note the tendency of Christian culture to separate the world into the categories of ‘spiritual’ and ‘secular.’ Mark Sayers comments that “Watching football would be secular; so would eating tacos with your best friend or starting a roofing company. Activities that would be “holy” or “spiritual” include going to a prayer meeting, practicing with the worship band for the Sunday service, or reading the Bible on the subway on the way to work.”¹⁶ Kandiah agrees and notes that: “We often settle for a spirituality restricted to Bible study and church services, which means that we live most of our lives without reference to God. We become professing Christians but practicing atheists.”¹⁷

Goodwin observes, from his own experience, that his conversion to Christianity came “booby-trapped with a disconnect between the inner and outer world.” He

¹⁵ Judith Thompson, Stephen Pattison, and Ross Thompson, *SCM Studyguide to Theological Reflection* (London: SCM press, 2008), 3.

¹⁶ Mark Sayers, *The Trouble with Paris*, 159.

¹⁷ Krish Kandiah, *Twenty Four*, x.

notes that the split played itself out in the separation of his life into separate categories of “spiritual seeker and materialistic shopper.”¹⁸ Goodwin quotes Wendell Berry noting that the physical/spiritual split ultimately manifests itself within the lives of individuals:

Perhaps the greatest disaster of human history is one that happened to or within religion: that is, the conceptual division between the holy and the world, the excerpting of the Creator from the creation... and this split in public attitudes was inevitably mirrored in the lives of individuals: A man (sic) could aspire to heaven with his mind and his heart while destroying the earth, and his fellow men, with his hands.¹⁹

Craig Bartholomew contends that the notion of two separate spiritual and secular realms doesn't represent the worldview represented in the Bible. In the Old Testament, the whole of Israel's life was regulated by its covenant with God. There were laws relating both to religious issues like sacrifice and tithing and also to environmental issues, health care, family life, politics and economics. In covenantal perspective, the whole of life is religious, and therefore the expectation is that faith will shape the whole of the life of the people of God. Likewise in the New Testament, Bartholomew notes, Paul's definition of spirituality encompasses what faithful believers do with their whole bodies.²⁰ Stott applies this way of thinking to contemporary life. “If we are Christians everything we do, however ‘secular’ it may seem (like shopping, cooking, totting up figures in the office, etc.) is ‘religious’ in the sense that it is done in God's presence and according to God's will.”²¹

¹⁸ Craig Goodwin, *Year Of Plenty*, 53.

¹⁹ Wendell Berry, *Continuous Harmony* (San Diego: Harcourt Publishers, 1973), cited in Craig Goodwin, *Year Of Plenty*, (Minneapolis: Sparkhouse, 2011), 125.

²⁰ Craig Bartholomew, “Consuming God's Word: Biblical Interpretation and Consumerism,” 93.

²¹ John R. W. Stott, *Christian Counter-Culture*, 153.

Instead of originating from the Bible the sacred/secular split now prevalent in Christianity is seen to originate from a Greek dualistic worldview. Munera observes that Catholic moral theology, like other theological expressions, relies more on Aristotelian epistemology than on an authentic religious experience. The foundation and support of this theology is the philosophical interpretation of the human being in terms of a universal abstract nature: human nature was seen to possess some intrinsic characteristics from which it is easy to establish which behaviours are moral and which are not. Unfortunately, this interpretive lens has privileged the dualistic worldview, reinforcing notions of spiritual and secular.²²

Alongside notions of a Greek dualistic worldview, explanations of the split of sacred and secular also look to the period of the enlightenment. Diana Butler Bass notes that individuals of the enlightenment wanted to break the chains of superstition and follow exciting new paths presented by science and democratic politics. However, in doing so they disassociated faith from reason and eventually lost the sense of “a God who is present in the world.”²³ Max Weber, considering this phenomenon, borrowed the term ‘disenchantment’ to describe a move away from seeing the spiritual as present in the world. He noted that in subjecting the world to mechanical and rational investigation, nature came to mean ‘natural resources’ and ‘capital,’ thus was eventually extended to human resources and capital betraying a utilitarian mindset. Meanwhile, spiritual notions of creation and humanity were banished. Explaining this Anthony Balcomb writes: “An enchanted universe was one in which space was presenced with spiritual agency, where things were subjects, not objects, and in which an epistemology of engagement, not disengagement, operated. Disenchantment involved, amongst other things, the emptying of space, the objectification of being, and the linearizing of time.”²⁴ In a disenchanted world mysterious, unknowable forces disappear to be replaced instead by the belief that

²² Alberto Munera, “New Theology,” 73.

²³ Diana Butler Bass, *Grounded* (New York: HarperCollins, 2015), 19.

²⁴ Anthony O. Balcomb, “Re-enchanting a Disenchanted Universe: Post Modern Projects in Theologies of Space,” *Religion & Theology*, vol 16 (2009): 77.

all things can be mastered through calculation.²⁵ Therese DeLisio describes this world as one “in which the numinous is bled from the common, the holy is leached from the ordinary, and the mystical is cut away from the everyday.”²⁶ This marked a change between the believers of the seventeenth century and the believers of those centuries before this who thought and spoke about God as though God was very much within the world and not outside of it.²⁷ Balcomb notes that “For those who wanted more than the banality of a materialist existence a spiritual realm was created, inaccessible to the physical senses but accessible to faculties especially nurtured for such a reality.”²⁸ Balcomb’s description emphasizes the notion of duality present in Christianity which divides the physical from the spiritual.

John Kavanaugh laments the splitting of sacred from secular, noting that:

the “people of God” join forces with Time and Newsweek in their prying apart of politics and spirituality, in their sundering of faith from justice.... It is a most dangerous separation. For it is precisely this splitting of faith from social reality that seduces the religious impulse into a stance of mere accommodation to political and economic power. Hence the second dangerous tendency: the identification of faith with cultural standards, even cultural idols.²⁹

French philosopher, sociologist and lay theologian Jaques Ellul, writing in the 1940s, agrees with this sentiment, commenting that while Christians make: “good sons, fathers, husbands, employees and workmen” they do not have a style of life distinct from their surrounding culture. “They have exactly that which has been imposed

²⁵ *ibid.*, 81.

²⁶ Therese DeLisio, “Stretching the Sacramental Imagination in Sacramental Theology, Liturgy, and Life: A Trinitarian Proposal for a Cosmologically Conscious Age,” (Ph.D. diss., Union Theological Seminary, New York, 2007), 226.

²⁷ Anthony O. Balcomb, “Re-enchanting a Disenchanted Universe,” 83.

²⁸ *ibid.*, 84.

²⁹ John Kavanaugh, *Following Christ in a Consumer Society*, xii.

upon them by their nation, their environment and so on. It is not their spiritual condition which affects their style it is their political or economic condition.”³⁰

Instead Ellul proposes that:

Absolutely everything, the smallest details of which we regard as indifferent, ought to be questioned, be placed in the light of faith and examined from the point of view of the glory of God. It is on this condition that, in the church, we might possibly discover a new style of Christian life, voluntary and true.³¹

Kavanaugh also argues that the way of Christ must be seen as systemic and any response to that must be complete, informing both private and interpersonal lives, and also social, political and economic worlds.³² He concludes:

The gospel of Jesus will have to be addressed as an integrative unity which penetrates and unites the seemingly separate dimensions of our life-world. It is not just for prayer time or Sundays; it is for all time. Believing in Christ, if it is indeed real, does not merely change the way we worship; it changes the way we labour and play, the way we buy and sell, the way we make love or make war.³³

Religious Adherence

Mark Sayers argues for another reason to explain why belief and practice don't match. He believes that Christians in a consumer society essentially adhere to two religions at the same time. Sayers explains that people do this without realising it

³⁰ Jacques Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom*, trans. Olive Wyon (New York: The Seabury Press, 1967), 146.

³¹ Jacques Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom*, 148.

³² John Kavanaugh, *Following Christ in a Consumer Society*, xiv, 19.

³³ *ibid.*, 31.

because they embrace both a 'high' religious form as well as a 'low' or 'folk' religion.³⁴ He draws on the work of missiologists and their observations of religious adherence in non-Western cultures to bolster his argument. He concludes that while many in the West may adhere to one of the major world religions, they probably know very little of the faith they claim loyalty to and actually may be more involved with the folk religion of hyperconsumerism."³⁵

Sayers quotes missiologist Paul Hiebert who contends that high religion deals with ultimate realities and answers "big" questions such as: Where we came from, how the world was created, and what the meaning of life is. However, high religion is detached from everyday life. On the other hand, low or folk religions deal with the problem of everyday life. Through omens, oracles, shamans, and prophets, they guide people facing uncertain futures. Through rituals and medicines, they counter such crises as droughts, earthquakes, floods, and plagues, as well as helping bring success in marriage, in producing children, in business, and the like."³⁶

Sayers also draws on Edward Bailey and his theory of 'Implicit Religion.' Implicit Religion postulates that despite the Western world's move towards a more secular society, the Enlightenment did not fully empty the world of a religious impulse. Rather than relying on traditional 'religious' institutions, other 'non-religious' entities now command the same 'commitment' (conscious or sub-conscious), or 'integrating foci' in an individual's life. Consumerism is posited by Bailey, like other theorists, as a religion in late Capitalist society.³⁷

In Western culture, Sayers argues, it is consumerism that speaks into the "everyday," offering "solutions, distractions, and hope that speaks into our pragmatic needs. We worship at the mall, buying products as if they were magic amulets; we place our

³⁴ Mark Sayers, *The Trouble with Paris*, 109.

³⁵ *ibid.*, 109.

³⁶ Paul Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 222.

³⁷ Edward Bailey, *Implicit Religion, An Introduction* (London: Middlesex University Press, 2006), 18-19.

hope and faith in vacations and SUVs to make us happy; and we work and save and borrow to reach the consumer version of heaven—the lifestyle we dream about.”³⁸

Utilising these frameworks, Sayers concludes that it is “Hyperconsumerism [that] we really place our faith in to deliver a meaningful and fulfilled life in the here and now.”³⁹ He maintains that it is in considering consumerism as an “implicit or unspoken religion in our midst” that an explanation can be found to understand the disconnect between belief and practice within the ‘high’ religion of Christianity.⁴⁰

Sayers is not alone in arguing for a spiritual syncretism of Christianity within a consumer culture. Theologian Lesslie Newbigin distinguished between what might be someone’s named religious adherence and their ‘true’ religious commitment, which may actually be the definitive factor in their thinking and acting. It is “that which has final authority for a believer or a society, both in the sense that it determines one’s scale of values and in the sense that it provides the models, the basic patterns through which the believer grasps and organizes his or her experience.”⁴¹

Commodification of Religious Practice.

Millar advocates an alternative argument to explore the disconnect between belief and practice in a consumer society. He believes that consumerism encourages believers to practice and use Christian doctrine and symbols in a way that prevents them from influencing their everyday social practices.⁴² Consumerism fosters a

³⁸ Mark Sayers, *The Trouble with Paris*, 109.

³⁹ *ibid.*, 33.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, 108.

⁴¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 160-61.

⁴² Vincent Millar, *Consuming Religion*, 25-27.

particular way of engaging religious beliefs that divorces them from practice.⁴³ This is not, he believes, because some coherent, holistic Christian culture has been shattered, nor because the masses are encouraged to develop their own religious syntheses, but because believers encounter the elements of tradition in an abstract, fragmented form and are trained to engage them as passive consumers.⁴⁴ People in a consumer society encounter religion in a commodified form, whereby doctrines, symbols, values, and practices are torn from their traditional, communal contexts. In such a setting it is quite easy to construct hybrid religiosities abstracted from particular communities. Millar believes that while such syncretism has always taken place; it is infinitely easier to do now.⁴⁵

Consumer culture encourages a shallow engagement with the elements of religious traditions because people are trained to engage beliefs, symbols, and practices as abstract commodities that are readily separable from their traditional contexts. The cost of this form of engagement is that when elements of religious cultures are deprived of their interconnections with one another and of their ties to particular communal practices, interpretations and applications of them become less likely to impact an adherent's daily practice.

The Role of the Church

Both Sayers' and Millar's arguments place the blame for the lack of coherence at the foot of wider culture and the impact it has on individuals within that culture. However, others look more towards the church and theologians, arguing that they fail to address consumerism and related issues sufficiently.⁴⁶

⁴³ *ibid.*, 12.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, 9.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, 6.

⁴⁶ See, for example, Clifford Jones Sr., "How a Christian African-American Reflects on Stewardship in a Consumer-Oriented Society," in Rodney Clapp, ed. *Consuming Passion*, (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1998), 151-66; Robert A. Kelly, "Lutheranism as

There are two reasons posited for the Church's role in the disconnect between belief and practice. The first is that Christians simply do not spend enough time within Christian community to engender the sort of transformation necessary to combat the messages of a consumer culture. The second is that the church itself spends too much time focused on its internal workings rather than issues of the wider world.⁴⁷ Nicholas Healy maintains that churches "are usually not sufficiently central for, and exclusive to, their members' daily lives to counter the often far more intense formation that occurs within the family, at work, in school, from the media, amongst friends, and the like."⁴⁸ He notes that it would take "Massive changes within Christianity ... to make the churches the central community for a good majority of their members." Likewise, Beaudoin and Hornbeck observe that most Catholics in the United States do not attend mass frequently or regularly. Therefore, "their reception of something else on the weekends (family, work, television, sex, sports, sleep) is what is helping them become something other than the sort of Catholics official teaching envisions."⁴⁹ They conclude that "Catholic theology has not been curious enough about what sorts of people those who are baptized Catholic are becoming through their ordinary practices."⁵⁰ Alongside this, Healy argues that when Christians do attend church, the church itself reinforces that Christians must simply "attend Sunday morning worship services and have occasional quiet

Counterculture? The Doctrine of Justification and Consumer Capitalism," *LWF Documentati* no. 45 (March 2000): 209-12.

⁴⁷ A separate issue is churches that actively encourage consumption as an extension of 'Prosperity Theology' where wealth is seen as a sign of God's blessing. A church that actively endorses excessive consumption patterns is obviously going to be ignoring the concerns about consumerism raised previously. However, the focus of this chapter is on the disconnect between the beliefs and practices of Christians who share the concerns about consumerism yet fail to act in a way that is consistent with those beliefs.

⁴⁸ Nicholas M. Healy, "Ordinary Theology, Theological Method and Constructive Ecclesiology" in *Exploring Ordinary Theology: Everyday Christian Believing and the Church*, ed. Jeff Astley, Leslie J. Francis (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2013), 6.

⁴⁹ Tom Beaudoin and Patrick Hornbeck, "Deconversion and Ordinary Theology: A Catholic Study" in *Exploring Ordinary Theology: Everyday Christian Believing and the Church*, ed. Jeff Astley, Leslie J. Francis (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2013), 36.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, 37.

times.”⁵¹ The language of the church has reinforced this through emphasis on a Sunday about “a time of worship” or a “worship service” rather than emphasis being on worship as a whole of life commitment that includes “eating, drinking, playing sport or getting in and out of bed.”⁵²

Abstraction of Theological Discourse

As noted above, a recurring critique of theological analyses of consumerism is that they fail to provide sufficient practical advice about how to counter the pernicious features of consumerism. Dorothy C. Bass argues that many contemporary Christians express a desire to share community and to live a moral life. They also possess a deep hunger for spiritual experience and understanding. However, she maintains, they are left wondering whether and how what they are supposed to believe really connects to the realities of their lives.⁵³ Bass’s argument reflects wider criticism of academic theology, which has been accused of being abstracted from the realities of everyday life.

This assessment contends that rather than encouraging the activity of faith, academic theology can result in a significant distancing from the life of faith. The questions asked of scripture and tradition from within the academy can be quite different from the questions asked by the general Christian community. Consequently, Bass maintains, theologians do not always appreciate the importance of contextual questions and often fail in significant ways to address the needs and

⁵¹ Nicholas M. Healy, “Ordinary Theology, Theological Method and Constructive Ecclesiology,” 10.

⁵² *ibid.*, 10- 11.

⁵³ Dorothy C. Bass, *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People* (Milton: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 2.

problems of particular situations that are of vital significance to Christians.⁵⁴ As a result, Helen Cameron et al. argue, “In the minds of many, ‘theological’ is synonymous with ‘irrelevant’, dissociated from human experience and cut off from the everyday business of living.”⁵⁵ An example of this can be found in a book on ‘everyday theology’ where the author Paul Zahl writes that malls must be resisted to the “last drop of blood”⁵⁶ because they “activate original sin and total depravity to a high degree.”⁵⁷ While this, and other similar critiques, rightly draw attention to the problematic aspects of acquiring goods within a consumer society, people must, nevertheless, consume to live. More specifically, many people in the Western world will obtain the basic necessities of life, such as food and clothing, through the act of shopping in some sort of mall or supermarket complex.⁵⁸ If Christians must resist malls entirely, it would be helpful for Zahl to outline how to go about acquiring the everyday necessities of life. In contrast to this, Swinton and Mowat comment that human experience raises new questions, offers challenges, and demands answers of the gospel which are not always obvious when it is reflected on in abstraction.⁵⁹

The ability to ground theological reflection when it comes to consumerism is still a challenge for both Catholic and Protestant theologians. Beaudoin argues that within these writings there is a tendency to slip into moralising about the failures of everyday people which “exhales a humid mixture of condescension, guilt and envy” patronising the supposedly less mature.⁶⁰ Likewise, Millar notes that an abstracted critique of consumerism renders consumers as “mindless passive dupes.”⁶¹

Gonzalez concludes that daily life must rupture the model of detached rational

⁵⁴ John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM Press, 2006), 14.

⁵⁵ Helen Cameron, Deborah Bhatti, Catherine Duce, James Sweeney and Clare Watkins, *Talking about God in Practice* (London SCM Press, 2010), 7.

⁵⁶ Paul Zahl, *Grace in Practice: A Theology of Everyday Life* (Grand Rapids: Michigan, 2007), 220.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, 221.

⁵⁸ David H. Jensen, “Foreword” in *Shopping*, Michelle A. Gonzalez (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2010), vii.

⁵⁹ John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 17.

⁶⁰ Tom Beaudoin, *Consuming Faith*, 40.

⁶¹ Vincent Millar, *Consuming Religion*, 146.

theology⁶² where “too little attention is given to the real contexts of ordinary people.”⁶³

A Way Forward

Millar maintains that whatever criticisms of consumer culture exist, a way to engage it constructively as well as critically must be found. If there is to be hope concerning justice for the world’s poor and increased environmental care, these issues need to be discussed in the concrete reality of everyday shopping practices.

Millar maintains that a constructive evaluation requires a consideration of the agency of consumers. Consumer culture involves a significant expansion of who may exercise cultural agency. It construes every person as the author of his or her own identity, expressed aesthetically through the consumption and display of commodities. However, this understanding of agency, which is often understood in shallow terms, is also linked to a more profound understanding. Consumer culture accompanies an explosion in literacy and, more recently, in technologies that make it possible for masses of people to not only consume culture but to produce and share it as well.⁶⁴

In the seminal work *The Practice of Everyday Life* by French philosopher, social theorist and Jesuit, Michel de Certeau explores the way in which ordinary people re-appropriate products in everyday life was explored in depth. De Certeau rejected the notion of people being passive in their reception of culture. With a particular interest in responses to consumer culture, de Certeau posited that people use a variety of tactics to subvert and poach from institutions and power structures in

⁶² Michelle Gonzalez, *Shopping*, 104.

⁶³ Gloria Albrecht, *Hitting Home* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 12.

⁶⁴ Vincent Millar, *Consuming Religion*, 29.

society.⁶⁵ Andrew Blauvelt notes that "Certeau's investigations into the realm of routine practices, or the "arts of doing" were guided by his belief that despite repressive aspects of modern society, there exists an element of creative resistance to these strictures enacted by ordinary people."⁶⁶

Within consumer society, people develop, what de Certeau calls, 'tactics' which are "the ingenious ways in which the weak make use of the strong, thus lending a political dimension to everyday practices."⁶⁷

I am... suggesting some ways of thinking about everyday practices of consumers, supposing from the start that they are of a tactical nature. Dwelling, moving about, speaking, reading, shopping, and cooking are activities that seem to correspond to the characteristics of tactical ruses and surprises: clever tricks of the "weak' within the order established by the "strong," an art of putting one over on the adversary on his own turf, hunter's tricks, maneuverable, poly morph mobilities, jubilant, poetic, and warlike discoveries.⁶⁸

De Certeau argues that consumers don't need to be duped by consumerism and can exercise creativity and claim their own sense of identity.⁶⁹ In a similar vein, Millar asks "what sort of identities, solidarities, and meanings are consumers able to fashion through consumption?"⁷⁰ De Certeau claims consumption can be a way of

⁶⁵ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Randall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 31.

⁶⁶ Andrew Blauvelt (Curator), "Strangely Familiar: Design and Everyday Life," Art Exhibition at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 2003 cited on <http://carlesbaiges.tumblr.com/post/110724038828/tactics-in-de-certeaus-the-practice-of-everyday> (21 Nov 2016)

⁶⁷ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, xvii.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, 39.

⁶⁹ Mark Paterson, *Consumption and Everyday Life*, 143.

⁷⁰ Vincent Millar, *Consuming Religion*, 146.

asserting freedom, or challenging the systems of power, and fighting back at capitalism itself.⁷¹

Providing possible examples of a fight back, Matthew Hilton observes the “growth of ethical and green consumer movements, the explosion of fair trade and the widespread politics of consumption emerging out of the latest trends within anti-globalisation protest.”⁷² Such trends, while criticised for potentially being co-opted by consumerism itself, do highlight the ways that consumers might make choices “in favour of the poor and in favour of justice.”⁷³

Conclusion

Despite a range of criticisms of consumerism within Christian tradition it has been noted that Christians often fail to live in a way that is coherent with these beliefs. A range of theories have been proposed to explain this disconnection. However, this lack of consistency need not be inevitable for Christians. A way forward can be found that creatively engages with the challenges of consumerism. It is possible to see signs of this engagement in an emerging group of Christians who, because of their religious convictions, particularly around poverty, justice, and care of the earth are consuming differently. They buy Fair Trade and organic; eat vegetarian; buy second hand; say no to rubbish, plastic, and cars; and boycott companies such as Nestle, McDonalds and Coke. Recognising that this group of Christians may have insights concerning how to link beliefs with practices and about living well in the face of consumerism, I will now turn to an examination of their beliefs and practices.

⁷¹ Michel de Certeau, Luce Giars, Pierre Mayol, *The Practice of Everyday Life Vol 2 Living and Cooking*, trans. Timothy Tomasik (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 256.

⁷² Matthew Hilton, “The Death of a Consumer Society,” in *Transactions of the RHS* 18 (2008), 234

⁷³ Julie Kelly, *Consumerism* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2003), 21.

PART TWO

Chapter Five: Fieldwork

The research presented in this thesis is based on the premise that there are Christians living faithfully within a consumer culture and that a study of their practices and how they relate their beliefs to those practices will be helpful to others seeking to live more faithfully in the face of consumerism. This chapter explains the theoretical framework and process undertaken to collect and examine the beliefs and practices of a group of Christians that are thoughtfully and practically wrestling with the challenges of living faithfully in a consumer society.

Amy Plantinga Pauw emphasises the importance of looking at the efforts of ‘everyday’ believers in order to “bridge the troublesome gaps that keep reappearing in various ways between their beliefs and practices.” She notes that there can be a temptation to turn to exemplary cases when talking about the relationship between religious faith and action. “In these instances, the connection between beliefs and practices seems so clear and vibrant that observers of all religious persuasions are filled with admiration and wonder.”¹ However, she concludes that it is also worthwhile to examine the efforts by “less exemplary believers.” Plantinga Pauw argues that the “continual slippage and compromise” that occurs between the beliefs and practices of the beliefs and practices of these believers can be a useful guide.² De Certeau describes the process as “rendering more perceptible the music of these anonymous voices that speak the gestures of every day and the treasures of

¹ Amy Plantinga Pauw, “Attending to the Gaps between Beliefs and Practices,” in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 33.

² *ibid.*, 33.

ingenuity that those who practice the everyday deploy there.”³

An approach embedded within Practical Theology will be adopted in order to view the actions of everyday Christians. Practical Theology encourages observation of, and listening to, the theological reflections of Christians, in this case, those currently engaged in faithful practice within consumer culture. In Practical Theology, human experience is presumed to be an important locus for the work of the Spirit.

One of the assumptions that commonly distinguishes Practical Theology out as distinct from other theological disciplines is its beginning point within human experience.⁴ Drawing on the insights of Liberation Theology, which was concerned with the “conspicuous mismatch between Christian ideals and social practice in Latin America,”⁵ Practical Theology proceeds under the assumption that the various practices that are performed by the Christian community are “deeply meaningful and require honest critical reflection if they are to be and to remain faithful to the ‘script’ of revelation.”⁶ Practical Theology, therefore, takes human experience seriously.

In taking experience seriously, Practical Theology acknowledges that the gospel is not simply something just to be believed, but also something to be lived. “Human experience is, therefore, a ‘place’ where the gospel is grounded, embodied, interpreted and lived out.”⁷ This grounding raises new questions, offers challenges and demands answers of the gospel that are not always as obvious when reflected on in an abstracted way.

Those in the field of Practical Theology maintain its task is not simply the application of doctrine worked out by the other theological disciplines to practical situations. Rather, within a Practical Theological framework, understanding arises

³ Michel de Certeau, et al., *The Practice of Everyday Life Vol 2 Living and Cooking*, xiv.

⁴ John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 5.

⁵ Judith Thompson et al, *SCM Studyguide to Theological Reflection*, 3.

⁶ John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 7.

⁷ *ibid.*, 6.

out of practice and involvement in everyday life.⁸ By beginning its theological reflection within the human experience of life with God, rather than in abstraction from such experience, Practical Theology appreciates and takes seriously the actions of God in the present.⁹

Qualitative research

In order to uncover the practices of individuals seeking to live in opposition to the values of consumer culture, this research utilises qualitative research methods, specifically Grounded Theory Method.

Qualitative study differs from other forms of investigation, in which researchers test findings against a preformulated theory.¹⁰ Such research often involves developing hypotheses that might be intellectually challenging to the researcher but may not necessarily have any practical application.¹¹ In such a structured approach everything in the research process such as objectives, design, sample, and the questions asked of participants, is predetermined. Such a process is best suited to determine the extent of a problem, issue or phenomenon.¹²

However, in qualitative research, researchers create theory through their investigation which generates and clarifies concepts through the analysis of data.¹³ Because of this, the qualitative approach is generally less structured and allows flexibility in all aspects of the research process. Questions are generally open ended and exploratory while data is descriptive. "Reality is seen as a shifting feast,

⁸ Duncan Forrester, *Truthful Action: Explorations in Practical Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000), 16.

⁹ *ibid.*, 25.

¹⁰ William Gibson and Andrew Brown, *Working with Qualitative Data* (London: Sage, 2009), 15.

¹¹ Kenneth Bailey, *Methods of Social Research* (New York: Free Press, 1978), 17.

¹² William Gibson and Andrew Brown, *Working with Qualitative Data*, 15.

¹³ *ibid.*, 15.

subjectivity is usually viewed as important and power is shared with the participants who are the experts of the matter under investigation.”¹⁴ The unstructured approach is predominantly used to explore a phenomenon or issue.¹⁵ The analysis results in the development of explanatory concepts and models which are underpinned by comparison with existing concepts or theories, widespread generalisation is avoided.¹⁶ One of the most popular and widely used methods in qualitative research is the Grounded Theory Method.¹⁷

Key for this research project, Grounded Theory Method generates theory from observations of real life as these are occurring.¹⁸ It relies on enquiry that emulates rather than repudiates everyday thinking.¹⁹ This results in the development of a “grounded” theory.²⁰ The basic principle of the Grounded Theory Method is that all concepts and hypotheses should originate from, rather than being generated before, research. Theory should result from an engagement in research, rather than being imposed on it.²¹ This theory generating research uses observations of reality to construct theories while the primary focus of research is the investigation of the day-to-day lives of people including their interactions, their behaviours and their constructions of reality.²² Grounded Theory Method is considered appropriate to

¹⁴ Carol Grbich, *Qualitative Data Analysis* (London: Sage, 2013), 26.

¹⁵ Ranjit Kumar, *Research Methodology* (London: Sage, 2011), 11.

¹⁶ Carol Grbich, *Qualitative Data Analysis*, 26.

¹⁷ Antony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz, ed. *The Sage Handbook of Grounded Theory* (London: Sage, 2007), 1.

¹⁸ Carol Grbich, *Qualitative Data Analysis*, 79.

¹⁹ Ian Dey, “Grounding Categories” in Antony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz, ed. *The Sage Handbook of Grounded Theory* (London: Sage, 2007), 169.

²⁰ Antony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz, ed. *The Sage Handbook of Grounded Theory*, 2. The Grounded Theory Method emerged in the 1960s with the publication in 1967 of Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss’s *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. The initial research projects, from which the method emerged, were conducted by Strauss and Glaser after they each experienced the death of a parent. Grounded Theory Method became a way of shifting researchers from what they saw as the testing of theory in social research to the creation of theory. (Antony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz, ed. *The Sage Handbook of Grounded Theory*, 7.)

²¹ William Gibson and Andrew Brown, *Working with Qualitative Data*, 27.

²² Carol Grbich, *Qualitative Data Analysis*, 80. The central argument in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* was that theory that is developed in relation to a data set is more likely to do justice to that data than theoretical concepts that are imposed on data. Grounded Theory

use in small-scale environments and micro activity where there is little or no prior knowledge of the reality under investigation.²³

The process for using Grounded Theory Method is different from other qualitative approaches in that it avoids using literature to generate theoretical or conceptual ideas that are then used to determine the direction of the research.²⁴

If you begin with a list of already identified variables (categories), they may – and are indeed very likely to – get in the way of discovery. Also, in grounded theory studies, you want to explain phenomenon (sic) in light of the theoretical framework that evolved during the research itself; thus, you do not want to be constrained by having to adhere to a previously developed theory that may or may not apply to the area under investigation.²⁵

Instead, data collection and analysis proceed simultaneously with each informing and guiding the other.²⁶ In research using the Grounded Theory Method, decisions regarding what data to collect are revised as the study progresses; data collection is an iterative process based on emerging theories being derived from analysis of the data already collected.²⁷ It is suggested that the researcher look for the underlying patterns amid the many perspectives that participants present. These can be identified by adding an abstract layer of conceptualization, which reveals patterns

Method grew in popularity, becoming the dominant qualitative methodology in the late 1980s. (William Gibson and Andrew Brown, *Working with Qualitative Data*, 26; Antony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz, ed. *The Sage Handbook of Grounded Theory*, 2.)

²³ Carol Grbich, *Qualitative Data Analysis*, 79, 80.

²⁴ William Gibson and Andrew Brown, *Working with Qualitative Data*, 29.

²⁵ Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques* (London: Sage 1990), 49, cited in William Gibson and Andrew Brown, *Working with Qualitative Data* (London: Sage, 2009), 29.

²⁶ Antony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz, ed. *The Sage Handbook of Grounded Theory*, 1.

²⁷ Janet Heaton, *Reworking Qualitative Data* (London: Sage, 2004), 97.

more clearly.²⁸ Literature review in Grounded Theory Method is viewed as a way of generating ideas in subsequent analytic phases rather than in the first instance.²⁹

In Grounded Theory Method, the management of data from field research is not an organized process of turning a pile of data into themes and categories but rather a looser process of generating connections and ideas and then explaining them theoretically.³⁰ The focus remains on the development of theory through the saturation of categories rather than through substantive verifiable findings.³¹

Grounded Theory Method has been subject to some criticisms which have led to an adaptation of research methods relating to this study. Antony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz note that:

Adhering to some of the central precepts of GTM is difficult in a culture where research aims and objectives have to be submitted for vetting to research boards, funding committees, and ethical approval procedures in advance of the research being undertaken; and where, once approval is granted, any deviation from the proposal requires further formal approval.³²

Researcher Lora Bex Lempart explains that in her own work she uses literature extensively throughout the process which is a deviation from the expectation of delaying comprehensive use of the literature until after the analytical picture has emerged. She notes that the caution was predicated on an assumption that researchers would abandon the centrality of discovery in Grounded Theory and

²⁸ Carol Grbich, *Qualitative Data Analysis*, 81.

²⁹ *ibid.*, 81, 82.

³⁰ *ibid.*, 81.

³¹ Antony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz, ed. *The Sage Handbook of Grounded Theory*, 13.

³² *ibid.*, 22.

would instead attempt to force data into pre-existing categories.³³ However, while she recognises the concern she embraces a pragmatic approach.

In order to participate in the current theoretical conversation, I need to understand it. I must recognize that what may seem like a totally new idea to me (an innovative breakthrough in my research) may simply be a reflection of my ignorance of the present conversation. A literature review provides me with the current parameters of the conversation that I hope to enter. It does not, however, define my research.³⁴

Bryant and Charmaz agree, noting that the advice about postponing exploration of the literature usually comes from experienced researchers, who have developed an extensive knowledge of a vast array of literature as well as a general familiarity with key topics and concepts.³⁵

The use of Grounded Theory Method in this project meant that no pre-formulated hypotheses were constructed prior to the research process. The interviews with participants were semi-structured in order to generate conversation. However, those questions did not represent any underlying theories to be tested against the participants' responses.

The resulting interview data was not primarily examined according to questions asked, but rather, by looking for themes to emerge or, as was the case on a couple of occasions, looking for a singular piece of wisdom that was worth exploring further. These emerging themes directed the course of the study, shaping up areas to consider further. Like the authors who have deviated from Grounded Theory Method for pragmatic reasons, this project also saw some theoretical study

³³ Lora Bex Lempert, "Asking Questions of the Data: Memo Writing in the Grounded Theory Tradition" in *The Sage Handbook of Grounded Theory*, ed. Antony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz, (London: Sage, 2007), 254.

³⁴ *ibid.*, 254.

³⁵ Antony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz, ed. *The Sage Handbook of Grounded Theory*, 20.

completed before interviewing began. The chapters on the nature of consumerism and the existing Christian critiques of them represent this prior work. The rest of the project and the themes that emerged were shaped by the content of the interviews. This has allowed the data to generate the conceptual categories for further exploration. The research has been concerned with theory generation, not theory verification.

Embedded in this research is the notion that human practices can be seen as a source of knowledge. In light of this, particular attention was paid to the everyday practices and wisdom of those interviewed. Mark Cartledge contends that within qualitative research “good and varied data can be shown to provide insights that are rich, deep and meaningful.”³⁶

Sample selection

The research that forms the heart of this thesis came initially out of observation of a number of Christians, loosely linked, all of who are either currently involved in the evangelical stream of Christianity or have had a significant previous connection. Alongside this observation, a number of interviews were conducted. All of those interviewed were attempting to live in ways faithful to their Christian faith, in the face of the values of consumer culture. Several of the respondents were known to me and from the initial participants, the snowball method, whereby interviewees recommended others to interview, was used to find further participants. Not all interviews proved to be useful in gathering meaningful reflection around everyday practices. There were a few stand out examples, however, of people who were reflecting deeply on how they could make their lives line up with their espoused Christian values, rather than the values of consumer culture.

³⁶ *ibid.*, 81.

Overall, twenty people from throughout New Zealand were interviewed. All of those interviewed were living in large metropolitan areas (Two lived in Auckland, five in Wellington, eleven in Christchurch, and two in Dunedin.) Because of the strategy used for gathering participants there were a number of shared traits that emerged. The majority were reasonably well educated and in professional jobs. Ninety percent were under 45 years of age. Four had engaged in theological study of some sort and two were involved in paid Christian ministry. As the aim of this project was not to gain a representative sample, but rather to hear and reflect on insights of those seeking to live faithfully within consumer culture these commonalities are not of concern.

Chapter Six: Beliefs

In this chapter I will consider the views of those interviewed and the concerns they raised about consumerism. This chapter and the following present the collated views of the participants. The focus of this chapter is on the concerns the interviewees had about consumerism. The concerns are then compared to those provided in both the theological writings and secular critiques from the previous chapters.

The critiques of consumerism raised by the interviewees will be illustrated through the comments of the participants directly. Within this and the following chapter those being interviewed will be quoted at length. The reason for this is to acknowledge and value the voice and actions of the participant. The purpose of the project is to seek the wisdom of those living in constructive tension with consumerism. Hearing their voices allows their insights to be made more plain.

Apparent in the comments from the interviewees is a high level of awareness of ethical concerns around consumerism. The key sources of that information are considered along with the major areas of influence. Three key areas are apparent that sum up the perspectives of the participants. The first, and least mentioned, concern was the false values of consumerism. Of greater importance to the participants was the destruction of the environment caused by consumerism and also unfair wages for workers.

Also of note, the interviewees explicitly mentioned only occasionally how Christianity, scripture or the life of Jesus might have influenced their views in their critique of consumerism. Concerns raised by Protestant theologians discussed in Chapter two were barely raised. Where they were discussed, the focus was primarily on the false values of a consumerist culture. Within this criticism of

consumerism the influence of scripture was evident in the interviews. However, these more theologically oriented themes were not nearly as prevalent as other, more sociological, concerns.

Awareness

Key in the responses to consumerism made by the participants was the degree of awareness they had around the concerning elements of a consumer culture. Many of the interviewees were able to quote off the cuff stories as well as facts and figures related to consumerism. It was very apparent that they were well read and engaged with information related to exploitation, in particular. Illustrating the commitment to learning held by many of the participants, Interviewee 2 stated: “looking at, and reading, and listening to material is an important component to me.” Interviewee 8 also stated that “a few things stand out as stories in my life that are pivotal in me being on this journey, I guess, and it all has to do with research as well, to finding out information.” The participants had a remarkable knowledge of global issues as well as specific information about different corporations, all of which informed their opinions and actions.

The concerns about consumerism raised by the interviewees did not align particularly well with those raised by Protestant theologians. Rather, the concerns overwhelmingly focused on those areas where consumerism is a secondary concern in theology. The environment and sustainability as well as a concern about unfair labour practices in the two-thirds world were the main foci of the participants.

This possibly reflects the source of information utilised by the participants in the study. Interviewee 8 described the impact of taking a theology paper on justice issues taught by a Catholic theologian.

In that paper I learned about things like the *New Internationalist* [magazine] and different ways of finding information and I remember having to do a little presentation research thing. I looked into the process of manufacturing denim, from cotton-growing through to the dyeing, making them... sweatshop kind of stuff... and pretty much decided then that I won't wear jeans anymore because it's such an iconic item of clothing, with so many issues behind it that we don't think about.

He acknowledged that prior to this this he had not been aware of these issues.

Why hadn't I been aware or concerned or convicted about the world or humanity before now (in 2001)? Starting to do all this research and becoming aware of this stuff - why had it taken so long and why had it taken the influence of these more fringe, or non-evangelical influences in the Christian world to get me thinking about it?

This was not abnormal in the responses. It was secular sources that proved to be more influential than Christian sources in reponding to consumerism. The sort of resources that the interviewees were drawing on was varied. There were 38 distinct secular books, authors, magazines, groups, organisations or speakers mentioned as well as 30 distinct Christian sources. Popular secular sources were the *New Internationalist* magazine, the book *No Logo* by Naomi Klein and *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* by Barbara Kingsolver. The most mentioned Christian influence was the Bible, with eight people singling that out, while the author and speaker Tony Campolo was mentioned five times. Ron Sider and Shane Claiborne both were mentioned three times.

In the direct question from the interviews querying key influences on their thinking around consumerism, it became apparent that much more than any well known authors, speakers or experts on the topic, the greatest single influence was that of

peers. Thirteen people mentioned the impact of their friends, flatmates, fellow students, parents, children, and siblings as key influences in their thinking.

Interviewee 8:

I was in my second year as a theology student and I was flatting with four other people, quite an influential bunch of people, who were my peers but they were all a bit ahead of me, all of them kind of 'fringe' in their Christian experience. And so I was kind of the clean, evangelical in many ways... hadn't been exposed to the stuff they were getting into.

Interviewee 10:

Definitely [it would have been] talking with friends... and even now I have friends that challenge us about it, that's something that I value, and that keeps you kind of thinking things. There's certain people that I would ask "Oh, which kind of thing would be an ok thing to get in terms of slave labour, and... whatever?" and they all kind of know. So it'd be mainly people.

For many of those interviewed the influential peers were found in their young adult years. This proved to be a critical period for shaping thinking in this area.

Interview 9:

Maybe the twenties, just being in the era when you ask a lot of questions. And the friends that I was around, we asked a lot of questions around that stuff.

In line with this, there were some positive comments about Christian Student groups.

Interviewee 11:

My own encounter with the discussion has been through the university student Christian groups.

Interviewee 10:

At the Christian Union group and at the student groups was somewhere where we'd get together and talk about.... yeah, for me that was certainly the main influence. And it was particular friends... but they're not kind of high-profile speakers.

Likewise, fellow students at theological college were mentioned.

Interviewee 18:

Being fortunate enough to have really good friends when I was studying Theology more seriously, that engaged with slightly bigger and broader issues than just getting me out of hell and into heaven, was definitely influential.

University study was a particularly frequent and positive source mentioned by the participants. Nine people specifically mentioned university or their degree subjects as a key influence in their thinking and critique of consumerism. There were 12 total mentions, if topics or authors encountered within university are included.

Interviewee 14:

Early on, at university, I think, I started to see how buying certain products were connected to potential human rights abuses.

The high number of mentions of university is remarkable considering that a number of those interviewed had not, in fact, engaged in tertiary study or attended a university. The responses indicate that secular universities were a distinct influence

in helping Christians determine an appropriate faith based response to the challenges of consumerism.

For some of the participants, influential peers were encountered in their churches.

Interviewee 13:

Going to [name] Baptist church was the big one for me, in terms of meeting people and forming relationships where I could learn a lot, have a lot of conversations. It was certainly a hub of interesting people doing really interesting things and that's where I sort of would pick up a lot, through my connections and friendships.

Interview 15:

My [Pentecostal] Church - they talk about that sort of thing. There are other people who are on the same wavelength.

Interviewee 14:

Those were questions [about boycotting] that my priests and fellow church members were asking, and so it was a part of my outlook on the world.

However, while the church proved a worthwhile place to encounter ideas to challenge the values of consumerism for some, overall the church didn't fare so well in the interviewee's responses. Only six out of 20 people specifically mentioned "church" or a congregation as source of influence in their response to consumerism. If mentions of a "pastor" or "sermon" are also included, the total does increase to 11. But, what is notable was the number of dismissive comments about never having heard the topic covered in a church setting:

Interviewee 1:

Actually the main thing that comes up is the fact that my church there wasn't much stuff about this ever taught... and it's one of the reasons I left that church, because I just thought it was such a glaring omission, that consumption and all those kind of issues were never brought up. At church basically we got force-fed the "personal relationship between you and Jesus" and the whole "say the sinner's prayer and you'll go to heaven" and "it's all about your personal prayer time and your connection with God and how the Holy Spirit is working in your life," - but it was such an individualistic, "you and God" kind of way, not "you and God above, and then your impact of your behaviour and your life on not only your immediate neighbours but kind of with a global perspective" - that was never brought up. I remember my Youth Pastors mocking me when I started to become really aware of environmental practices or more aware of that kind of stuff... of people mocking me that I stopped eating meat, or thinking that I'd gone extremist, kind of vegan-hippie when I did this and that really scared them, and they were really unsupportive and that's why I left.

This respondent was not alone in her decision to leave church. At least a quarter of the respondents no longer actively participated in a church congregation.

What is notable in these comments is that, in talking to a group of Christians, secular tertiary study was found to be more helpful in shaping a Christian response to consumerism than the church. Secular universities were also mentioned more positively than theological study – which barely got a mention, aside from fellow students at theological college. This finding, although on a small scale, does give credence to the critiques that show a concern that Christian faith can remain too abstracted, overlooking the real challenges of everyday life.

While similarities in the influences that the participants could name were not particularly clear, it was apparent that they were gathering similar information and drawing the same conclusions from it.

The concerns of the interviewees can be divided into two categories.

In the first area, concerns reflected the sorts of issues raised by Protestant theologians previously covered in Chapter Two. These focused on the false values of consumerist culture. Concern was expressed about the following areas: an economic model that focuses on money and material possessions; the lie that having more will make you happy or give you a sense of safety and security; the drive for more goods and the dissatisfaction this causes; people's worth being found in the goods they own; a focus on the self; and the objectification of people, particularly women in advertising. When discussing these themes the participants often quoted scripture passages to back up their thinking.

However, each of these areas was much less likely to be mentioned than the second area of focus which concerned the exploitative practices underlying consumerism. This concern was expressed in two main ways and included: a concern about the exploitation of the environment and the lack of sustainability that consumerism entails and a concern for workers being exploited in the manufacture of goods in order to drive down prices.

False Values of Consumerism

In the first area of critique, participants expressed concern about the values of consumerism and their contrast with a Christian worldview.

Interviewee 9:

If [young people] just buy into this consumer culture, they buy into what the world says is gonna be good for them, what the advertising says is going to be good for them and bring them happiness and fulfilment and success - if they buy into that then ultimately it's not actually going to lead them to living like Jesus, or living for Jesus. It's actually going to lead them down... they're going to just be the same as the culture.... It's so hard to show young people that they're ingesting a whole lot of rubbish, and that actually the good way is found in God.

The interviewees often spoke of the sense of dissatisfaction that consumerism engenders and how this can lead to stress and anxiety. They were concerned that consumerism advocated finding a sense of worth in material goods and a focus on the self was encouraged. There was also a clear sense in some of the comments of the notion that consumers themselves were being exploited.

Interviewee 7:

Most people, and myself included, most of the time aren't even aware of ourselves being influenced by these kind of consumerist ideals. I think quite often we make decisions, or put pressures on ourselves when we don't need to because we have these, kind of urges and drives being fed to us by a consumer culture.

Many of the concerns for this group were very specific in the ways in which they viewed the impacts of consumerism. It was noted that consumerism fostered a love of material goods and a focus on money. This materialistic impulse was often countered with verses from scripture. It is worth observing that this aspect of critique, which was well linked by some of the participants to concerns found in

Scripture, was often the least connected back to the day to day realities of living within consumerism. The critique and the concern remained reasonably abstracted.

In talking about the materialistic aspect of consumerism Interviewee 6 quoted scripture:

I guess, probably the overriding value in the New Testament is “store up treasures in heaven where they won't be attacked by moths and whatever... turned to dust or...” (it's probably a terribly awful quote), but that kind of attitude - a sort of statement that really says hey, what's on earth isn't of any significant value.

Likewise, Interviewee 20 also used scripture to critique a political ideology which reflects a focus on materialism:

“You cannot serve both God and money”, and “the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil.” [But] it seems that general political thought is that we must improve people's lifestyles, and that appears to me to be a direct symptom of loving money - because the only way that politicians seem to think of in improving lifestyles, is making people richer.

A key word to emerge in the concerns expressed about consumerism was ‘dissatisfaction.’ Consumerism needs people to remain dissatisfied with what they have so that they will keep buying. This was a concern for the participants.

Interviewee 19:

I think if you live in a society where you have to buy the newest, the best, the biggest whatever and you choose to live that yourself, you end up never satisfied with what you've got and financially in a poor position as well.

Part of the problem leading to this dissatisfaction is the way that consumerism encourages people to compare themselves unfavourably with others.

Interviewee 7:

Consumer culture, by its nature, is a culture of greed and of 'never enough', and I think that's kind of the thing I think is most sad about it, is that there's always people who probably could be really content with their lives, but we're kind of, not forced, but - by how we choose to live, and the values we take - feel constantly dissatisfied and always comparing ourselves with other people. And I think this is probably the biggest cost of the consumer culture - just that sense of discontentment, basically. And then along with that is the idea of hierarchy and constantly comparing ourselves to other people as some kind of valid measure of if we're good people - rather than there being some kind of measure of being just - am I content with what I have? And I think along with that comes all the spinoffs - which is, you know, the constant consuming leads to really bad environmental practices, and lots of other bad things that spin off from that - waste and really bad energy usage and health and stress problems... you know, all kinds of stuff like that. But it all comes back to that idea of comparison and never being content.

Another issue that was raised concerned the damage done to a person who thinks their self worth is defined by what they own.

Interviewee 10:

It's not about people meeting one another in a human way, it's an assessment of judgement of people's worth in terms of the things that they own or buy and, scarily, people's assessment of their own worth by the things that they own or buy.

Interviewee 18:

One of the main issues is that [consumerism's] trying to define what will make you happy in life without ever being able to meet the promise of what it claims will make you happy - so that it has to keep you insatiably searching and dissatisfied, otherwise it ceases to work. And that's profoundly disturbing on two fronts: one is that environmentally we can't sustain always having more, because we're on a finite system where the planet has finite resources and not enough to go around; but also that it's profoundly dissatisfying for what it means for people who are then constantly bombarded by a message about their inadequacy and 'if only they had this next thing they would be better' - because that does them a huge amount of damage as a person... it's a really deeply unsatisfying explanation of who you are, and where happiness and contentment and joy..... When I see the massive amount of things on offer, and the huge range of stuff that tells people they're not good enough the way they are - it makes me feel claustrophobic and really sad, and I think that's how God feels about it. I don't think that God hates us buying things - I think God hates our deliberate creation of a sense that 'you're not good enough the way you are', so that you have to have the next thing, and the next fashion, and more of this and more of this.

Aside from a criticism of the materialist focus of consumerism, concerns were raised about some of the perceived working assumptions of consumerism. One of the issues raised was that the message of consumerism was based on lies which promised happiness, safety and security that it could not deliver.

Interviewee 15:

So, people try and find happiness through consumption, or thinking that having the right things will lead them to have positive, fulfilling relationships.... and [consuming's] not so useful to do those things.

Interviewee 11:

A Christian has to be mindful of the fact that many of the things that we are persuaded we need are only apparent needs... and so we need to be resistant to those sorts of pressures to acquire certain products - perhaps so that we would feel good or feel secure, feel safe - when in fact they cannot offer those sorts of things in any genuine sense.

There was a concern raised about how much consumerism causes people to focus on themselves and the negative results of this.

Interviewee 13:

I'm just trying to think - if we had infinite resources - whether [consumerism] would raise any concerns? I'm just trying to think if there's anything intrinsic.... I think there's intrinsic issues around focusing on yourself so much. I think, especially in terms of Christianity, that if you focus on yourself that much, it doesn't lead to good mental health. There's been a lot of research and a lot of empirical evidence around that. The more we consume in this culture - our Western culture - the higher the rates of anxiety and depression go. The more affluence we have, the less happy we are. So I guess there are, perhaps, intrinsic issues.

Finally, the issue of the way in which people are objectified in consumerism – particularly in relation to their portrayal in advertising was commented on.

Interviewee 9:

I'm not happy about the way [advertisements] sort of degrade women and turns them just into sexual objects and if guys wear Lynx they get this sexy

creature and so I won't support that because of that. That's not the way God sees us as people, and not the roles he'd have for us as men and women... so that offends my understanding of who people are, you know - so that's why I won't support Lynx deodorant, or other products like that... I'll get my ire up and I'll be like "No, I'm not about that, so I'm not going to support you."

While there were clear concerns about some of the philosophical assumptions underpinning consumerism, the critiques offered by the interviewees were less likely to be concerned with issues such as these. Rather, among the much more frequently mentioned areas of concern, notions of exploitation featured prominently. The two most prominent areas of concern were the exploitation of the environment and the exploitation of workers.

The Environment

The most common of the concerns raised was the destruction of the environment caused by the consumptive patterns of western society.

Interviewee 15:

It's not just that people consume, it's how they consume. So, if we're consuming products that have costs which are artificially low - if you're not paying environmental costs for your products, if your products are paying people low wages - it encourages over-consumption, which has an environmental impact.

Interviewee 14:

So our consumptive behaviour is extremely detrimental on the planet and it's going to make life worse off for those who come after us. So we're not being

good stewards of the resources that we have, and our consumerism connects us in a really obvious way to the exploitation of our resources, and the people, and the working systems that are used to mine them, or produce them, and so forth. So there's all sorts of injustices that it creates, we're consuming too much stuff, and the planet can't provide enough resources to make all that stuff, and it can't absorb all the waste that's left over from that stuff, and it's squeezing out the livelihoods of other people and other creatures and natural spaces and so forth.... We can't just keep producing and consuming all this stuff, it's no longer sustainable.

In further comments about the environment, issues around sustainability were key.

Interviewee 12:

I just can't see it being sustainable. I just can't see that we can go on consuming at the rate at which we are, and therefore disposing at the rate at which we are, and for that to keep happening the way it is. I just can't see that being a sustainable option - unless the consumption patterns change, or the manufacturing changes, dramatically. Because how can it be - with the amount of material, the amount of carbon emissions and everything that happens just in the distribution of these products - in the production of them and then in the distribution of them - and then the very short life cycle that they have for the consumer, and then the disposal of those products - I just can't see how the planet can maintain that.

It was noted that the patterns of consumption were not able to be universalised and therefore people in wealthier countries were taking more than their fair share.

Interviewee 11:

Somebody who was studying natural resource engineering said to me that there are not enough resources in the world to sustain the lifestyle that we have. So, the American lifestyle - that I think New Zealanders pretty much share - consumes resources at a rate which is.... if all of the world lived that way... we couldn't do it, because the demand for the precious resources involved, the energy for instance, or just simply the raw materials, would spike such that only the rich could afford them. So we live on borrowed time there.

Concern was also raised for future generations who were being “robbed” in order to sustain the consumptive patterns of the Western world.

Interviewee 13:

But for me personally, the obvious issue is to do with the fact we don't have enough resources, and that we are not being very good custodians of our resources. I think, from a Christian perspective, there's a unique aspect there around this Creation that a loving God gave to us to care for.... and then the unfairness of taking resources from our children, and especially resources that could be very well managed, like our fisheries, and they're not - and our children will not have the diversity that we've had.

In their concern about environmental destruction, Christian thinking, scripture or theology was rarely mentioned by the participants. When it was utilised the theme usually appealed to was the biblical injunction to be a steward or custodian of creation.

Interviewee 13:

The way Jesus talked and what he did and how he acted is very much around honouring others, and it was about justice and then the message in Genesis around how we are to care for our planet and how we are the custodians of it.

Interviewee 8:

I just had this kind of realisation... it was this 'wow' moment, that God's creation is like this school [in Auckland] that was turning to custard, and it was because the Board of Trustees was not doing their job properly, and we are, at least the Christian Church is, like the Board of Trustees, and so trusteeship made more sense to me than stewardship or dominion, because if you're a trustee and you don't do it well, it's going to turn to custard, and we had this perfect example - that if we're bad trustees it's not going to work as well as if you're the best trustee that you can be. So I've tried to be motivated to be a good trustee of Creation. So... that, I guess, is a bit of a theological angle on my consumption - if I'm trying to be a good trustee of Creation, and Creation includes humanity, then the things that I consume... it all stems right back to there.

While the participants did show evidence of linking their faith and Christian beliefs to their concerns about the environment, concern was more often expressed with secular nuances than with reference to theological or scriptural themes.

Wages for Workers

A second area of concern was for the workers who produce goods for consumption and their exploitation. Here key concerns were a sustainable wage for workers as well as the conditions they labour in.

Interviewee 19:

With consumer culture, you don't often consider who has made the product and what wages they've been paid - you are more concerned with the end product that's got to look just right... which means that you could have clothing that you've paid a lot for, but the people that made it have been paid less than enough to live on, and have been forced to work in conditions that aren't good for them physically or mentally.

Interviewee 18:

Acknowledging that if a product arrives on our shelves and it's so incredibly cheap that there's no possible way you could even source the materials in order to build it that cheap - and not only has it been built that cheap but it's been flown around the world for me to buy it - then somewhere along the lines, someone hasn't got paid for something. And that's not okay to me.

Within this critique there was also an acknowledgement of the inequality that has been created between how rich nations and nations of the two-thirds world use resources. It was observed that the way the economic system was operating furthered the exploitation of those in poorer nations.

Interviewee 13:

The other issue I have around the way we are using our resources is the massive problem with the system where the gap between the rich and poor is getting bigger and bigger, and I see that as a by-product of our economic system and the way we trade - it's a massive part of poverty in Developing Nations. Even the way our economy is structured within Western Nations, like within the [United] States, or New Zealand. I believe New Zealand has gone from being one of the most equal countries in the world in terms of standard of

living, to being one of the biggest gaps in 20 years within the OECD, and that's just a direct result of our economic systems, of which consumer culture seems to be part.

Interviewee 14:

And we're not producing and consuming it fairly - it's not equally shared. There's some really obvious examples like the working conditions in the Third World, the way that oil companies are extremely powerful because they have a lot of resources and they actually dictate to governments what government policy should be - and so while we should be doing something on climate change, which is killing us, there's a lot of powerful vested-interests that can stop governments from acting and make us act not in our own best interests. So it's hugely complex, but when we consume we buy into systems which are degrading our environment, our natural environment, and exploiting our fellow... our brothers and sisters elsewhere.

More participants mentioned biblical and theological concepts of justice and care for the poor, as well as solidarity with all people, in relation to this area of exploitation.

Interviewee 5:

I have got a very strong understanding of the fact - I'm absolutely certain - that God calls us... some of the strongest statements by God to us... is that we are to be concerned, always, with the poor.

One of the participants specifically mentioned the message of the prophets in this regard.

Interviewee 18:

If you take any of the Christian story seriously it has a extremely large body of literature where, all through the minor prophets, the one thing that God through the prophets constantly riled against Israel for, was their ease and comfort of life, with a disregard for the poor - and a huge amount of links that suggested that it was precisely their ease and comfort of life that keeps people poor. So passages in Amos - like an accusation that they sell the needy for a pair of sandals - you know, I think are incredibly apt in our period of time. And the idea of communion suggests that when we take part in communion we express our identity and our solidarity with people globally, and it doesn't allow for this complete disconnect that says 'what I do over here is separate', and 'what I do in one field of my life is separate from another field of life'. I think faith and the Christian story insists that everything is connected and interrelated, so if I want to take seriously that my brothers and sisters are starving to death in slums in Manila and Brazil, I can't take that seriously and I can't engage with what that means unless I take seriously my complicity and my participation in those systems that keep them in that situation.

One area of Christian critique that was evident in the interviews was the acknowledgement and support of the sort of businesses mentioned by Campolo as referred to in chapter three. These were concerned with thwarting both the functional and moral bankruptcies captured in the critiques of capitalism present in the interviews. A number of people mentioned specific businesses similar to those described by Campolo. The business 'Freeset,' which offers employment to women trapped in the sex industry in Kolkata, India, was one business talked about by those interviewed. This business produces a range of goods including bags and apparel which is fair trade and organic certified. Also mentioned was the Wellington business 'People's Coffee.'

Interviewee 14:

There's a coffee company that some friends have started in Wellington - People's Coffee. I have a sense that they're doing something that is something that is really special. And it does tickle me that this is Christians, responding from their faith, to do something right in the world. And they also love coffee - they seem to me to be the most moral coffee company that I've come across, in the sort of fullest sense of the world. So it's grown according to best environmental practices, it's delivered in packaging which is recyclable, compostable, and it's delivered on bicycles, and it's a small-scale operation, it's not a big multinational, so they're keeping the profits in Wellington.... So to me, that's an example of hope - of faith in action and hope, and about a world that is smaller on a people's scale, but that intimately connects us to the growers of coffee overseas so yeah, I see the presence of God in the work of People's Coffee and what they're achieving.

In their critiques of consumerism the participants identified areas familiar from Protestant critiques of consumerism that consider the negative aspects of materialism as well as unhealthy outcomes stemming from finding a sense of self from goods that are consumed and never being satisfied or content with what you have. However, far more common in their critiques were concerns about the environmental consequences of the overconsumption encouraged by consumerism. While recent Christian theological themes associated with creation care were observed in a previous chapter it is worth noting that these were not mentioned by the majority of those interviewed. Another key area of concern for the participants centred on the exploitation of workers in the two-thirds world, as well as the uneven consumption of resources within the global capitalist system. Again, the theological critiques of capitalism considered in chapter three were not utilised by those interviewed. Overall, the concerns raised by the interviewees directly reflected the criticisms found in theological critiques of consumerism for a minority of respondents, in a small portion of their responses only. There was evidence of

some influence, as seen in a few interviewees' comments, but these examples were minor in the overall data collection.

It was apparent in the responses of those interviewed that there was a desire to change behaviour in response to knowledge about environmental degradation and injustice. The participants were adamant that Christians are called to resist consumerism's destruction of the environment and exploitation of fellow humans. They believed that Christians needed a way of living that embraced different values.

Interviewee 15:

When we consume, we buy into systems which are degrading our environment, our natural environment, and exploiting our brothers and sisters elsewhere and because we know of this, because we know this connection, I think we have to be actively resisting that, and no longer be complicit, as much as we can.

Interviewee 20:

I think: one; Christians need to be the light of the world, and two; their lifestyle actually needs to be different from the people around them, otherwise there's often not much to distinguish the difference between a Christian and a non-Christian. I think it's wrong of Christians to not care about environmental issues, or recycling, because we do have a responsibility to God's earth, as well as God's people.

Key to this research is not the theoretical frameworks that are held by those seeking to live alternatively to the values of consumerism. Rather, it is their everyday practices as they seek to put their beliefs into practice. It is to this topic that we now turn.

Chapter Seven: Practices

The participants in the study had a range of practices that they undertook in order to combat the negative impacts of consumerism. This chapter presents the narration from the participants about areas of importance to them.

The practices were numerous in number and diversity. Not all interviewees partook in all practices but there was a large crossover of similar practices. These included: buying less, buying secondhand, boycotting unethical brands such as Nestle, Kraft, Shell oil, and Nike, avoiding unethically sourced products such as diamonds or denim, buying quality, long lasting products, not eating meat or only eating “happy” meat, avoiding dairy products, keeping chickens, growing vegetables, avoiding waste creating products or being rubbish free, making food from scratch, buying fair trade, buying organic, eating only local or seasonal produce, avoiding convenience food such as take-aways, biking rather than driving, choosing not to fly, using public transport, buying fuel efficient cars or electric vehicles, not buying time-saving labour devices such as dishwashers, and in one case a fridge.

The interview material represents the ‘phronesis’ of everyday wisdom in regards to consumption that seeks to reflect biblical values. The key themes to emerge from the interviews will be considered under the seven headings of Meaningful Work; Avoiding Consumption; Ethical Consumption; Food; Waste; Energy; and Avoiding Advertising.

Meaningful Work

As they worked out ways to embrace an ethic different from that espoused by a consumerist way of life the interviewees generally rejected notions of financial security as a valid primary concern for life.

Interviewee 9:

There's a real value around the Baby-Boomer culture, which is my parents' generation, of getting a good job to get a good house to provide financially for your family - financial security often expressed through material ownership, and owning material things is kind of their goal. And you hear that a lot expressed through people in my generation from their parents, saying that it's really important that you get a good job so that you can provide financially for your family, or financial security which I think is a myth, and I think the stuff that's happened recently with the economic crashes and things kinda shows that there's just no such thing.

In acting out an alternative ethic there was clear evidence of people not choosing to be motivated by money in their career choices. Interviewee 18 stated "I'm not simply pursuing a career choice that gets me the most money as possible." While Interviewee 1 said, "I'd rather have a job that pays way less, and where I feel like I'm making a positive contribution."

For some, the commitment to simplicity meant actively turning away from higher paying job options while for others it meant downgrading their existing jobs. For others, it meant not charging expected rates for their services. There were some particularly interesting stories of individuals feeling guided by their faith to pursue jobs that focused on values other than money.

Interviewee 8:

When I finished high school I was pretty driven by making lots of money and I had chosen a career path that was guaranteed to earn a good income. Through high school on my walls in my bedroom I had posters of a certain kind of car that I was pretty sure I'd like to drive or own, I was going to be retired by the

time I was 35, and all this stuff. I had examples in my family where that was a reality, and it was just: 'this was what I want, it's going to happen.' I was quite driven by that. I had this business on the side in my first year of [study]. I was making money from people in the hostel I was living in. I was pretty driven and pretty successful for a 17 year old to be earning more money than the student allowance was giving me, from doing very little.

So I graduated after two years, got a job - I was on track to start making decent money. There was this woman in the company I worked for - a fairly small company, there was about 100 people - there was this Christian woman, she was this crazy, Pentecostal type, I'd define her as that, in a friendly kind of way, and she thought it was important for Christians in this company to get together and yeah, fellowship (I hate that word, but it's the best way to describe what she wanted) and to pray. So she lived nearby where the company was and so once a week she got these Christians to come - and I was one of them - to have this prayer meeting. We arrived at 7 o'clock and prayed for half an hour, and then went off to work. There was about eight or nine of us. And it was her personality, I think, that pulled us all together, a diverse bunch of Christian people. And I did that for probably about 5 years. One day I remember sitting in her house in this early-morning prayer meeting, and I hate.... I didn't really enjoy it, I was going to say I hated it....I always went along, but I don't think I participated a lot. But one day - I don't have many of these occasions, but I distinctly heard from God, kind of had words in my mind that had to be God speaking to me... one of them was to do with a future involvement with mission, and the other was to do with letting go of money as this big thing in my life. And so there were two significant things basically. I hadn't had an experience like that before. It was just this visual thing in my head that couldn't have been created by me - it was God speaking to me. So I slowly gave up the ways that I was making money, and basically decided that money had so much to do with the way I thought about things, that I had to let that go, and I've tried ever since to not chase things like investments and

getting so excited about "Oh, I could do this with this money and it's going to do that..." because I know that's the path that I was going down. So I kind of try to hold that stuff loosely and I think it's working. So that started me thinking about consumption, obviously... cos if you're kind of holding this stuff loosely, you're not.... I wasn't striving for this car that costs as much as our average house.... Since then I've had to hold [money] loosely, but then become more conscious of what I'm spending. If you've got less money, it's easier to be more conscious about how I spent my money.

A second story reflects similar concern, although at a later stage in the career path.

Interviewee 2:

So, until '99, I worked as a full time Chief Executive in an organisation and had done since I qualified as an accountant. But in '99 I started working for myself because I was disillusioned with the chief executive career path. And why was I disillusioned? Well, to be honest, I could only see 50-year-old chief executives who were on a treadmill of options values, and were watching their marriages break up in front of them, and I thought that was just not a commendable model to follow. So I worked for myself until 2003, and in 2003 I made a decision that part of being a Christian was your giving - and, I don't mean this wrongly, but if you have money, giving money away is not actually that complex. Writing a cheque out is quite simple, and putting a stamp on a letter is quite easy, but it seemed to me that it would be far more useful if I could give my time and my skills to some organisations. So, in 2003, I literally stopped working two days a week and volunteered two days a week. I had no idea what that was going to lead to, but if you go to today I work two days a week to be paid, and give away five days a week.

For another participant her response, as a medical professional, came in choosing to charge very little for their services.

Interviewee 5:

My prices are considerably lower than most people's and I do see quite a few people for nothing and quite a lot of people for reduced money. Money has never.... I had a choice a long time ago about that, where I could have become really rich with it, but [I] chose not to go down that road.

Instead of money, many interviewees spoke of being motivated by their faith which fueled a desire to help others and to carry out work they felt was meaningful, particularly around issues of justice and environmental care.

Interviewee 10:

I would say my job is motivated by having a sense of caring for the vulnerable, and that's who God's got a special heart for, people who are vulnerable and aren't in a position to help themselves to the same extent as maybe some other people.

Interviewee 13:

I have not been motivated primarily by making money - I've been primarily motivated by trying to make the world a better place, and I guess, by justice issues, so working in communities, community groups, with people who have been marginalised, or for whatever reason could do with an advocate, or a listening ear, or whatever. So I've spent my working life working in Christian NGOs.

Interviewee 14:

So, straight out of university, I almost became a stockbroker... and actually, I think my faith has put my desire to see us have a more socially just, more

environmentally sustainable lifestyle... [it] has led me to work a lot in the non-profit sector.

I've done a lot of conservation/restoration work with volunteers... so that involved a lot of tree planting, a lot of predator eradication, a lot of environmental restoration in the field, um... and teaching others to take that back to their places from all around the world, to do that thing where they live and are... but... but most recently it's come to working for the Greens. I'm the conservation advisor - so that's one of my first passions, so I get to try and promote great conservation outcomes here in New Zealand, and I do economics advising too - so I'm trying to, um, advise about more ways that we can share our income more fairly amongst each other, and ways that we can do it in a way that's more sustainable.

Now, I'm an economic advisor for the Greens, in some ways I think I've returned to that life of speaking about economics and how we... how we run this nation's economy, and how we get by, and how we provide enough for each other - but also now I'm trying to temper that discussion, that discourse, with "And how do we do that fairly, and how do we do that sustainably?"

Such a commitment to the causes of justice, environmental care and care for others were the hallmarks of many of those interviewed.

Avoiding Consumption

The reasoning behind not buying goods or buying them secondhand was not straightforward. On the one hand there was a desire to avoid being complicit in production processes that harmed others and harmed the environment. Alongside this was an acknowledgement that consumerism was based on a lie that self worth is based on the purchase of the latest product. Finally, there was a belief, among

some respondents, that there was something inherently bad with luxury products or that surplus wealth should be shared with the poor rather than spent on personal consumer products. The interviewees engaged in a range of practices along this continuum with some choosing a lifestyle, for example not using a flushing toilet or owning a fridge, that others would have rejected. However, common to all participants, perhaps more than any other topic, was an acknowledgement that there was little need to buy nearly as much as a consumerist society advocates. In this sense, there was a degree of simplicity being advocated in contrast to the push by the surrounding culture to consume more.

The types of commonly owned goods interviewees had intentionally not purchased included some large items such as cars, a fridge, dishwashers, televisions, and stereo as well as everyday items such as certain foods, takeaways, extra or new clothes and furniture.

Interviewee 1:

I guess I just try and not buy stuff that I don't need. Like, I always find it fascinating in, for example, "Good" magazine and heaps of the mainstream magazines that there's always one little page that's all about eco-consumption or ethical consumption, and they've got, you know, the latest product that's carbon-neutral or that's made of organic cotton, or whatever it is - but nobody ever says "the best thing you can do is just to consume less" - not to consume ethically, but to consume less. Like that's the best thing for the environment, but the market prerogative prevents anyone from even going there, because it's just too terrifying and the advertisers will scream. It's always just this glaring hole in all those eco pages.

Interviewee 18:

But I think, more than that, it's not just about choosing some products that you don't want to buy and choose ones that you will buy instead - it's actually about saying " I don't need to buy this stuff - at all". ... it's not just about saying I'm not going to buy a Samsung big flat-screen TV - it's about saying I don't actually need a TV. There's thousands of advertisements with scantily-clad women draped over television sets in order to try to convince me that that sense of desire that I get when I look at them will be mine, if only I buy this television - which is absolutely crap and we all know it, but because this permeates us so much, and it surrounds us so much, it gradually sinks in and changes what our expectations are on life and how we see things and all that kind of. It's not just about choosing one product over another - it's about intentionally attempting to stand back from that, and saying "what do I actually need to be happy and to have a whole life?" And actually, a television set I find unhelpful - it's not that I'm a bad person if I buy one - it's that it's unhelpful for me in my pursuit of a relationship with God. So that would go for a whole lot of other products - so I look at the amount of men's grooming products that are advertised anywhere that tell me I will get any girl I choose if I now have this aftershave, or whatever else it might be - and I would say "well, that doesn't stand up to scrutiny, I don't know if that's actually true", and so there's some liberation for me in saying I actually don't need all of those products, you know - I need a toothbrush and a flannel... um... so there's that side of it as well - to try to step back from it and have a less consumptive way of living.

Two individuals explained what this looked like when giving gifts.

Interviewee 13:

With birthdays, Christmas - we have pretty much ceased to buy things that people don't really need... and given that most people - children included - don't really need any of their presents... unless it was something totally local, and totally good, and you feel like you're supporting some very worthwhile industry that's actually helping the planet - we pretty much don't buy. So we've changed the way we do presents... last year I gave all my nieces and nephews in my family \$20 each [but] they actually gave that back to me all year, and so at the end of the year with the lump sum of money I shouted them a trip to Waiwera Hot Pools - so I gave them an experience, which I thought was a better use of money than buying them some plastic thing that is going to be around for the next thousand-odd years and used for, maybe, two... and then in the landfill at best... at worst, in the oceans and penguins stomachs, etc. This year, I am giving them some time. I'm saying "You choose what you would like to do with me, and that's what we'll do - whether it's a picnic, or whether it's..." I was going to say a road-trip, but that's carbon emissions Just looking to do fun stuff with them, fun experiences.

One mum spoke of avoiding buying for her children.

Interviewee 19:

We consciously don't buy lots of toys or so on. We get lots of toys out of the toy library for our children, lots of books out - although we buy quite a number of books too. For our daughters first Christmas present, as her parents, we decided that what she most wanted was a cardboard box, so that's what she got for Christmas! [Laughs] We did put a teether toy in it for her too, but the box was the main present [laughs]..... much to some people's disgust, because it wasn't 'stuff'.

Alongside the challenge of not buying goods was the discipline of buying secondhand as well as choosing things that would last, this was particularly true for clothing.

Interviewee 16:

I never buy new clothes, I wouldn't. If I bought something new I would have to completely justify it, because buying stuff is bad for the environment, it's money that could be used in other ways.

Interviewee 6:

I hate the production of rubbish and junk. So I like buying second-hand. I like buying things that'll last, and I like not having many things.

Interviewee 14:

And so, when it comes to buying stuff, it [my opposition to consumerism] has manifested itself in a sort of pragmatic way about buying less - buying really well when you do have to buy stuff, so it lasts for a long time, buying second-hand stuff, and finding sort of beauty in the used and using creativity to find out how you can reuse stuff and things like dumpster-diving and looking in strange places to find stuff. So I'm in the midst of restoring a house and I'm actively, consciously trying to restore it using second-hand materials wherever practical and possible, and finding new ways to reuse stuff. But my recent pair of shoes - these are second-hand shoes from Ziggurat in Wellington - so, I really like frequenting op-shops and second-hand stores and stuff like that.

Interviewee 14 goes on to explain his habits when he does need to buy new:

When I do buy stuff, I tend to buy really quality things, hoping that they will last a long time. A good example of this is a toaster (I used to always use this example with my conservation volunteers because it would set up really good conversations.) I had an experience of two cheap toasters, in rapid succession failing. You know - a little plastic piece on the handle broke twice, and I was, like - Right! That's the last time I'm going to put a toaster in the landfill, I'm going to buy a really good toaster that I can replace every part on it. And I ended up buying a \$400 toaster - a Dualit toaster - it was made in the UK, really high quality, really simple, every single piece on it was replaceable. But that's ten times the cost of a normal toaster. Maybe I could do that because I have disposable income, maybe that's not an option for everybody.... So it's a really vexed decision. But by and large I still adhere to the principle that it's better to buy really good stuff and do that only once, rather than to buy into this consumer sort-of version of society, which makes us buy lots and lots of things. So the toaster - I haven't had to throw out a toaster since, but I've had to spend a lot of money on it... but maybe that's a better thing, that's a better way to spend my money, because actually the person that's paying for the real cost of those disposable toasters is actually future generations, who won't have all the mined resources that go into each of those toasters and also all the waste that it creates, the waste stream down at the other end of it. I'm not paying for the real cost of the toaster upfront.

Likewise, Interviewee 6 believed that buying quality was a way to minimize consumption in the long run:

I got my table over there, that was second-hand. But I want to keep it for life - that's my 'keep' one. I feel satisfied when I buy something that I know is gonna last for ages. Cos it's solid timber.... I like buying things in solid timber rather than stuff that's not gonna age well or that will devalue. That's the other thing is that table - if you keep it good, it won't devalue because it's quality. I was quite happy with that table purchase cos it's worth, like four and a half grand, I

think, in McKenzie and Willis, new and we got it for nine hundred. And nine hundred - some people say that's really expensive for a table, but I say that's really good value for that table. And it's very solid, it should last me forever, and then I don't have to buy another table.

The interviewees acknowledged the ethical considerations of buying things that will last, and the reduction of waste this contributes.

Ethical Consumption

One of the sentiments expressed by the participants of the study was a need for a Christian approach to buying. Interviewee 13 commented that "I think that Christians have a very clear mandate to be consuming responsibly - it's not consuming responsibly, it's acting responsibly." She went on:

I don't think it's always been the case that what you buy is an ethical decision. But I think that because of our economic system at the moment, it is. And I think in many ways, in our society, it's quite easy to be a Christian. We live in times of peace and affluence, so it's easy to give to the poor, it's not going to break the bank and all sorts of things like that. But the one thing that's extremely difficult in our society, in terms of Christian values, is buying stuff, and just going to the supermarket. And the more we think about that, the more difficult it will become. So it has become the area of my life that I have probably given the most attention to, in terms of my Christian faith. So 'being a good neighbour' and stuff, I grew up with that and it becomes a bit easier. It's more obvious and you've got the skills and we're in a society that facilitates a lot of our Christian values... but not with consumer culture.

Putting that into practice Interviewee 18 explained:

So, really, really cheap, mass-produced stuff that breaks soon and is only there so I can get that sense of excitement when I buy a shiny new bauble very briefly - that's one thing that I try and avoid. So in that category I would put cheap plastic stuff that's going to break in six months. So I will avoid buying anything that fits in that category. There's certain companies that are really well-known for relatively dodgy and exploitative practices. It's always hard to stay current and up-to-date with those practices, because as a company hits the limelight for its exploitative practices, the only way it can buy itself out of trouble is to clean up its practices temporarily, so things do change and I'm aware of that. But Nestle ranks particularly low down on the list every year, because of their advertising baby milk formula in developing nations, which leads to mothers getting hooked, previously (although they don't do this anymore) with six month free samples until they dry up and then they have to keep buying that same product, and they mix it with poor quality water, and so babies end up dying of waterborne diseases. So the World Health Organisation estimates that the lack of breast-feeding is responsible for 10 000 infant deaths a year, and Nestle certainly plays a role in that. And so, I choose - because I want to be as uninvolved in that as possible - to not buy any product that Nestle owns... which would include Maggi, which would include The Body Shop - not that I ever buy anything from The Body Shop - they [Nestle] own L'Oreal, which has a 29% shareholding in Body Shop - so there's those kind of things which I like to try to be aware of.... So another example would be Samsung, who are on the 'Top 100 Weapons Manufacturers' lists of the world, who make - not just electronic components that other companies put inside guidance systems and missiles - but they actually make the bullets, tanks and missiles themselves that end up destroying children that I've got no shit with in some other country.

For some of those interviewed it was apparent that the discovery of exploitative, corporate practices became the lightning rod for counter-consumer practices.

Interviewee 14:

So, one of the big human rights campaigns that I got involved with at university was a boycott against Pepsi, because Pepsi were working with the Burmese government - they were one of the only Western companies that was working in Burma - and they were actively supporting a regime that was known to torture... to wage war against its own citizens and torture them and so forth. So, Pepsi wanted to introduce vending machines onto the Victoria [University] campus. So that was possibly one of the first consumer boycotts that I got involved with. I also got really involved in a campaign, a boycott campaign, against Shell in the 1990s, because of what they were doing in Nigeria. They were despoiling an environment of the native Ogoni people and the Ogoni people they were suffering as a consequence of it. They were having their human rights abused, they were having their waters that they fish from polluted by oil, and they were having constant oil flares depositing soot all over their vegetable gardens, and all that sort of stuff - and there was a huge injustice. And then the government cracked down on them because they started to complain about it, and Ken Saro-Wiwa and nine others were executed as a result of that. So I got really involved in that sort of boycott action as well. That gave me a glimpse of what's really wrong with how multinational companies behave - oh, and there's also Nestle, another giant company, that was... my partner at the time worked for a short amount of time in a slum in India, and saw how Nestle was selling milk products to completely impoverished mums who were spending what little money they had on milk-products, which they would then dilute with tainted water and give to their babies, rather than breastfeed them... and so I think those three companies gave me an insight into what modern consumerism's all about, and led me to ask a lot of questions about the bigger picture - like, what's the nature of multi-

national corporations, and how does it work? What's it doing to the planet and each other? And how are we complicit in those crimes when we consume those companies' products and so forth.

The concern about Nestle's practices was consistent in many of the interviews.

Interviewee 7:

[My wife] and I choose not to buy a whole bunch of products, because we really believe in trying to be as ethical as we can be. And we're quite keen on buying local where possible, and also avoiding Altria products, which is the holding company for Phillip Morris... which actually includes a whole range of products, unfortunately, for us.... It's hard leaving that peanut butter behind, it's so good. But I have lived for five years without Kraft Peanut Butter in my life... having discovered that [it was owned by Phillip Morris]. Oh, it was a miserable day, actually..... [But] Philip Morris for me is pretty cut and dried. There's a huge amount of evidence to show that when they were producing cigarettes they knew for a long time - even before most scientific studies knew - they knew that it was addictive, and they knew it was bad for health in a big way. And they basically just covered that up for a long time. So I think in the ideal world, when that came out, that company would have been disbanded and they would have just said "Look, you're totally unethical, you can no longer trade" but of course there's no body that can do that, because they don't sit under any one government. So the only answer really is to say "Well, no thanks" to your products. And Nestle is kind of really similar in the whole milk powder/formula in Africa thing. They just got busted, but they just don't care. They'll just pay any fines they get given and they'll keep rocking the same old thing.... I don't really care what Philip Morris does now. I think they lied about stuff for a very long time and made a lot of money off people getting really sick off their products, so I think I wouldn't really care how ethical they might get now - I think some corporations are unredeemable and that's one of them, in

my mind. Same thing with Nestle - I just think they've had a lot of chances to improve and they never have, so... you know. I just totally boycott them.

Other companies or products mentioned specifically that were boycotted by participants were Nike, McDonalds, Farmers,¹ Starbucks, jeans, and diamonds.

A related issue that came up numerous times in regard to the ethics of different products was the manufacturing of goods in China. This was problematic for a number of those interviewed.

Interviewee 8:

I read *No Logo* by Naomi Klein, and that kind of stuff was another layer to my Chinese clothing - not phobia - but this reluctance I had to consume Chinese-made goods. It put a different ethical spin on it. The sweatshops and the branding - like Nike. These days I'd never buy something with branding on it like Nike. Just the issues (you've read *No Logo* I'm sure) things like the amount of money that gets spent on branding to make us feel good about ourselves by buying into this thing... it's just a load of crap, and I'm not going to partake in that where I can.

Interviewee 14:

I grieve the fact that I still have to buy stuff that's made in China occasionally. I think it's really hard to buy sports shoes that aren't made in the Third World

¹ Interviewee 19 explained why they boycotted Farmers. "At one stage various companies were asked: could they do their history and prove that it wasn't slave labour that they'd used in their products? And where The Warehouse and other companies answered, "We have a process in place to identify", Farmers refused to answer the question. In our view, that means that they probably know there's slave labour involved in their clothing manufacture, but they don't care enough to do anything about it."

and Vietnam, Thailand. But I'll never buy Nikes, for example, because of what Nike did in the '90s has forever reminded me that it's inexcusable, the sweatshops that they use to produce their products. I'm a little bit harsh, I have a theology of forgiveness for people, but when it comes to multinational companies it's just... I can't buy petrol from Shell, which sometimes has disastrous consequences - I almost ran out of petrol because of that on a number of occasions! Yeah, I don't buy Nike stuff.

The interviewees acknowledged the real difficulty in being able to achieve the goal of always buying ethically and therefore had a range of strategies to try and avoid purchasing from multi-national corporations or goods manufactured overseas. Those being interviewed did this in a couple of key ways. The first was to buy or source locally or New Zealand made goods. The second way was to purchase goods that had been ethically sourced through systems such as Fair Trade.

Interviewee 17 noted:

It's really tough though, because the more I look into supply-chain stuff and company stuff, you realise that the majority of companies have some bad stuff going on - but they've also got some good stuff going on, and you have to actually make a choice. Do you support the company for the good little environmental project that they've got on this island, but ignore the union rights that they're abusing in this country? Or do you try and encourage them? And to what extent do you believe in boycotts that are not massive or well-publicised ones? For example, I don't buy Nestle, because there's probably enough people that are angry at Nestle that it probably does make a difference. But, for instance Coke I know has got real problems, but they're also doing some good stuff. But then, when you look at other brands, they're also owned by Coke, it just becomes very grey and I got very disillusioned about that. I think I get around it more by just trying to reduce waste and stuff as much as possible wherever I can. Yeah... buying second-hand stuff, so buying as little as

I can, and then, I won't buy non-fair trade where there are fair-trade options. I think fair-trade is one of the the few - not squeaky clean, by any means - but closest to that, and I think with a genuine heart for the cause. So, wherever that is happening, I try and encourage that.

Interviewee 7 emphasised his reason for shopping locally:

I think the reason why I keep going back to local and wanting it to be local, or at least NZ companies, is that I think as soon as you have a multi-national - like I kind of alluded to before - there's no controls over those companies. And I feel really uncomfortable about that, in the sense that they can do whatever they want. And in some ways you can't blame the company, and you can't even blame the poor little middle managers, or even the big-guns, because in the end, the whole purpose of that company, its one reason to exist, is to create money for the shareholders, and it doesn't say in their charter necessarily to do that ethically, or to do that sustainably, or environmentally, or in a way that makes sense. I can just see how that one decision influences everything, because there's only one goal and it doesn't really matter how you get there, and there's no real regulation or control on those companies because they're across multiple governments. And the UN's like a totally toothless beast when it comes to that kind of stuff - and so is the World Trade Organisation, in fact, they're probably just as bad as everyone else. So, to me, to know your company and to know that it's family-owned and NZ-owned, that at least there's a real person where the buck stops - it's not just this disparate body of shareholders who are demanding more money each year....

Alongside a commitment to buying local was a clearly evident support of fair trade products.

Interviewee 1:

I try and buy things that are Fair Trade. If I'm in Trade Aid I will usually buy some chocolate so I have some in stock for baking, or gifts, or whatever. At our house we buy fair-trade soap and stock in bulk from Trade Aid, and cocoa.

Interviewee 19:

We'll choose to buy fair-trade drinking chocolate and coffee, and little things that make less of an impact on other members of society or the environment.

One of the interviewees was involved in a number of fair trade product initiatives.

Interviewee 15:

As a community, we also are involved with fair-trade, buying People's Coffee, selling fair-trade t-shirts - we've done a fair-trade t-shirt project... we import Freeset t-shirts as well.

While priority was placed, by the interviewees, on trying to source more ethically produced goods, there was also an acknowledgement that this practice could only go so far and the easiest way to counter being complicit in an exploitative system was to not buy goods altogether.

Food

The practices in the area of food consumption with the interviewees were rich with insight around how to consume ethically. A number of those interviewed were vegetarians. This related both to a belief in the value of animals as well as lowering their carbon footprint by eliminating meat products from the diet. For those that

were not vegetarian, eating “happy meat” that was reared in humane conditions or free range eggs was important, as was limiting the consumption of meat – for some to once a week.

Interviewee 15:

We eat less meat as well - we have one meat meal a week, we were all vegetarian at one point, but now we eat one meat meal a week.

Interviewee 17:

[Being vegetarian] is mainly for environmental reasons.... just not taking more than we need in terms of the environmental toll.

Interviewee 8:

I had to preach for three Sundays and I thought I'd do a sermon series, because I'd never done one before, and I decided to preach on things that I find easy to avoid - and so there's these three weeks of these different things and the first one was on things to do with the environment - and basically that forced me to focus on proper research, cos you can't get up and preach a sermon and just make it up - and during the research process, I learned some things and got convicted by my lifestyle. Like, meat consumption was something big that I learned about back then - so that was 2001 - pretty much I, yeah, I learned about things like the amount of grain that goes into feeding... in some parts of the world grain-fed cows versus the amount of output of food that we actually get from them... issues like that that are kind of unjust when there's starvation in the world. Even just the value of meat in your diet, the way that some animals are farmed - pretty much I decided to have what I call 'happy meat' - so, if I could, when I was spending my money buying meat, I'd buy meat that

had a happy life - so not chicken that was raised in unnatural environments - force-fed the drugs and stuff.

Interviewee 13 spoke of the extra time and cost this commitment had meant for them:

Not buying meat at the supermarket, [but] going to a butcher; going to not just any old butcher, but an organic butcher, and the fact that it costs (I don't know actually, it's been so long since we've been to a supermarket) but I imagine probably about twice the price. And, because of the income we're on, I just don't buy whatever I feel like - we probably only ever eat sausages and mince, 'cos that's about all we can afford when we buy organically. So that's directly affecting us. I could afford to buy steak if I bought it at the supermarket.

Interviewee 19:

We've made a conscious decision that we actually want to buy free-range eggs - and that's a little thing, but it's those sorts of things that actually make a difference in the end. I think we went free-range before it was trendy to do so [laughs].

Related to this was the avoidance of dairy. Once again this represented a concern for the ways in which animals were treated as well as acknowledging the wasteful amount of water needed in the processes of producing milk.

Interviewee 1:

I try to consume as little milk as possible - well, not, no, that's a bit of an exaggeration - I try to drink soy milk rather than milk,... So I try and be aware of how the food I eat impacts the environment.

One of the key ways of ensuring the food was as ethically sourced and as environmentally sound as possible was through the raising of animals, keeping chickens and growing and making from scratch their own food.

Interviewee 9 explained this:

[My wife] always wanted the cheapest eggs, so I went out and got chickens. I thought 'stuff getting the cheapest eggs!' Cos it's just not an ethical choice... I don't personally want to do that or support that, and I love chooks! My kids love having the chooks around, they're so cool, they're a really cool creature, it's a special experience that adds so much to our life, our little family having chooks in the yard.

When it came to food, in particular, organic production was a key requirement for some of the interviewees.

Interviewee 1:

We're part of an organics co-op, so we buy some things from the organics co-op as a regular thing, um, we don't buy everything 'cos some things really are a hell of a lot more expensive, and so we kind of try and balance the extra expense with the more conscious consumption I s'pose... yeah.

Interviewee 12 talked about his rules for food consumption that included buying organic produce:

The criteria [for our food] is that it's local, over imported, products and seasonal.... It's about trying to live more in terms of the rhythm of the seasons rather than my own instant gratification of having egg-plant in August, and stone fruit all year round. So firstly, I guess it's more about buying in season, which by default then means buying locally. And then, secondly, organic, over

sprays. which is sort of [about] societal, environmental health, and then personal health comes second to that in terms of buying organic versus sprayed and stuff. And then, the third issue is price - so finances. And that one does come and go, depending on our fiscal situation, as to whether we're buying organic or not. We do the same with meat, we buy local and organic meat. And that actually doesn't change as much - we'll tend to just drop [out] the meat, as opposed to buying cheaper meat.

One of the final practices common for many of the interviewees was growing their own food. Two interviewees spoke of the process of learning how to grow vegetables.

Interviewee 14:

Part of that is actually raising my own vegetables, because I can buy less food, and I can control where my food comes from and I can stop it having pesticides and all that sort of stuff by growing my own vegetables. And also, I love it because it connects me to the land and it makes me really realistic about the kinds of decisions you have to make as a grower - you know, you have to deal with pest infestations and stuff like that, so you have to make these really hard decisions about... you can't just be really idealistic and say "well I'm not going to have any food that has no pesticides on", because you have to deal with pests in your own garden and so forth. But actually, through a lot of organic practices, you can pretty much eliminate all use of pesticides and so forth. So... um... so I try and grow my own food, but I have to buy food.

Interviewee 18:

I have quite a big vegetable garden at home, and I'm in a constant battle with my landlord about how much of the lawn I'm allowed to dig up to grow vegetables. It's always a bit of a Catch-22 - because you start growing

vegetables the easiest way to do it, that all of the advertising and the gardening shops and the marketing tells you to do, is that you have to buy this huge amount of compost, and buy all this stuff for it - and you don't! The soil... stuff grows. That's what it does. So I'm trying to learn how to grow, and give it the best chance it can, so that our garden is not a raised-bed garden, I don't bring in any compost from the outside, I turn the soil over, all of the stuff that grows we harvest and put it back into the soil - so I'm just kinda learning how to do that more. So, at the moment we've got a big crop of courgettes - we've got enough garlic for the rest of the year off our quarter acre lot, we've got chickens and none of it (it always takes me a while to remember that we're doing that stuff), because none of it's a burden. It's something that I've done really, really slowly and now it starts to give me a bit of pleasure.

Lastly, one of the participants spoke of making their own bread as a way to ensure that that food source was ethical.

Interviewee 13:

We [make bread] for health reasons as well, because I know we're avoiding preservatives and all the stuff they put in it - but that means we can get all the raw ingredients either locally, or organically, or without plastic packaging or something like that. So the more control we can have over something like that, then the more ethical we feel we have the opportunity to be.

Waste

Another area of importance to the participants was the reduction of waste. For one particular couple this was a key focus and they had committed to being 'rubbish free' which involved taking reusable containers to bulk food suppliers or the butchers to

avoid packaging. This was a large commitment for this couple and proved to be a framework for tackling concerns around consumerism.

Interviewee 12 noted:

For every bag of rubbish we throw away, there's been another 70 bags of rubbish created in creating that one bag of rubbish. So for us reducing our rubbish output domestically [it] actually has a massive impact further upstream from us. So even though we might just cut down our rubbish and help stop a wee bit, it has a massive impact, which isn't seen. So the impacts that flow on from that is that..... often the goods that we are throwing away, after just having them for a short amount of time, have been produced in unfair-trade situations and unfair working conditions, as well as the issues around oil production and consumption and [oil] being used in the manufacturing of a lot of these goods. And so by being able to rethink what we buy as consumers, in terms of what we're going to be sending to landfill, that quite a lot of effects in other areas. But it's just a simple way of looking at those issues, rather than having to analyse each individual company - simply by deciding on the product or the packaging, that actually circumvents a lot of that and makes it simple to do that.

For others it was one of many things to consider when buying.

Interviewee 19:

We're fairly keen on recycling, and even to consciously choose products that aren't over-packaged in the first place... and all parts of the process - so we'll look at, when we buy something, we're looking at packaging, were looking at the way it was made.

Interviewee 6:

Sometimes I go around looking for - if I have to buy a product - like, if you go and buy a pair of headphones, or something like that, there's so much plastic on it! You think, I'm buying these little headphones that could fit in something like, a fifty cent piece sphere, and then... you just get this box with all this heavy plastic that you can't rip apart and you've gotta cut up and just throw straight in the bin cos it's not recyclable - that sort of stuff irritates me. So if I was buying headphones, I would be motivated in part by how it was packaged.

Another area that three of the interviewees specifically mentioned around waste was dumpster diving.

Interviewee 16:

Round here we jump into dumpsters which is cool, because we can both help the environment and reduce the amount of stuff that we buy. And hopefully the money that we free up through that we don't just keep ourselves - cause that would be very selfish - but we give it away or whatever.

One of the participants was living in a house with others who had decided to use a composting toilet as a means of combatting waste.

Interviewee 18:

One of the things we've done recently: since the world is divided up into two people - those that crap in their clean drinking water, and those that don't (and so it's all of us in the western world are strangely part of that former group that crap into our clean drinking water and then flush it away so it's someone else's problem) we made a composting toilet, and it worked well enough that there was no smell involved at all... we never had to look at any

crap or anything unseemly, and never had to make any of us squeamish - but the result is a really high quality compost that we can actually put over a huge amount of our garden. So the whole process of what it actually takes to live and be a human isn't something that I'm sending off to other people and trying to avoid the consequences of and moving away from us, it's something that we're saying 'no, I need to learn what it means to take up space in this world.' And so we've got a composting toilet at home now, which is really great! So nothing that comes into our property has to leave our property and go to the landfill. And, the quality of our soil is getting better and better and better, and richer and richer and richer.

Energy

Energy use was an area given particular attention by all the authors who spoke from their own personal experience. All were concerned about the reliance on fossil fuels focusing on both its use in transport and in power use for the home. Talk of combatting the negative impacts of transport was important. One quarter of those interviewed did not own a car and sought to use more sustainable forms of transport.

Interviewee 19:

For eight of the last nine years we've chosen not to have a car. That's been a little bit harder, especially with two children, but we chose to live locally to where we needed to be, and concluded we actually didn't need to have a car. [We chose to travel] in a sustainable manner - for us, that's bikes or walking. We have family in different parts of the country, and it will be significantly easier to go for an hour-long plane journey versus a ten hour bus trip with two children, but we don't do that frequently - this would be maybe yearly we

would travel by plane - which isn't ideal because of the environmental impact, but sometimes it is necessary.

Several of the participants spoke of trying to avoid using plane travel wherever possible.

Interviewee 15:

I try and travel in a way that's carbon-low, so I catch the train, or hitchhike, that kind of thing. My parents live in Nelson, so I try to ferry and then hitchhike to Nelson rather than fly. If I'm travelling to Auckland I usually train or hitchhike, rather than flying - not always, sometimes it doesn't work - but usually I try.

C: How about day-to-day travel?

15: I bike - I don't own a car. There are some people in the community that own a car, who share a car. I bus sometimes, but usually I bike.

More commonly the focus was on the type of car driven with economical vehicles, either cars or motorbikes, mentioned. Since the study at least two of the participants have gone on to buy electric vehicles. The personal cost of the economical vehicle was clear in the responses of a couple of people.

Interviewee 8:

The car that I choose to drive, it's not the car that I like, I don't really like it. It's functional, and I bought it because I lived in a city. I didn't do a lot of driving, and it was small... small motor, it's efficient, but it's not a nice car. I don't look at my car... I guess this is another discipline altogether, but males and their cars - there is something about it. I would like a car that I kind of enjoyed and looked good in. [But] the car that I own, I've chosen that and I live with it, and I've kind of given up the "having the car that I really want" because I know that

the car that I really want at this point in time doesn't suit - I don't need it, so I'm not going to have it. Having a small car means it's using less fuel, better for the environment in terms of that sort of stuff.

Interviewee 18:

I cycle everywhere for work. I own a motorbike and I've driven a motorbike around, a little 250[cc], for the last five or six years, for things that are a little too far to cycle to. And that is something that I always struggle with - because I look at a bigger, flasher motorbike - and I want it, you know, I really want it. And a struggle for me is seeing that that's an illusion... it's an illusory thing. It's something that would make me really happy for maybe six months, I don't know, maybe three weeks... and then as soon as the shine wore off it would just be another piece of transport. So it's fun in the Summer, in the Winter it gets really miserable motor-biking around, but I motorbike Summer and Winter... and that's partly because it uses less fuel... so I've got a small motorbike, and I cycle around, even for work - even though it takes me longer to get to meetings, that's okay... and sometimes I turn up stinky - I'm sorry, it doesn't mean my ideas are any less valid when I get to the meeting.

There were just a couple of instances where power usage in the home was referred to. One person mentioned not owning a dishwasher while another mentioned their house had chosen to go without a fridge.

Avoiding Advertising.

The final practice under consideration was the attempt by the participants to avoid advertising. There was a general acknowledgement that they were tempted by advertising and needed to take steps to limit its influence.

Interview 19 commented "We don't have TV - which has been another way of avoiding so much consumerism - and a 'No Circulars' sign on the letterbox."

Interviewee 16 emphasised the reality of temptation:

[People think] you can just resist temptation, but I really disagree with that. I think we're people... we're so human, we're so sinful, we get tempted with everything. So I think the solution is to just cut all the sources of that... 'If your right hand causes you to sin, just cut it off'... just to avoid advertising situations. So I avoid malls, I avoid reading ads, we don't watch TV. So just avoiding it.

Interviewee 14:

I've tried to eliminate the source of desire, so I don't have a TV, and I generally don't listen to commercial radio... I don't subscribe to a newspaper - although we do have to read newspapers here - so I've totally tried to drop out a little bit of any sort of... I don't allow advertising... circulars to come in through the letterbox... so I've tried to close off those... because I find myself, when I watch TV, I'm a real sucker for how they're manufacturing desire for products and so forth, so I've tried to eliminate that out of my life - I think that's part of the spirituality of consumption.

Interviewee 9:

My wife always says, "What the eye does not see, the heart does not want" - she's always drumming that one in, and just reminding. And it's something that she realised was the truth for her - when she's looking through magazines and things, she would end up spending way more money, but if she didn't look at the magazines she didn't have a need or want to spend the money or to buy those things, and so she's sort of changed her tune on that one. So we don't scrounge through all the advertising that comes through the mail or anything

like that. I don't even think I ever look through that stuff. In a way, it's an isolating existence, because you go "I'm going to choose not to do this, because I know how this affects my emotions", when it's totally things that I don't actually need.

Conclusion.

It is clear from the research findings that the participants of the study were taking concrete steps to align their concerns about the injustices being perpetuated by consumerism with their own personal way of living. The ways they did this demonstrated a number of overlapping areas of key concern. A move away from jobs that were focused on material reward was apparent as participants often chose to earn less in roles they believed were more meaningful. It was a key issue for all participants to consume less. This involved careful consideration of what was actually necessary for a whole life and avoiding unnecessary purchases. When things were purchased, second hand item or items that would last for a long time were priorities. Alongside this, the desire to consume ethically, which included boycotting companies known to be exploitative in their practices, as well as choosing products that are fair in their production process, such as Fair Trade, was apparent. Food represented a consumption category worthy of consideration in its own right. As this is an unavoidable and frequent consumption choice, issues around environmental care and exploitation of workers, as well as animals, were key in decisions being made. Reducing or eliminating waste was one way many of the participants were striving to protect the environment in their consumption choices, as was reducing the impact of transport and energy use. A practice important to the interviewees, centred on avoiding advertising. There was acknowledgement that advertising presented a real temptation that was hard to resist and therefore reducing its impact altogether was key in the effort to reduce consumption.

PART THREE

Chapter Eight: Processes

I will now turn towards analysing the data in greater depth and developing three key ideas from the interview data. In order to do this, I will bring in material beyond the interview data. I will draw on wider sources and look for commonalities and analyses that might prove useful in finding ways of responding to consumerism that constitute faithful Christian living.

In this chapter I will explore the first of the three ideas to be considered in this thesis. This chapter examines the process of change. Acknowledging that seeking to live ethically in the face of strong pressure from consumerism requires significant effort, this chapter concerns itself with the ways in which the participants pursued change. It was observed that the process of moving from concern to action is fraught with difficulty. However, as the participants demonstrated a degree of coherence between their beliefs and practices their actions will be further analysed. The responses by the participants highlighted two different ways of seeking to align beliefs and practices. The first included adopting a 'rule' to live by in the face of consumerist pressure. Another strategy employed was slowly incorporating more practices into the process of everyday living as the participants became aware of a new and pressing issues. In discussing the different approaches to changing a way of life, a concern about legalism is considered.

The importance of peer group pressure and support is recognised as an important component of change for many of the participants both in providing an initial impetus and in maintaining a counter cultural way of life. A number of the participants were part of different intentional communities. Because this was a

reasonably significant phenomenon consideration is given to consider the emergence of a 'new monasticism.' Finally, the processes that the participants undertook are compared helpfully to the method of theological reflection in which priority is given to 'praxis.'

In considering the ideas discussed by the interviewees, the stories of authors who have undergone a similar change of in their way of life are also highlighted. These can be seen to strengthen or challenge the findings from the participants.

Undergoing Change

In considering the process of change undertaken by the participants it is noted that the effort required is significant. The process of changing from a casual to a conscious approach to consumption is captured below:

Interviewee 13:

I can remember a happy-go-lucky, probably from about 5 to 10 years ago, happy-go-lucky, just buy anything... cheap, plastic, whatever, without any thought. The only thought was "What's cheapest? What do I want? What's fun? What tastes good? What's easy? What's quick?" And it's just such an easier way of consuming, it's so much easier.... [But now] consuming is not an easy thing for us. It takes time and energy and we're putting effort into every single consumer choice we make and that can be hundreds in a week. It's not to say that I feel that every 'buy' is a good one - but I'm aware of it, and I may have put a lot of thought into it - and then from lack of time, or energy, or money, or resources, or information, I will go ahead and buy something I don't believe to be a great buy anyway, but still, there's been energy put into it, and that is normal for us now.

Interviewee 12 agreed:

Now, if I want to buy anything, whether I need to or want to, it becomes a long, torturous process. Consequently, my shoes are in need of replacement, and just haven't been, because on the one hand there's the Western product of wanting to buy shoes that I like, and do I like the style of them, and do they feel fashionable? And on the other hand there's this faith and belief that this system is immoral, so therefore I try to find alternatives to that - and it's just a nightmare of circular process of not being able to find... I mean, I haven't easily found shoes that I've felt happy enough that are fairly made, and fair-trade, and are they going to biodegrade? And what materials? Is the leather good, or is it bad? You know, all these questions, and it's just a nightmare! So consequently I haven't bought any shoes.... With clothing I don't really know whether a cotton shirt is really better than the cotton/acrylic mix - given that cotton is one of the most polluting industries in the world, cotton production. And then I have no idea whether Hallsensteins have their clothes produced in good work conditions for their workers, or whether they're from some slave thing. Yesterday we walked through a mall for an hour and a half, saw plenty of things that I would [wear], in fact, I even saw a woolen jersey that was 100% wool, but I just didn't know if it was good to buy that one for \$60, thinking it's probably NZ wool, made in China, versus holding out and buying an Untouched World jersey for \$200.... And it feels like that with everything, so whether it was a car, whether it's even buying a house, as to where do you buy one in terms of trying to reduce your impact on the world, is it better to have land and be able to grow a veggie garden, or but then have to travel and use cars? Or do you live downtown and have to buy your vegetables which come in by trucks? So... I don't know! Clothing, property, cars, transport, health, it's all affected, it's a complete disaster! [Laughs].

Author Laura Hartman acknowledges the difficulty that results from striving to consume ethically. She describes the process of comprehending consequences of consumption choices as “somewhere between daunting and impossible.”¹ She notes:

To trace the ramifications of one purchase requires extensive research and an advanced understanding of international trade, geography, economics, ecology, and politics. The complexity and opacity of global political and economic systems means that a multitude of moral problems may arise in relation to human consumption, yet consumers remain completely unaware of them. One act of consumption may have morally relevant effects on the nonhuman biosphere, on other humans, and on consumers themselves.²

The participants in this study were willing, to different degrees, to forgo convenience in order to place concerns about the environment and justice for the world’s poor first in their consumption decisions. This commitment is one of the first factors that becomes apparent in considering the way of life of the interviewees.

Interviewee 2 sums it up:

I guess one tension is the thing of convenience. Living and making consumption decisions for ethical and really considered consumption decisions is often really inconvenient because you can't just buy whatever you want from the shop just down the road because that's an unethical shop, or they're unethical products.

As choosing inconvenience seems counter-intuitive in our culture, the two methods that people utilised to ensure their ethical priorities remained central in consumption and decisions about their way of life will now be considered. In the interviews the notion of making a new commitment to a ‘rule for living’ was present

¹ Laura M. Hartman, *The Christian Consumer*, 16.

² *ibid.*, 16.

in the responses of a few people. However, the change undertaken was more likely to be relayed as a series of moments and relationships that compelled people to act.

Alongside the participants' comments, other resources, as previously noted, will be drawn on. Particularly helpful is a small collection of books written by 'everyday' Christians who explore their own process of life change in seeking to live more faithfully, despite the dictates of consumerism. These are: *Serve God Save the Planet* by Matthew Sleeth, *Everyday Justice* by Julie Clawson, and *Year of Plenty* by Craig Goodwin.

A Rule for living

There were two rules specifically mentioned by interviewees. The first rule mentioned was buying local, seasonal and organic food.

Interviewee 12:

The criteria is that it's local, over imported, products... and seasonal, rather than buying stuff... just because I want a tomato... [instead] it's having tomatoes when they're available and going with that. It's about trying to live more in terms of the rhythm of the seasons rather than my own desire, [the] instant gratification of having egg-plant in August and stone fruit all year round. So firstly, it's more about buying in season, which by default then means buying locally. And then, secondly, with the organic, over sprays, which is the sort of societal, environmental health, and then personal health comes second to that in terms of buying organic versus sprayed and stuff.

The second rule mentioned was to only buy goods that would not create rubbish. Implementing the rubbish free rule carried with it the commitment to live by it no matter how inconvenient. When she first started to implement the rule, Interviewee

13 said that she would often forget to take her reusable bags shopping, but to be faithful to the rule meant going home and getting them rather than continuing shopping. This rule also affected the sorts of products she would buy and even the sorts of shops where she could buy things. It often entailed her avoiding supermarkets altogether. She commented on the impact this (along with her less concrete commitment to buy organically) had on her shopping:

Not buying meat at the supermarket, going to a butcher. Going to not just any old butcher, but an organic butcher, therefore affected the time it's taken me. The fact that I remember to take my containers with me, and the fact that it costs (I don't know actually, it's been so long since we've been to a supermarket, but I imagine) probably about twice the price. And, because of the income we're on, I just don't buy whatever I feel like - we probably only ever eat sausages and mince, 'cos that's about all we can afford when we buy organically. So that's directly affecting us.... I could afford to buy steak if I bought it at the supermarket.

However, the introduction of the rule had had a wider impact on consuming:

I've got a lot of habits now, good habits and I've got a lot of information, a lot of resources, so all these choices are becoming easier - but if I actually stop to compare those two realities, it's quite different. So yeah, hugely affected - every little thing.

Amongst the everyday authors, Julie Clawson and Craig Goodwin express developing a new 'rule' of consumption that they choose to live by. For Clawson it took the season of Lent to commit to changes that allowed her to live more coherently the Christian beliefs she espoused, particularly regarding the food she ate.

During that season I devoted myself to righting my relationship with others through the food I ate. I decided, as much as possible, to eat food that wasn't harmful to the environment, farmers or my body. This meant seeking out food that was fairly traded, organically grown and, often, locally grown as well (to support local farmers and reduce wasteful transport).³

Clawson's experience is mimicked by Goodwin. For him it took a "fit of New Year's idealism" which saw him propose that his family only consume things that were local, used, homegrown, and homemade for a whole year⁴ in an attempt by his 'ordinary' family of two adults holding down two jobs, raising two children, "and living absolutely ordinary lives in our ordinary neighborhood in our ordinary city"⁵ to "rebel against the consumption status quo and seek to craft a more holistic and sustainable way of living."⁶

Reflecting on the use of rules to help him on his journey towards a more loving consumerist ethic, Goodwin notes that "it takes more than a Bible study and discussion to go from an observer to an activist." He learned instead that "it takes a rule for living, a confined space, with meaningful and intentional constraints, to form me as a responsible citizen in God's creation."⁷ By implementing the rule Goodwin noticed its ability to facilitate change.

Our previous patterns of consumption had seemed so unchangeable. It was just the way the world was (or so we thought), and it was hard to imagine that there were other options. But we were learning that all habits, patterns, and practices of consumption are changeable. It might take five or six months to feel comfortable with them, but nothing was inevitable or set in stone. All it

³ Julie Clawson, *Everyday Justice*, (Downers Grove: IVP, 2009), 112.

⁴ Craig Goodwin, *Year Of Plenty*, 6.

⁵ *ibid.*, 14.

⁶ *ibid.*, 10.

⁷ *ibid.*, 31.

took was an intentional focus on the little things and some faith that not only could we do it but that somehow it mattered if we did.⁸

Legalism

However, while implementing a rule or rules for consumption might seem like a quick path towards ethical living, there is resistance to this approach. This was particularly evident in popular theological writings from the 1980s. In writings from this era there is a distinct fear of anything stemming from a desire to live ethically that might contain a hint of 'legalism.'

Carol Westphal, for instance, expresses concerns about legalism:

To try to spell out how our family responds frightens me, as I am so conscious of the tendency to legalize. Perhaps we're too sophisticated for legalism, but at least it's hard not to begin comparing standards of living and vying for the position of "simplest of all" or at least "simpler than thou"—trying to keep down with the Smiths or the Joneses.⁹

John McInnes states that trying to describe what an ideal Christian life should look like can too easily "end in legalism—a set of rules and prescriptions about sizes of houses, calorific content of food, depth of carpet pile, numbers of electric kitchen helps, percentages of income to give away ... and a multitude of other particulars."¹⁰

He wrote:

⁸ *ibid.*, 197.

⁹ Carol Westphal, "Struggling Free in the Family: Guidelines and Models a Modest Effort at Living More Simply," in Ronald Sider, *Living More Simply* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1980), 103.

¹⁰ John McInnes, *The New Pilgrims* (Palm Springs: Ronald N Haynes Publishers, 1980), 43.

... too concrete a prescription for Christian living could itself become a new legalism. Jesus certainly wasn't advocating that! Such fear [of legalism] is understandable and helpful if it acts as a brake on the sort of teaching which says, "Christians will spend no more than \$5,000 per year on themselves" or "Christians will own dogs weighing no more than 20 lbs.". New pharisaical "thou shalt nots" we don't want!¹¹

This sentiment is mirrored almost exactly in the writings of Richard Foster who contended:

If simplicity were merely a matter of externals, things would be quite easy. We would then need only to formulate the system (no small trick, to be sure) that defines the boundaries: Christian faithfulness would allow us to live in this income bracket but not that one, to purchase this house but not that one. We would have a clearly definable arrangement, even if it would need periodic adjustment to keep abreast of inflation. It would be clear who is in and who is out, who is faithful and who is not. Presto, a new pharisaism.¹²

Foster acknowledges that the clarity of that approach has "immense power to motivate and change behavior." Despite this he argues that the "end result is bondage and death. The letter always kills; the Spirit alone gives life. Gospel simplicity gives freedom and liberation."¹³

However, in returning to the earlier illustration of Smith eating "uphappy" sausages at Costco, it is possible to see articulated a different way of understanding external constraints. Smith concludes that he is not able to "think his way to new hungers." "While Wendell Berry had convinced my intellect," he states, "I was still prone to

¹¹ *ibid.*, 12.

¹² Richard Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity*, Revised ed. (New York: HarperOne, 2005), 9.

¹³ *ibid.*, 9.

pull into the McDonald's drive-thru."¹⁴ Smith argues that what he needed was a whole new set of practices. He needed to engage in different rhythms and routines to retrain his hunger so he would want to eat differently.¹⁵ He concludes:

If sanctification is tantamount to closing the gap between what I know and what I do (no longer reading Wendell Berry in Costco, essentially), it means changing what I want. And that requires submitting ourselves to disciplines and regimens that reach down into our deepest habits. The Spirit of God meets us in that space—in that gap—not with lightning bolts of magic but with the concrete practices of the body of Christ that conscript our bodily habits.¹⁶

In his reflection on what brought about the change in his behaviour, Goodwin strongly advocates the introduction of boundaries. He promotes the Christian tradition of 'askesis' which is the intentional exercise of limiting freedom with a goal of growth and maturity.¹⁷ He writes that "It's common to fantasize that the pathway to fulfillment comes from unbounded freedom, but the wisdom of the ages is that it's actually in wrestling with limitations that we grow."¹⁸

Goodwin compares living by his rule to the formal Rules found in monastic communities. He links his own way of life to the Rule of St. Benedict.¹⁹ Benedict of Nursia believed that monks should live in community and that they should undertake the traditional disciplines of prayer and study alongside manual labour. Here sanctification was to be found, not in an escape from the burdens of everyday life but through them.²⁰ Goodwin notes that Benedict did not separate or divide the spiritual from the necessary but rather "weds them together in a holy rhythm."²¹

¹⁴ James K A Smith, *You Are What You Love*, 59.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 59.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 65.

¹⁷ Craig Goodwin, *Year Of Plenty*, 103.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, 103.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, 41.

²⁰ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, 2015, (10 May 2016).

²¹ Craig Goodwin, *Year Of Plenty*, 86.

Linking the notion of right living in a consumerist culture to living by a monastic-type rule is picked up by Esther de Waal in her book *Living with Contradiction*. Commenting on Benedict, she notes that his rule prevents an “escape into any disembodied spirituality.” Rather, his way of life illuminates the closeness of God “and that I can be constantly aware of his presence, wherever I am and whatever I am doing.”²² De Waal emphasises the mundane ordinariness of the rule’s focus which forces those living by it to deeply ponder the material things in life. She believes that Benedict’s rule is concerned with minute directions about the right ordering of daily life in the monastery because it reflects the belief that if God cannot be found in the things that are handled in the kitchen then God should not be looked for anywhere else.²³ This consideration, De Waal claims, extends the call of reconciliation to a “right relationship with all my possessions.”²⁴ Such an approach to living removes love away from the domain of idealised abstraction to the context of daily living.²⁵ She writes:

Most of us need help to unearth God in our midst, to practice being aware of his constant presence. This is where the relevance of the Rule becomes clear, for the Benedictine life it shows us is undramatic and unheroic; it simply consists in doing the ordinary things of daily life carefully and lovingly, with the attention and the reverence that can make them a way of prayer, a way to God.²⁶

In theological considerations of Christian practices, there is an acknowledgement that practices themselves can, in fact, lead to new beliefs. *Practicing Our Faith* and *Practicing Theology* are two anthologies concerned with a greater theological reflection on the importance of everyday practices for the Christian faith. A key

²² Esther de Waal, *Living with Contradiction* (Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing 1998), 80.

²³ *ibid.*, 69.

²⁴ *ibid.*, 73.

²⁵ *ibid.*, 104.

²⁶ *ibid.*, 71.

point made by many of the authors in the two volumes concerns the primacy of practices in shaping the Christian life. Editor Dorothy C. Bass questions whether doctrines are a group of “stable propositions that, once learned, are then applied intact to situations of daily living?”²⁷

Tanner notes that theologians, “especially academically trained ones,” are adept at constructing systems of ideas and drawing systematic connections between Christian actions and beliefs. “Thus, beliefs about God and the world seamlessly suggest the propriety of circumstances that make those beliefs seem natural. In the abstract light of theological reflection.... Christians do this or that sort of thing because, as Christians, they believe this or that.”²⁸

Miroslav Volf observes that “People come to believe either because they find themselves already engaged in Christian practices (say, by being raised in a Christian home) or because they are attracted to them. In most cases, Christian practices come first and Christian beliefs follow — or rather, beliefs are already entailed in practices, so that their explicit espousing becomes a matter of bringing to consciousness what is implicit in the engagement in practices themselves.”²⁹

To illustrate this, Bass and Dykstra consider the practice of keeping the Sabbath. They argue that through the Christian practice of Sabbath-keeping a knowledge that is embodied grows. This knowledge confirms that the world is not dependent on any human ability for endless work and that ultimately the world is not controlled by humans. Bass and Dykstra hopefully claim that through “Observing Sabbath on the Lord’s Day, Christian practitioners come to know in their bones that creation is God’s gift, that God does not intend that anyone should work without respite, and

²⁷ Dorothy C. Bass, “Introduction” in *Practising Theology*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 2.

²⁸ Kathryn Tanner, “Theological Reflection and Christian Practices,” in *Practising Theology*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 229.

²⁹ Miroslav Volf, “Practicing Theology, Theology for a Way of Life,” *Practising Theology*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 255.

that God has conquered death in the resurrection of Christ.”³⁰ Volf explains that right practices are likely to open people to insights into beliefs that they would otherwise be closed to.³¹

For Bass and Dykstra the content of each practice “challenges, lures, and sometimes drags” its practitioners into new ways of knowing and being, giving people further capacity to enable them to read the world differently.³²

Rather than fearing the legalism that might come from encouraging a specific set of practices, Bass reminds us that the ability to envision a way of life that can be lived with integrity in an era of consumerism is needed for “the good of all people, indeed of all creation, [which] may depend on our ability to order our lives well.”³³ For her, the concern should not be that restrictive practices may result in legalism but rather in “figuring out practices with enough specificity to make a difference.”³⁴

Interviewee 9 captured the necessity of being able to live with boundaries to live well in the face of consumerism:

I often think the way of Jesus is a good way [but] it's also a way of restraint, definitely. People don't like talking about that, or the mundane nature of faith sometimes in life... but actually restraining ourselves from our whims.

³⁰ Craig Dykstra and Dorothy C. Bass, “A Theological Understanding of Christian Practices,” *Practising Theology*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 25.

³¹ Miroslav Volf, “Practicing Theology, Theology for a Way of Life,” 257.

³² Craig Dykstra and Dorothy C. Bass, “A Theological Understanding of Christian Practices,” 25.

³³ Dorothy C. Bass, *Practising Our Faith*, 2.

³⁴ *ibid.*, 7.

Steady Progress

The second type of change seen in the lives of the participants of this study and the authors of popular works was more a slow, steady change. Interviewee 3 advocated the gradual approach to change while still acknowledging the inherent difficulties:

You can't just pause and wait until you're ready and you've figured out everything, before you live, you're already living, and it's a process. I think you can't expect to be able to do change, to achieve the ideal overnight - but you can make small progress towards it.... the problem is... that it's hard, and it takes time, and it takes thought-space to make all the little changes required to reach that ideal.

Interviewee 8 expressed his attitude to gradual, consistent changes:

I've pretty much decided you can't win all the time but it's good to win as much as you can and to be on a journey that's always changing. In a year's time from now, there'll be something else I might've discovered, or there'll be another thing that has become accessible for me to still function the way that I do, that I'll take on board and it'll be another change.

Interviewee 18 expressed a similar sentiment:

I'm making really intentional decisions about the sorts of things that I buy,... [but] it doesn't always occur to me now, because you make lots of little changes all of the time until those changes become habitual and then it's not until someone looks in from the outside and goes 'Wow - that's kind of.. weird" that you notice how different it is.

He goes on:

What I tend to do is add one more thing to the list of how I choose to live, each time something's become more habitual.

Ruth Valerio, the author of *Just Living*, a book that reflects on her own life as well as the practices of people interviewed for her doctoral thesis, notes that living well in consumer culture ultimately requires a reframing of the whole life, which takes significant amounts of time.³⁵ Recounting his own transition to more ethical consumption, Sleeth tells the story of gradually including more and more aspects of his household living into the process of change.

Over the past five years, my family and I have made significant lifestyle changes. We no longer live in our big house; instead, we have one the exact size of our old garage. We use less than one-third of the fossil fuels and one-quarter of the electricity we once used. We've gone from leaving two barrels of trash by the curb each week to leaving one bag every few weeks. We no longer own a clothes dryer, garbage disposal, dishwasher, or lawn mower. Our "yard" is planted with native wildflowers and a large vegetable garden. Half of our possessions have found new homes. We are a poster family for the downwardly mobile.³⁶

While this approach did not emphasise the importance of a 'rule' to live by, it was apparent that there were 'guidelines' or 'standards that came into play. Sleeth argues that Christians must be "constrained by conviction to think about their lives, their actions, and their responsibilities"³⁷ stating that Christians are "not at liberty" to do whatever they like. Sleeth believes that because Christianity has so few

³⁵ Ruth Valerio, *Just Living* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2016), 265.

³⁶ Matthew Sleeth, *Serve God Save the Planet*, 18.

³⁷ *ibid.*, 85.

restrictions on what to eat as well as what to wear, when to marry, Christians must bring a moral and ethical view to every aspect of life.³⁸

Sleeth provides a compelling example of applying these sorts of guidelines towards the practice of eating. He argues that although Christianity carries no specific injunctions about eating, Christian morality does. For him the first moral injunction arises during a food shortage. “There is no specific commandment that says, “Thou shall not eat all you want.” However, the Christian morality is clear: We are to put the needs of others before us, up to and including laying down our life for another.”³⁹ Because of this, in a situation of food shortage Christians should eat no more than a ‘fair share.’ For Sleeth a second reason to abstain from a food is if it has been obtained through an immoral means, such as food that is stolen or produced by child or slave labour. Sleeth also believes that God intends animals to be treated with respect. Therefore food that is obtained from mistreated or tortured animals should be avoided. Food that is harmful to the person consuming it should also be avoided. Finally, Christian morality excludes the eating of food if the growing, harvesting, storing, or cooking of it is harmful to others. Sleeth notes that for his family these growing realisations meant dropping fast food and several other foods including a process of reducing meat consumption, beginning with dropping any meat from breakfast, then from lunch and finally several dinners weekly.⁴⁰

Coming up with her own ethical guidelines, Valerio constructs parameters for the consumption of food. Namely: eat less meat; if/when meat is eaten, consider where it has come from and how it has been reared; buy fish and seafood carefully; grow and/or rear your own; eat local and seasonal wherever you can; eat as unprocessed as possible.⁴¹

³⁸ *ibid.*, 128.

³⁹ *ibid.*, 134.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, 134.

⁴¹ Ruth Valerio, *Just Living*, 242.

Clawson also points out what she believes is the key issue Christians need to grapple with regarding food. The choice consumerism presents is not about whether to buy cheaper or more expensive food, but deciding who will pay the cost of food. “Will we assume the full cost or will we make someone with fewer resources pay part of the price for us?” The issue is how Christians choose to treat other people.⁴² She relates her journey:

I had to personally commit to altering my schedule to make time for cooking food. I’ve had to learn how to actually cook things like homemade bread (my first few efforts weren’t all that spectacular). Some days I really don’t feel like putting in the effort and would much rather pop some frozen entrée in the microwave (and some days I do), but over time, I’ve learned how to save money and eat sustainably (not to mention healthier) by cooking very tasty meals mostly from scratch. I’m no frontier woman or iron chef, but this isn’t an all-or-nothing issue. It’s a process that I’ve had to work at but one that I’ve engaged at a comfortable pace.⁴³

Just as Clawson focuses on a key question to guide her consumption choices about who will pay the price of food, Valerio emphasises critical questions that should be considered before consumption. She suggests that every person should ask themselves, ‘what would the world look like if everyone lived the way I do? Would it be a flourishing world, or a world that was being used harmfully in order to make my life more comfortable?’ She quotes theologian John Larmody: “If I cannot extrapolate my standard of living for the whole world and still find nature nourishing, my standard of living is immoral.”⁴⁴

She goes on to say that before buying anything the ethical Christian consumer should:

⁴² Julie Clawson, *Everyday Justice*, 115.

⁴³ *ibid.*, 116.

⁴⁴ John Carmody quoted (no reference provided) in Ruth Valerio, *Just Living*, 230.

Stop, think and ask yourself what you know about the product. Do you know where it has come from? Do you know whether it was made by someone in good working conditions? Has it been made from environmentally harmful materials? Has it or any of its components been tested on animals? Has an inordinate amount of energy been needed to make it? Will it make the producer's life better if I buy it? Is this company involved in supporting an oppressive regime, or does it engage in unhelpful political activity such as lobbying? Does it allow trade unions to operate? Are the directors paid disproportionately high salaries in comparison to the wider workforce? Will this purchase foster good relationships between myself and other people and the wider world?⁴⁵

From a starting point of questioning, there are two other authors that develop frameworks to guide actions in the face of consumerism. Writing in the 1980s, from a Mennonite perspective, and trying to avoid legalism, Doris Janzen Longacre argues for a "way of life characterized by timeless values and commitments' which she terms: 'life standards.' "Standard" she argues "is a word that fits a way of life governed by more than fleeting taste. It is permanent and firm without being as tight as "rules.""⁴⁶ For Janzen Longacre "Do justice. Cherish the natural order. Nurture people" are standards that must become second nature for Christians.⁴⁷ 'Do justice' means that: "Our knowledge of others' needs and our guilt must resolve itself into a lasting attentiveness. This means being mindful, conscious, aware, so that never again can one make a decision about buying without thinking of the poor."⁴⁸ The questions "Does it nurture people?" and "Does it protect our

⁴⁵ Ruth Valerio, *Just Living*, 241.

⁴⁶ Doris Janzen Longacre, *Living more with Less* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1980), 16.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, 17.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, 26.

environment?” are questions that Janzen Longacre argues should be ingrained in consumption decision making processes for Christians.⁴⁹

Laura Hartman identifies Christian exemplars throughout history in order to consider the principles that have been applied through the ages to Christian thinking about consumption. She considers a variety of responses ranging from the ascetic approach of St Francis to modern day prosperity theology. Others she considers include Thomas Aquinas, Quaker abolitionist John Woolman, Ellen G. White, Sergei Bulgakov, Dorothy Day, L. Shannon Jung, and contemporary evangelical leader Ronald Sider. Drawing on the strengths from the different approaches she goes on to highlight four ways to handle consumption. The four themes she concludes are pertinent in an age of consumerism are: avoiding sin, which includes avoiding the exploitation of the environment and all workers; embracing creation, which involves enjoying and savouring the gifts of creation with gratitude; loving the neighbour – while it is recognised that much consumption involves the provision of necessities and gifts for those being cared for by the consumer, love for one’s neighbour also includes those who are distant and unseen. Finally, Hartman concludes that good consumption takes into account envisioning the future, looking forward to the reign of God and shaping practices around that hope.

Whatever the approach to change, whether through the rapid implementation of a rule or by gradually changing habits one by one over time, two patterns seem to emerge. The first was that any initial areas of change drew attention to new regions of concern. Goodwin commented that as he “asked questions about loving our neighbors we couldn’t help but pay attention to issues of land and economics, carbon footprints and farming methods.”⁵⁰ He noted that “going green was not how we would have described our plans for the year, but the nature of our rules placed

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, 48.

⁵⁰ Craig Goodwin, *Year Of Plenty*, 168.

us square in the middle of conversations about sustainability, carbon footprints, reducing waste, recycling, and reusing.”⁵¹

Interviewee 6 described this process at work:

Having a strong conviction in one area and then realising I'm perpetuating an [injustice] in another, that is discouraging. It's like, how difficult is it to live out these convictions? I think it's very challenging. At the start I just thought 'I'm going to go hard,' but then realising I'm making a decision for our whole family, so it's got to be something they understand, you know, I can't just tell them how it's going to be. ... So [it's challenging].... being passionate and having a conviction about something and then finding out that in another areas I'm buying something that's perpetuating some other unethical practice and crikey, I've got to give that up too, or I've got to go and change that as well.

A second aspect that was widespread in the responses about the process of change, was that once one habit was changed it became easier to change subsequent habits. Sleeth noted that over time “Our family’s relationship to things is changing.” And, that implementing new habits “makes everything easier.”⁵² This is significant because of the acknowledgement that ultimately making the choice to consume ethically is not an easy one. Clawson honestly notes that “Being constantly aware of the ethical implications of our actions, much less finding out information about different companies ahead of time, is difficult.”⁵³

Praxis

The processes undertaken by the interviewees can be helpfully compared to the theological method of ‘praxis.’ This theological model provides a useful way of

⁵¹ *ibid.*, 168.

⁵² Matthew Sleeth, *Serve God Save the Planet*, 84.

⁵³ Julie Clawson, *Everyday Justice*, 85.

understanding the way in which the participants engage in consumer culture. A process of change found in a 'praxis' model of theological reflection is analogous to the change undergone by the study participants. This model has as its starting point concrete, lived experience and insists that the final point of all Christian teaching is also practical action.

Praxis describes a process of reflection and action directed towards structures needing transformation. In this model, proper theological understanding cannot be formed independently of practical engagement. The starting-point of this method of theological reflection is not abstract speculation, but consideration of the real obligations of Christians, particularly in the face of inequality. It is a process to enable the Church to live out its commitment to care for those in need.⁵⁴ Within a theology rooted in the idea of praxis, theological reflection becomes much more than simply thinking clearly and meaningfully about faith. It is a way of expressing faith that comes from a particular course of action and a commitment to continued action in the future.

This method of theological reflection is most closely associated with the theologies of liberation that emerged in the two-thirds world from the end of the 1960s, initially centred in Latin America where a Conference of Bishops held in Medellin, Colombia in 1968 agreed that the church should take a 'preferential option for the poor.' In 1976, a group of theologians from the two-thirds world gathered at Dar es Salaam, Tanzania and issued a statement saying: "We reject as irrelevant an academic type of theology that is divorced from action. We are prepared for a radical break in epistemology which makes commitment the first act of theology and engages in a critical reflection on... the reality of the Third World."⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Elaine Graham, Heather Walton and Frances Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods* (Norwich: SCM Press, 2005), 170.

⁵⁵ Ecumenical Dialogue of Third World Theologians, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, August 5-12, 1976, "Final Statement," in *The Emergent Gospel*, ed. Sergio and Virginia Fabella (Marynoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978), 269.

The term 'praxis' derives from Marxism, reflecting Marx's view that intellectual knowledge did not constitute genuine knowledge. Rather, Marx insisted that we know best when reason is coupled with, and challenged by, our actions. "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways;" Marx argued, "the point is to change it."⁵⁶ In Latin America, educator Paulo Freire sought to 'conscientize' the poor through praxis, whereby oppressed people would "acquire a critical awareness of their own condition, and, with their allies, struggle for liberation."⁵⁷

While the Marxist roots of the notion of action and reflection are clear, Elaine Graham points out that this method can appeal to a deeper provenance throughout history. She highlights biblical stories of prophetic protest against social injustice and the emptiness of rituals performed at the expense of observing compassion, justice and righteousness. Graham also links praxis to radical movements in Christian history such as the Society of Friends (or Quakers) who hold that creedal religion is secondary to realising peace, justice and personal integrity. This is echoed in contemporary Quaker guidance: 'Let your lives speak.'⁵⁸

Liberation Theologian, Juan Luis Segundo describes praxis based theological reflection in stages. He notes that it begins with 'immersion' in the context. "Christians should not redefine social praxis by starting with the gospel message. They should do just the opposite. They should seek out the historical import of the gospel by starting with social praxis."⁵⁹ For Segundo and others, this is not a method of 'applied theology' but a process of theological reflection that begins and ends in

⁵⁶ Karl Marx, *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, ed. and trans. Lloyd Easton and Kurt Guddat (Garden City, NY, Doubleday, Anchor Books 1967), 402, cited in Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (New York: Orbis Books, 2002), 72.

⁵⁷ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1986), 36.

⁵⁸ Inscription on George Fox's Memorial Tablet cited in Elaine Graham, Heather Walton and Frances Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods*, 171, 178.

⁵⁹ Juan Luis Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, trans. John Drury (New York: Orbis Books, 1976), 85.

practical engagement.⁶⁰ Leonardo Boff agrees, writing that it does not start with words (those of the Bible) and end in words (new theological formulations), but stems from actions and struggles, and works out a theoretical structure to throw light on and examine these actions.⁶¹

Key in this process, and of critical interest to this project in light of the ways in which a consumerist lifestyle in the west contributes to the oppression of the poor in the two thirds world, is a recognition of one's own complicity in the dynamics of oppression and structural sin. This is coupled with a commitment to resist injustice. This recognition and commitment leads to the next phase, where a more critical understanding is gained. It is an attempt to look beneath superficial accounts of reality, and to challenge dominant and accepted forms of knowledge.⁶² In this process the perspectives and interests of those "on the underside of history" are privileged in readings of biblical texts as similarities between the biblical world and current context are explored.⁶³

Finally, comes the move back to faithful practice, informed by the insights of theological reflection. This brings the process in a full circle as practice is both the starting point and the aim of theological reflection grounded in Praxis.⁶⁴

Stephen Bevans notes:

By first acting and then reflecting on that action in faith, practitioners of the praxis model believe that one can develop a theology that is truly relevant to a particular context. What becomes clear is that theology done in this way cannot be conceived in terms of books, essays or articles. Rather than

⁶⁰ Elaine Graham, Heather Walton and Frances Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods*, 189.

⁶¹ Leonardo Boff, *When Theology Listens to the Poor*, trans. Robert Barr, (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 23, cited in Elaine Graham, Heather Walton and Frances Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods* (Norwich: SCM Press, 2005), 189.

⁶² Elaine Graham, Heather Walton and Frances Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods*, 189.

⁶³ *ibid.*, 190-191.

⁶⁴ *ibid.*, 190.

something concrete, permanent, and printed, theology is conceived more in terms of an activity, a process, a way of living.⁶⁵

This description of theological engagement is a useful description of the process undertaken by the interviewees. The interviews revealed that the starting point for many of the participants was their unease about environmental destruction and the exploitation of workers. It was not primarily the more abstracted considerations about consumerism expressed by Protestant theologians. From their unease they then acted, aligning themselves with the concerns of the oppressed. Out of this process some of the participants were clearly developing deeper theological reflection around their concerns, which, in turn, was propelling them to further commitments on behalf of the poor and the environment.

What is particularly useful in this model is its orientation towards solidarity with the poor and oppressed. In consumer society, which depends on exploitative practices towards workers in the two thirds world and the environment, it is right and necessary to recognise a theological model that places these concerns at the centre of its reflection. More than that, it places practical responses, realised in the theatre of everyday life, as a true theological response to the injustices perpetuated by consumerism.

Community

Alongside the mechanisms for undertaking change, the role of support structures in this process was an important finding in the research. The importance of community for those seeking to live out an alternative ethic in the face of consumer culture was evident in the lives of the interviewees. This was apparent in two distinct ways. Firstly, it was the influence of close friends and family that had the

⁶⁵ Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (New York: Orbis Books, 2002), 74.

most impact on the participants in the study in their thinking about consumer culture. Secondly, it was apparent for some of those interviewed that the support of a community of some sort was a key part in their staying faithful to their intention of living ethically.

The responses from the participants showed the importance of connecting with peers for stimulating their thinking about issues related to consumerism. However, as well as providing information and modelling a way of life that the participants learned from, connection with peers also provided a supportive community for implementing change. Those interviewed noted the encouragement they had received from their peers in their day-to-day choices about their way of living. Interviewee 1 noted: "I live with a bunch of Christians and they're all totally on board and aware of this sort of stuff, so that's encouraging."

Interviewee 16:

I'm living with people who are living similar to me, and not living with people who have a really different set of ideas. Yeah, so every day [I'm] surrounding myself, talking to people about it all the time.... When I became a vegetarian - that was with a couple of guys from my flat, I would never have been able to do that on my own. There's just no way, and I admit that.

Closely linked to the concept of being shaped and supported by peers was the number of interviewees living in some sort of intentional community. Six people fit this criterion. Most of them were living in separate intentional communities from one another. Observation of those living in these arrangements indicated that this was a location where people were actively seeking to challenge consumerism in their way of life. Their comments about the impact that living in community had on their responses to consumerism highlighted its value:

Interviewee 15:

I think it's easier for me, because I live in a Christian intentional community, where we try and remind ourselves, and teach ourselves and each other about this, as a pretty ongoing kind of a process. But that's pretty unusual, I mean I live in a household with nine other people at my house, including a family of three kids... we live in a kind of a crazy old rambling house that's freezing in the winter, with another house next door that has another five people living in it including two kids, and then another household down the road... and I think we all try and live this way, and most of us are in either roles, in terms of our paid work, that are either caring roles (like being a doctor or a nurse or a drugs counselor) or we're somehow involved in politics, trying to change the political reality of NZ. So I guess I'm made more aware of these issues daily through the people I live with, which makes it easier, and it's kind of like the good kind of peer pressure.

Interviewee 17:

I live in a community that is like-minded in this regard, and they are actually a really, really good help to pull me up on stuff and to talk through these things. I don't know if it's strictly consumerism ideas that the community is about - it's broader than that - but it's definitely part of it. And the people in there definitely have some really quite challenging views about consumerism which help me.

The importance of support in sustaining a way of living that represents an alternative to that promoted by consumerism is apparent in the interviews. This is a theme that is also present in external works. Jim Stentzel from the Sojourners Fellowship, a community in Washington, D.C. writes:

If I were a super strong, determined, stubborn, disciplined person I could singlehandedly overthrow a lifetime of captivity to the North American consumer culture. But I'm one who makes New Year's resolutions that last about a week. I buy into the televised good life even as I profess my belief in higher things. I am a creature of the Fall whose appetite has moved far beyond mere apples. I need help when it comes to more responsible use of God-given resources.⁶⁶

Ron Sider also advocates the need for accountability and proposes that small group of people "covenant together and be accountable to each other for their economic discipleship." He notes that in his own church there are small groups that regularly consider family budgets, discussing them in the light of biblical priorities and kingdom values.⁶⁷

In a similar vein, John Taylor contends that the pull of our culture is "so deadly serious and the pressures are so subtle and, once challenged, so ruthless", that individuals don't stand much chance unless they find ways of living in a corporate opposition.⁶⁸ He goes on to argue that "the impasse of our global economic imbalance calls for a new kind of monastic movement which will be secular, non-celibate and non-institutional."⁶⁹

The presence of the communities mentioned in the interviews can be seen as part of the new monastic movement Taylor called for.

Writing on this topic, Ian Mobsby and Mark Berry describe new monasticism as a "radical commitment to.... seeking the kingdom of God in places where God can feel

⁶⁶ Jim Stentzel quoted in Doris Janzen Longacre, *Living more with Less* (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1980), 55.

⁶⁷ Ronald Sider, "Prophet to a Rich Church," *Eternity* (April 1979), 19.

⁶⁸ John Taylor, *Enough is Enough* (London: SCM Press, 1975), 77.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, 80.

absent.”⁷⁰ Members of these new monastic communities continue to participate in the day-to-day life of everyday society.⁷¹ They don’t have to commit to a life of poverty, and they come from a variety of walks of life. Most are also not committed to celibacy. Instead, they seek to engage in the practices of prayer, meditation, study and service with others in the midst of busy family and work lives. The Lindisfarne community in New York notes that membership with a new monastic community is “a radical discipleship in finding Christ in the very heart of twenty-first century life—the breaking down of sacred and secular.”⁷²

The theme of breaking the barrier between secular and sacred and the linking of belief to practice is a common thread in new monastic writings “In the new monasticism,” Jonathan Wilson notes, “we must strive simultaneously for a recovery of right belief and right practice.”⁷³ A leading figure in the movement, Shane Claiborne, comments that Christians often speak about ‘believers,’ focusing on doctrine, therefore, making ‘orthodoxy’ the only criteria for discipleship. In contrast to this, most activism revolves around ‘orthopraxy’ - doing the right things. He notes that in Matthew 25 Jesus gives an image of the final judgement, when the whole world is gathered before God.

On that day God will ask us a few questions. And, according to Jesus, the test we will be given won’t actually be a doctrinal test. God won’t ask us, ‘Virgin Birth: Agree, disagree, strongly disagree?’ Instead we will be asked, ‘When I was hungry did you feed me? When I was in prison did you visit me? When I

⁷⁰ Ian Mobsby and Mark Berry, *A New Monastic Handbook: From Vision to Practice* (London: Canterbury Press, 2014), 3.

⁷¹ Ray Simpson and Brent Lyons Lee, *Emerging Downunder: Creating New Monastic Villages of God* (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2008), 123.

⁷² The Lindisfarne Community, New York, (www.icmi.org) cited in Ray Simpson and Brent Lyons Lee, *Emerging Downunder: Creating New Monastic Villages of God*, (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2008), 125.

⁷³ Jonathan Wilson, *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World* (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 1998), 76.

was homeless did you welcome me in?' The true test of our faith is how it works itself out in love for neighbor.⁷⁴

He comments that "most people know what Christians' believe, but if you ask them how Christians live they do not know. We have not shown them."⁷⁵ Shane Claiborne believes that new monasticism is a location where orthodoxy and orthopraxy can unite. The new monastic movement aims to be both theologically grounded as well as offering practical alternatives to the world's values and patterns of life.

Agreeing with this sentiment, British bishop Graham Cray notes that Christian discipleship needs to focus on character formation, not intellectual instruction alone. He contends that while there are things Christians need to learn, more importantly, is what Christians need to become. He concludes: "My interest in new monasticism is, in part, because I am convinced that this sort of character formation has a much greater chance of success in community. A locally agreed, light touch, shared rule of life provides the best environment for Christian growth in a consumer society."⁷⁶

Within New Zealand the type of people involved in the movement are described by Michael Mawson and Justin Duckworth, reflecting on their experience of the Urban Vision collection of communities in Wellington.

Earlier in its history many of those involved came from fairly standard evangelical backgrounds, and the community theology was often articulated through departure from/development of the basic evangelical framework. To

⁷⁴ Shane Claiborne, "Marks of New Monasticism" in *New Monasticism as Fresh Expression of Church*, ed. Graham Cray, Ian Mobsby and Aaron Kennedy, (London: Canterbury Press, 2014), 19.

⁷⁵ Shane Claiborne, "Mark 2: Sharing Economic Resources with Fellow Community Members and the Needy Among Us" in *School(s) for Conversion*, ed. The Rutba House (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2005), 31.

⁷⁶ Graham Cray, "Why is New Monasticism Important to Fresh Expressions?" in *New Monasticism as Fresh Expression of Church*, ed. Graham Cray, Ian Mobsby and Aaron Kennedy, (London: Canterbury Press, 2014), 5.

some extent, though, the community—with its own rhythms of prayer, reflection, and engagement — tends to fulfill many of the normal functions of church, and this (along with increasingly different theological emphases) means that many people struggle to find space for, or meaning within, the mainstream church.⁷⁷

This pattern of belonging to an intentional Christian community is part of a global trend. The name ‘new monasticism’ has its origins in the United States, however, similar groupings exist around the world going by a variety of terms such as ‘Small Christian Communities,’ ‘Basic Ecclesial Communities,’ ‘Basic Christian Communities,’ ‘New Way of Being Church,’ ‘Fresh Expressions,’ and others.⁷⁸

There are a number of key influential moments in the movement’s history. Often quoted among its adherents is Dietrich Bonhoeffer who wrote in a letter to his brother Karl in January 1935:

The restoration of the Church must surely come from a new kind of monasticism, which will have only one thing in common with the old, a life lived without compromise according to the Sermon on the Mount in the following of Jesus. I believe the time has come to gather people together for this.⁷⁹

After the Second World War, the Iona Community in Scotland began out of a desire for a more integrated Christian spirituality. Bonhoeffer’s *Life Together* became standard reading there.⁸⁰ This ongoing intentional community focuses on an eco-

⁷⁷ Michael Mawson and Justin Duckworth, “Building Prophetic Community in Aotearoa,” in *Small Christian Communities Today*, ed. Joseph Q. Healey and Jeanne Hinton, (New York: Orbis Press, 2006), 150.

⁷⁸ Joseph Q. Healey and Jeanne Hinton, ed. *Small Christian Communities Today*, 4.

⁷⁹ Mary Bosanquet, *The Life and Death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1968), cited in Ray Simpson and Brent Lyons Lee, *Emerging Downunder*, (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2008), 121.

⁸⁰ *ibid.*, 121.

spirituality and emphasises justice in its daily living. This community has spread internationally. Likewise on Lindisfarne, a similar community birthed the 'Aidan and Hilda' new monastic community network, which is now global.⁸¹

Outside of Europe, Latin America saw the emergence of locally based communities which drew on the resources of liberation theology.⁸² The lay Roman Catholic 'base' communities were born in the context of brutal social repression of the poor. These communities have a particular focus on social justice. The writings and works of leaders such as Gustavo Gutiérrez, Leonardo Boff and Jon Sobrino helped give rise to a number of these liberationist monastic communities.⁸³

Based in Africa, the Roman Catholic St Egidio community has planted many new lay monastic communities around the world. These are focused on supporting the poor as well as reconciliation, particularly in the context of war and genocide.⁸⁴

In North America, new monastic communities have been inspired by these global movements while also drawing on local initiatives such as the Catholic Worker Movement founded by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin as well as John Perkins and his community development initiatives. The term "new monasticism" came from Jonathan Wilson's 1998 book *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World*, which was a theological reflection on the work of philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre.⁸⁵

A number of new monastic communities were established in the United States in the late 1990s. These included the 'Simple Way Community' in Philadelphia which included author and speaker Shane Claiborne as one of its founders, and the 'Rubta'

⁸¹ Ian Mobsby and Mark Berry, *A New Monastic Handbook*, 30.

⁸² Joseph Q. Healey and Jeanne Hinton, ed. *Small Christian Communities Today*, 5.

⁸³ Ian Mobsby and Mark Berry, *A New Monastic Handbook*, 32.

⁸⁴ *ibid.*, 32.

⁸⁵ Jon Stock, Tim Otto, and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *Inhabiting the Church* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2007), 1.

Community in Durham founded by Leah and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove (daughter and son-in-law of author Jonathan Wilson.)

In 2004 a number of new monastic communities gathered in the USA to affirm what they called the 'Twelve Marks of New Monasticism'.⁸⁶ Namely:

- Relocation to abandoned places of empire.
- Sharing economic resources with fellow community members and the needy among us.
- Hospitality to the stranger.
- Lament for racial divisions and active pursuit of a just reconciliation.
- Humble submission to Christ's Body, the church.
- Intentional formation and a community rule.
- Nurturing common life amongst members of intentional community.
- Support for celibates, married couples and children.
- Geographical proximity to community members.
- Care for the plot of God's Earth given to us and supporting our local economies.
- Peacemaking in the midst of violence and conflict resolution.
- Commitment to a disciplined contemplative life.⁸⁷

Adding to this, Ian Mobsby and Mark Berry have their own, similar descriptive list. However, they include a number of other points, namely:

- A commitment to participative governance,
- Radical yet fully integrated into the local church,
- Balancing affirmation of contemporary society with the call to be countercultural for the gospel.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Ian Mobsby and Mark Berry, *A New Monastic Handbook*, 31.

⁸⁷ The Rutba House, *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2005), xii.

⁸⁸ Ian Mobsby and Mark Berry, *A New Monastic Handbook*, 4.

A key observation of these communities is their prophetic nature, which stands in opposition to surrounding values and practices. New monastic communities, Mobsby and Berry note, seek alternatives to the “dehumanizing effects of the global market and what has become known as ‘ecocide’: the combination of global warming, deforestation and reducing biodiversity.”⁸⁹ Margaret McKenna describes this as a form of “disciplined resistance” in way of life and engagement within the culture.⁹⁰

Mobsby and Berry also comment that in a culture focused on individual consumer gratification, being and growing into community is a challenge.⁹¹ Proponents of the new monastic movement note, alongside other critics of consumerism, that consumer culture corrodes commitment, individualises society, counterfeits spirituality, and forms character in a different direction from the way of Christ. Instead, it provides a multiple-choice way of living that is comfortable, and “for many people, more than enough.”⁹² Jonathan Wilson observes that Christians are constantly tempted to form a church that will simply undergird the civil order. However, he contends, a new monasticism refuses that temptation.⁹³ Since those who form new monastic communities have also been formed by contemporary society this means that the task of forming communities will be marked by deep struggle, perhaps a great deal of pain.⁹⁴

David Janzen writes:

⁸⁹ *ibid.*, 4.

⁹⁰ Margaret M. McKenna, “Mark I: Relocation to Abandoned Places of Empire,” in *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*, The Rutba House, (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2005), 20.

⁹¹ Ian Mobsby and Mark Berry, *A New Monastic Handbook*, 181.

⁹² Graham Cray, “Why is New Monasticism Important to Fresh Expressions?” in *New Monasticism*, Graham Cray and Ian Mobsby, 3.

⁹³ Jonathan Wilson, *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World*, 78.

⁹⁴ The Rutba House, *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*, 4.

To be capable of authentic community we need to undergo a major conversion of life. This is especially true if we have grown up in the soil of a society like ours that has become toxic to community; worships self, money, and power; and scorns the poor. We may know what is wrong with the old world, but we seldom realize how much of that world we still bring along with us as we plant seeds of a new society in the manure of the old.⁹⁵

Duckworth and Mawson observe that community formation requires “a renewal of Christian notions of self-sacrifice and service.”⁹⁶ The preference given to “personal autonomy and individual choice” often found in mainstream Christianity also needs to be rejected.⁹⁷ Community formation that responds to these concerns can be capable of countering the pervasive ideology of consumerism.

However, despite the promises that intentional community holds for Christian formation, its ability to hold members over the long term is questionable. Since the interviews for this project took place, at least five of the six participants who lived in a form of community have moved out. One left over a difference of opinion with the leadership of the community, two got married and went overseas. One purchased his own house and moved in while the fifth moved into a more conventional housing arrangement. Intentional communities may still primarily be a “phase” in the life journey, particularly appealing to young adults. Describing the members of intentional communities Duckworth and Mawson comment:

Those who move into the community are typically in their early twenties, and are often either studying at the local university or just beginning work. This is probably due to students and young workers being at the stage in life that is more open and available to experimentation. An experiment in community for a young single contains nowhere near the same risk or adjustment as that for a

⁹⁵ David Janzen et al, *The Intentional Christian Community Handbook*, 3.

⁹⁶ Michael Mawson and Justin Duckworth, “Building Prophetic Community in Aotearoa,” 152.

⁹⁷ *ibid.*, 152.

family. Many stay involved for a couple of years and then move on because of typical pressures of career, family, or just plain normality. Some settle and stay for the long term.⁹⁸

Alongside the age demographic, Duckworth and Mawson also observe that ethnically the majority of those in intentional communities in New Zealand are Pakeha (of European descent). This fits with the observations of Stephen Bevans, who notes that practitioners of a counter cultural theological model tend to be monocultural. “With few exceptions,” he writes, “the practitioners are white and for the most part middle-class.”⁹⁹

The involvement of Pakeha young adults in an intensive formational community appears to be one way of creating a supportive and challenging community that helps nurture an alternative ethic to consumerism. Intentional communities challenge surrounding culture by emphasising a communal rather than an individualistic way of life. While monastic communities are not new, the emergence of these communities marks a new way of engaging with the surrounding culture for ordinary people who would not want to commit to a life separated from the surrounding culture in a way that a traditional monastic community might. However, intentional communities seem to present a “phase” of life commitment particularly suited to young adults. It is interesting that this was the age of the interviewees as they encountered other formative and challenging entities such as universities, student groups and fellow students. It might be that at this age individuals are more open to challenging the status quo in whatever form that challenge presents itself.

However, intentional communities are not the sole panacea for the influence of consumerism. Of those interviewed, most of the more radical lifestyles were displayed by those not attached to an intentional community, nor, in some cases, to a church. In these cases it was evident that a like-minded spouse, family member, or

⁹⁸ *ibid.*, 149.

⁹⁹ Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 125-6.

even close friends provided the impetus for the chosen way of life. Authors who deal with the topic of living contrasting values to consumerism note that not all Christians who take simpler living seriously will choose an intentional community for support. Doris Janzen Longacre observes that “I know persons who, although they would humbly shy away from claiming success in living by more-with-less standards, have actually governed their lives this way for decades. They’ve done it in one-family homes, at ordinary jobs, with personal bank accounts, and while attending middle-class churches.”¹⁰⁰

Despite advocating for forms of intentional community John Taylor, in fact, states that “the family is the best unit of witness in this matter, and I believe that parents and older children should try to work out for their own home the standards and patterns of a common life which will be a leaven of simplicity and responsibility in the dough of a society that is built on the ‘more and more’ principle.” It is “if the natural family is sadly incapable of creating any sort of common life”, that there are other ‘families’ being formed, often on a provisional basis, to replace the biological family.¹⁰¹

In the writings of Goodwin and Sleeth, in particular, the importance of the journey of the whole family together is strongly present. Sleeth talks about his family turning their home into a place to do mission, actively looking for projects the family could work on together.¹⁰²

Goodwin also reflects on the family dynamic that was important in their move towards more ethical consumption.

We knew this experiment was going to shake up our shopping habits, but it was turning into a great exercise in parenting as well. It wasn’t so much about

¹⁰⁰ Doris Janzen Longacre, *Living more with Less*, 58.

¹⁰¹ John Taylor, *Enough is Enough*, 77.

¹⁰² Matthew Sleeth, *Serve God, Save the Planet*, 143.

our particular set of rules but about having any set of official rules and working together to be faithful to them. We had a very tangible way of sharing in a common commitment.... I began to see our rules as instruments of the familial art, and our house as a sort of workshop in which we were creating something together.¹⁰³

Likewise, Smith shares the importance of sharing accountability with his wife for his own life change. For these authors, as well as a number of the participants, immediate family provided the community of challenge and support needed in their stand against a consumerist worldview. What appears to be more critical is the intentional agreement of a household to provide both support and accountability as a shared journey towards more ethical living is undertaken. These groupings might be usefully be referred to as 'households of faith.'

Conclusion

In light of the documented difficulty of aligning beliefs and practices, this chapter has concerned itself with the way in which both the participants of the study, and other popular authors on the topic navigated personal change towards more ethical living.

The chapter then considered key aspects impacting the process of moving towards a more ethical approach to consumption both among the participants of the study and in a number of the popular works narrating personal change. The changing of habits happened either dramatically, through the adoption of a new rule for living, or more slowly by increasingly transforming more habits and practices. Each of these two approaches had the same effect of moving the participant further away from mainstream consumption practices towards an alternative pattern, which eschewed

¹⁰³ Craig Goodwin, *Year of Plenty*, 40-41.

convenience for the sake of choosing more ethical alternatives. Concerns about a form of legalism emerging were downplayed by authors who noted the impossibility of change without external restraints. It was demonstrated that beliefs often come after practices, not the other way around. In the interviews, it was apparent that practice provided a way into new habits, rather than belief being the primary means of establishing new habits. It was seen that change in one area of life often impacted another area which resulted in further change.

The model of engagement parallels a praxis model of theological reflection. This model is seen to emphasise everyday practices as an important starting point for theological reflection and places priority on concerns around social justice. This model may prove useful for others seeking to implement changes to their way of living in the face of consumer culture.

Finally, the importance of support from others became apparent through the research. I have named such supportive groups 'households of faith'. In these households people agreed to encourage each other in a shared commitment to ethical practices. For some, particularly young adults, these households took the form of intentional communities or a new monastic order. This model appeared to be a useful aid for this age group in engaging the challenges of consumerism.

These findings lead me to propose that the development of a faithful Christian witness in the face of the challenges of consumerism involves, as we have seen, several key factors. These are: adopting a rule or new habits into daily life, implementing a praxis cycle of action and reflection and utilising the support of a 'household of faith.' In the next chapter I will add to these factors: choosing to live a simple way of life as well as viewing objects for consumption in a sacramental way.

I further propose that in order to provide better support for Christians seeking to challenge consumerist culture, churches need to include teaching and preaching that includes the minutia of everyday life and the importance of faithful living in

every realm. They would also do well to support the development of 'households of faith,' encouraging families and new monastic communities to establish 'rules' and new habits to engage in the challenges presented by consumerism.

These findings will be borne out as we survey in the following chapter a range of initiatives in New Zealand and elsewhere that are directed toward the living out of faithful Christian lives in the face of consumerist culture.

Chapter Nine: Postures

The previous chapter highlighted the practical ways in which people integrated their beliefs with their practices. While there was a commonality of process between the participants, there was no single coherent rule or set of guidelines at work directing behaviour. This chapter considers two postures that characterise the way in which the participants interacted with the world around them and the objects at the centre of a consumerist way of life.

The way the participants interacted with consumerism demonstrated key attitudes and standpoints that were guiding their practices. These postures existed alongside their perspectives concerning the negative elements of consumerism. Two key postures demonstrated by the participants of the study in their response to consumerism were those of simplicity and sacramentality.¹ The idiosyncratic use of the term sacramentality being discussed as a posture reflects a desire to describe ways of being in the world, rather than merely attitudes or principles to hold as thoughts. The use of the term captures the notion of living with a sacramental view of the world. Each of these two postures of simplicity and sacramentality will now be considered in turn. Evidence from both the participants and the popular authors will be used to illustrate these postures at work in individuals' stand against consumerism. As each posture is considered, wider literature will be examined to see the place of this framework in broader Christian tradition and practice. Each of these postures can be seen to provide rich resources for countering the impact of consumerism.

¹ Interestingly, there is a strong correlation between the findings from the interviews and John Taylor's conclusions in his work *Enough is Enough*. He contended that a movement against the problems of the society of his day, including consumerism, "must include three elements which I would call simplicity, non-violent techniques and community." (John Taylor, *Enough is Enough*, 80.)

Simplicity

In considering the issue of simplicity, it was evident from the replies that many wrestled with the challenges of capitulating to a consumerist, materialist way of life. Instead of choosing a way of living characterised by material comforts, a commitment to the causes of justice, environmental care and care for others were the hallmarks of many of many of those interviewed. This was displayed especially in the choice of many to having a meaningful career over a well paid one. It was also evident in the practice of limiting.

Interviewee 16 talked about wanting to continue the way of living he had established as a student. “Now that I'm a doctor I've told a whole lot of people, ‘make sure I don't start going up and buying more stuff, I'm just going to keep living the same way I am now’.”

Key to choosing to live simply is the ability to be content with less. In her consideration of this topic Valerio links living frugally with being content.² She draws attention to a verse she believes should be of crucial importance in consumer culture. ‘Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have’ (Heb. 13:5).³

Interviewee 11 emphasised the importance of being content:

If Christians knew what it was to be content with what they had, as described in the New Testament, I think we'd be more able to resist the negative questions of consumer cultures....[we need] a culture of being thankful, and content.

² Ruth Valerio, *Just Living*, 237.

³ *ibid.*, 237.

Interviewee 14:

I'm looking to develop a spirituality - and one that I can share with others - that promotes contentedness. I think an inevitable, inherent desire in humans is to want more and more. I just think we have to connect that, not to consumption, we have to connect that to other stuff. Like, I think it's healthy to desire more and better art in the world. Or, I think it's okay for us to desire more and better intimacy in our relationships. Or desire is a good thing when we connect it to our spirituality, like, to be closer to God. What does it mean? I think, actually, if we spent a lot more time in meditative, contemplative practices, rather than shopping, that's a great place to situate desire. So I'm trying to actively cultivate spirituality and contemplative practices, and I've become interested in how we can rediscover a part of our Christian faith that was such a big part of it in, like, the Middle Ages, before the Reformation, when I think the Church got involved in the whole process of the Capitalist revolution that took place around the same time of the Reformation and so, rediscovering those spiritual practices, I think, are really important, and are a strong repost to a consumptive lifestyle, and is something that the Christian church can offer the world as a solution.

The second antidote to a consumerist mindset that was expressed by the participants was found for them in the act of generosity. Interviewee 17 stated it clearly:

I think a really good antidote for me, an ongoing, challenging one, is generosity. It is the antidote because I think the way we are meant to live is to be really generous and to just look out for each other, but it relies on the base level understanding that 'I have enough already' - I have enough to give away. If I give stuff away, I will still have enough and I think maybe that helps you be

content. So maybe we can up the generosity focus - rather than the 'stop buying stuff' focus?

Like the participants, Valerio comments on the importance of generosity in enacting a Christian response to money and possessions. She challenges her readers to “practice generosity and give as much as you can. Actively look for opportunities to give away both your money and your things. Having an open-handed approach is one of the best ways to ensure that we are living out a good approach to our money and possessions.”⁴

For the participants, this thinking resulted in “completely changing the way we look at our money and our resources, as Kingdom resources rather than our resources”(Interviewee 16). Interviewee 7 explained how he enacted this: “how we spend money is influenced by our Christian faith.” As well as giving away some of their personal income the generosity also flowed into business practice. “So like the business, 10% would be pro bono work and [we] also give away 10% of all profit.”

Giving away money was a common response from the participants. Another area for generosity was with possessions. Interviewee 6 captured this:

We've often offered to people - if they're between flats or whatever - just to come over here to stay, we'll help you shift in, you know, bring your stuff over and here's a spare room. That's worked really well, so I have no qualms about sharing what we do have.... We've got a whole bunch of drinks in the cupboard, and, you know, we don't care about the cost of hosting people with food and drink and that kind of thing. So I do agree very much with using what you have for the benefit of the community and just being generous with your money for those in need.

⁴ Ruth Valerio, *Just Living*, 234.

The response of simplicity in the face of concerns raised by the surrounding culture is not a new one. In more recent history, the notion of a Christian Simple Lifestyle came to prominence in 1974 at the Lausanne Congress for World Evangelization. Paragraph three of the Lausanne Covenant, signed by thousands of Evangelical Christian leaders from all parts of the world read: “Most of us are shocked by the poverty of millions and disturbed by the injustices which cause it. Those of us who live in affluent circumstances accept our duty to develop a simple lifestyle in order to contribute generously to both relief and evangelism.”⁵ The focus of the congress was achieving “effective worldwide evangelism in the late twentieth century” with an affluent lifestyle taking up funds that should be used for this effort.

One year later the sentiment of adopting a simple way of life amongst Christians was articulated by Bishop John Taylor of Winchester. Concerned with chaos both “from the outside and from the inside” he wrote:

In the world around us we see the disparity between wealth and poverty growing worse, not better; the environmental and population crises mounting towards the point of no return; and the unbridled economy of growth devouring more and more of the world’s irreplaceable resources. And in the world within us the stress of tension, loneliness, guilt and futility pushes us towards the brink of breakdown. It has been said that we are living in two deserts – an exploited planet and a soul in agony which are in truth one desert. And the recognition of these things is compelling more and more of us to make the great refusal and insist on living by some alternative values. ⁶

Alongside Taylor’s book *Enough is Enough* other books endorsing a simpler ethic emerged. *Living More Simply*, an anthology edited by Ron Sider, *Living More with Less*, a compilation of examples from the Mennonite community put together by Doris Janzen Longacre, and *The New Pilgrims* by New Zealand author John McInnes

⁵ Ronald Sider, *Living More Simply* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1980), 13.

⁶ John Taylor, *Enough is Enough*, 101.

were published in 1980. Richard Foster's *Freedom of Simplicity* was published in 1981. These and others reflected a similar secular trend which called into question the current style of life evident in the wider culture. The book by German economist E. Fritz Schumacher *Small is Beautiful*, 1973,⁷ was seminal during this time.

By the 1990s voluntary simplicity was recognised as a top "trend."⁸ However, Jerome Segal points out that even within North American history there have always been advocates of simple living who have challenged consumerism and materialism.⁹ Within Christianity, Richard Foster points to the biblical tradition, and particularly to the life of Jesus Christ as exemplary for simple living. He also notes that "all the devotional masters have stressed [simple living's] essential nature" as a reflection of the "Good News of the Gospel having taken root in our lives."¹⁰

Considering the teaching of the Old Testament, Foster notes particularly the commandment not to covet as an instruction for simple living.¹¹ Frank E. Gaebelien picks up several themes in the Old Testament as directives for simple living. The Sabbath command to rest encourages a more simple ethic, while the Sabbath year and the year of Jubilee with provisions for debt cancellation and the return of land to the original inhabitants set limits on acquisitiveness. Alongside this the commandment to tithe and give ten percent of the harvest as an offering prevented greed.¹²

For John Taylor, the Old Testament spells out a "theology of enough" through "a number of independent enactments, moral judgments and traditions," which reveal

⁷ E. Fritz Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful* (Blond and Briggs, 1973).

⁸ In 1994, the trends Research Institute identified "voluntary simplicity" as one of the year's top ten trends. Michael Schut, ed. *Simpler Living Compassionate Life* (Denver: Living the Good News, 1999), 11, 15.

⁹ Jerome Segal, "Introduction to the Politics of Simplicity," in Michael Schut, ed. *Simpler Living Compassionate Life* (Denver: Living the Good News, 1999), 141.

¹⁰ Richard Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity*, 4.

¹¹ *ibid.*, 20.

¹² Frank E. Gaebelien, "Old Testament Foundations for Living More Simply" in *Living More Simply*, ed. Ronald Sider (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1980), 29.

a “consistent attitude and style diametrically opposed to the excess” of contemporary culture. For Taylor, this system is summed up in the Hebrew word “Shalom.”¹³ This economic and social dream of peace and wholeness represents “a full-bodied concept that resonates with wholeness, unity, balance.”¹⁴

Taylor notes the same ethic appearing in the New Testament in its “stern veto” against excess which is found in the Mosaic law. However, he goes on to explain that the biblical “theology of enough” cannot be expressed in negatives. Rather, it is a positive ideal enshrined in the vision of God’s kingdom reign on earth.¹⁵

Throughout Christian history, particularly in the lifestyle of monastic communities, the desire for a simpler alternative to surrounding culture presents itself. The desert mothers and fathers escaped the secular materialism of the surrounding culture rather than conforming to it.¹⁶ St Francis of Assisi represents a particularly ascetic example of voluntary poverty; he chooses to do without for the sake of freedom.¹⁷ His band of followers were noted for being “inebriated with the love of God, and filled with ecstasy” while “buoyant joy” was noted to be a mark of their simplicity.¹⁸

The Puritan movement strongly emphasised simplicity through a lack of ostentation, hard work, and religious devotion. Simple living was not a matter of individual choice for Puritans; laws restricted displays of consumption, and economic life was regulated in order to limit greed.¹⁹

Other Christian movements and denominations with a focus on simplicity that have lasted through generations have been those descended from the Anabaptists.

Particularly in North America the Amish, Mennonite, and Hutterite communities

¹³ John Taylor, *Enough is Enough*, 42.

¹⁴ Richard Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity*, 35.

¹⁵ John Taylor, *Enough is Enough*, 45, 51.

¹⁶ Richard Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity*, 65.

¹⁷ John Taylor, *Enough is Enough*, 82.

¹⁸ Richard Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity*, 69.

¹⁹ Jerome Segal, “Introduction to the Politics of Simplicity,” 141.

sustain a pietistic rural simplicity.²⁰ The Amish are noted for their careful conscious consideration of all new technology which they evaluate through the lens of their community life. From this standpoint they decide if the technology will enhance their community or detract from it and utilise it only if it is deemed to bring a positive contribution.²¹

A clear example of a simple way of life is witnessed in the lives of Quakers, particularly in the eighteenth century. The early Quakers dressed simply in their attire, rejected the fashions of the day and adopted instead the plain clothing of the working class.²² Part of their commitment to simplicity involved opposition to injustice and oppression. Their writings expressed outrage against the conspicuous consumption of the wealthy because of its connection with rampant poverty.²³ They condemned the “price fixing” of the day, which discriminated against the poor and needy, and insisted instead on a one-price system for all. The leading Quaker, John Woolman, decried excessively long workdays and cautioned employers not to work others too hard. Woolman made a connection between the institution of slavery and the pursuit of a life of ease and luxury.²⁴ As a storekeeper convinced of the injustices of slavery he endeavoured to not partake in any commerce that used slave labour. For Woolman, this meant not using or selling slavery plantation sugar or molasses, or any fabrics dyed with indigo. Woolman also took part in personal boycotts such as refusing to touch silver, which was a product of the slave trade, and travelling on foot to avoid complicity with the mal-treatment of post-horses. Woolman was also known to leave money to pay slaves when he stayed in houses that had slaves.²⁵ Woolman acknowledged how small the effects of such a boycott would be, in terms of affecting market forces and changing conditions for the slaves, his reasoning was

²⁰ David Shi, “Epilogue from the Simple Life,” in *Simpler Living Compassionate Life*, ed. Michael Schut (Denver: Living the Good News, 1999), 145.

²¹ Peter Block, Walter Brueggemann and John McKnight, *An Other Kingdom* (New Jersey: Wiley, 2016), 28.

²² Richard Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity*, 76.

²³ *ibid.*, 77.

²⁴ Jerome Segal, “Introduction to the Politics of Simplicity,” 141.

²⁵ Laura Hartman, *The Christian Consumer*, 38-46.

therefore based on a concern to avoid complicity rather than on the political effectiveness of the abstention.²⁶

However, while the Quakers displayed a commitment to simplicity oriented towards justice, recent writings on simplicity can often have a distinct focus on the individual, and emphasise personal satisfaction. Evy McDonald asks:

But has our affluence and consumption given us more fulfilling, happier and just ways of living? Today, people admit to feeling stressed and tired with little time to care for and nurture relationships, family, friends or the environment. Since 1970 our quality of life (as measured by the Index of Social Health) has dropped by 51%, even though our standard of living (per capita consumption) rose by 45%. We have luxuries beyond the dreams of previous generations, ... yet we are not happier.²⁷

Likewise, Bob Sitze writes:

Living simply, you serve God unencumbered by the excessive weight of a rushed and possession-heavy life. At a biological level, when your brain is living simply, it's not choked with the toxins of stress chemicals; it's more easily delighted, more capable of pleasing connections with God and with other people.²⁸

Foster, while acknowledging the “terrible realities of our global village” and the impact a simple way of life might have on them, tends to emphasise personal wellbeing. Pointing out the current state of the world and arguing for the need for simplicity, Foster writes:

²⁶ *ibid.*, 44.

²⁷ Evy McDonald, “Spending Money as if Life Really Mattered,” in *Simpler Living Compassionate Life*, ed. Michael Schut (Denver: Living the Good News, 1999), 60.

²⁸ Bob Sitze, *Starting Simple* (Herndon: The Alban Institute, 2007), 43.

The lust for affluence in contemporary society has become psychotic: ... the pace of the modern world accentuates our sense of being fractured and fragmented. We feel strained, hurried, breathless. The complexity of rushing to achieve and accumulate more and more threatens frequently to overwhelm us; it seems there is no escape from the rat race.²⁹

But the Christian, says Foster, “do[es] not need to be left frustrated and exhausted by the demands of life. The Christian grace of simplicity can usher us into the center of unhurried peace and power.”³⁰ Christian simplicity, for Foster, brings a “liberty of soul”³¹ in which the soul is not weighed down by the “cumber” of life. Instead, “It brings sanity to our compulsive extravagance, and peace to our frantic spirit... It allows us to see material things for what they are—goods to enhance life, not to oppress life.”³²

Foster continues that “One of the most profound effects of inward simplicity is the rise of an amazing spirit of contentment. Gone is the need to strain and pull to get ahead. In rushes a glorious indifference to position, status, or possession.... To live in contentment means we can opt out of the status race and the maddening pace that is its necessary partner. We can shout to the insanity which chants, “More, more, more!” We can rest contented in the gracious provision of God.”³³ For Foster living a simple lifestyle is a key to the personal wellbeing of the individual making the commitment. Any impact it may have on the world is given lesser attention and is definitely not the motivating factor behind such a decision.

In stark contrast to this are the approaches captured in the personal memoirs of recent authors seeking to describe their journey to a more ethical life. For medical

²⁹ Richard Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity*, 3.

³⁰ *ibid.*, 5.

³¹ *ibid.*, 92.

³² *ibid.*, 3.

³³ *ibid.*, 103, 104.

doctor Matthew Sleeth his family's journey towards living more simply was motivated by a desire for greater environmental sustainability. For Clawson the move to a simpler way of life was required for her to live a more just life. Her primary motivation, like Sleeth, wasn't a quest for personal benefit.

Seeking to discern an appropriate response to consumerism, Laura Hartman provides a survey in *The Christian Consumer* of Christian exemplars through the ages. She concludes that avoiding sin is an important consideration in good consumption. Part of avoiding sin in consumption is ensuring that consumers are not complicit in the exploitation of others or the environment through their purchase choices. She looks to John Woolman as an example of this.

Clawson also emphasises the importance of this commitment. Drawing on Old Testament prophets and the book of James, Clawson notes the imperative to treat workers with respect. "Look!" she quotes "The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. (Jas 5:4-5)" She notes that any system that results in the treatment of others as if their needs are less important, or as if they don't deserve proper payment for their work, has strayed from the command to "love your neighbour as yourself" (Matt 19:19).³⁴ She argues that living right in consumer culture must include refraining from participating in unfair practices through the purchase of goods whose manufacture has involved the exploitation of others.³⁵

Hartman also considers another relevant factor when considering consumption practices as she considers the guideline of 'loving the neighbour' in consumption choices. Hartman considers the story of the good Samaritan which was told in response to the question 'who is my neighbour?' She writes: "Jesus' reply... concludes with a different question: "Which of these three, do you think, was a

³⁴ Julie Clawson, *Everyday Justice*, 39.

³⁵ *ibid.*, 45.

neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" Jesus turns the question on its head, not asking who one's neighbors are (or how close or distant they are) but instead how to *be* a neighbor *to* someone."³⁶ For Hartman loving the distant neighbour requires dedication to acting in ways that bring about good for those who will never be met.

Again, Clawson picks this concept up in her writings. In one place she links it to oil consumption, which has detrimental affects upon the world both in terms of the pollution created by its use, and in terms of the environmental damage caused by its production. She concludes that oil is tied to global injustice and links it specifically to the command to love one's neighbour "Real lives are affected by our use of gas and oil, and the people it affects are people God commands us to love and respect as his image bearers." For these people, Clawson notes, climate change isn't just a theory to debate, rather it is a disaster that threatens their lives. For Clawson, loving one's neighbour means rethinking oil consumption.³⁷

Likewise, Sleeth connects oil use to issues of injustice and compares the use of oil to slavery. "Ours is not the first generation to be morally blinded by building a lifestyle based on energy from foreign shores. Slavery was the importation of cheap energy without regard for its moral cost."³⁸

The lives of the exemplars reveal a heavy emphasis on the just outcomes of living simply as a motivator rather than personal gain. The participants in this study echo these concerns. There was a definite desire among the participants when making consumption choices, to avoid complicity in the exploitation of others. Many of those interviewed boycotted products and companies they believed were unethical. A key issue of concern was the exploitation of people – both workers involved in manufacturing products, particularly in the two-thirds world – as well as the end

³⁶ Laura Hartman, *The Christian Consumer*, 122.

³⁷ Julie Clawson, *Everyday Justice*, 79.

³⁸ Matthew Sleeth, *Serve God Save the Planet*, 22.

consumers. Another area of concern was the exploitation of the environment. The boycotting parallels the boycotting of slave grown sugar during the late 1700s thus aligning the participants in the study more more directly with the Quakers and their outlook, rather than with the Puritans or the Amish. Consumption choices among the interviewees were especially which much more focused on the wellbeing of others, particularly the poor, and on the environment rather than on personal wellbeing or the benefit to be gained in the face of a pressured and hectic consumer society.

However, while simplicity is a key posture of the participants, this on its own offers little more than a living critique of materialism. To make a stand against the problems inherent in consumerism a further stance is required; such a stance is considered below.

Sacramentality

A second posture was less obvious in the replies. However, in a few instances, there was evidence of what might be called a 'sacramental imagination' at work in the participants' interactions with consumerism. The concept of sacramentality captures the notion that God allows himself to be found and experienced through material things. John Macquarrie writes that "perhaps the goal of all sacramentality and sacramental theology is to make the things of this world so transparent that in them and through them we know God's presence and activity in our very midst, and so experience his grace."³⁹

In a similar vein Henri Nouwen links the concept of material things being conveyors of God's grace to our consumerist culture. He notes a need to move from the opaqueness inherent in consumerism to transparency. He writes that our culture

³⁹ John Macquarrie, *A Guide to the Sacraments* (London: SCM, 1997), 1.

encourages us to see nature as property to be possessed and time as a randomly thrown together series of incidents and accidents. When these become the dominant modes of relating to our world, then our world remains opaque and we never see how things really hang together. When, however, we are slowly able to peel away our blindfolds and see nature as a gift to be received with admiration and gratitude, and time as a constant opportunity for a change of heart opportunity, we will “also see that our whole world is a sacrament constantly revealing to us the great love of God.”⁴⁰

Relevant to this study is the ability of participants to view goods with a degree of transparency thus allowing them to experience God’s presence in and through their consumptive practices. Interviewee 18 highlights this in his description of going to a mall:

But when I go into a mall, and see that actually about 50 per cent of the advertising posters... you wouldn't discernibly be able to tell the difference between them and posters advertising brothels, if you just kind of cut a 'head and shoulders' shot from the people in them - when I see the massive amount of things on offer, and the huge range of stuff that tells people they're not good enough the way they are - it makes me feel claustrophobic and really sad, and I think that's how God feels about it.... I think it makes him weep that some ten-year-old Vietnamese kid made these shoes that are just on show in a shop that someone's going to buy and throw into a second-hand store in six months time because they're not fashionable anymore.

In documenting the journey of his family’s changing consumption habits Goodwin comes to realise:

⁴⁰ Henri Nouwen, “Contemplation and Ministry,” in *Simpler Living Compassionate Life*, ed. Michael Schut (Denver: Living the Good News, 1999), 56.

In my Christian tradition we are guided by the great commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves. We have found that when it comes to so many things we buy and consume that we are disconnected from our neighbors, and therefore disconnected from our responsibility to love them. The geography is a means to an end. It puts us in proximity to people and makes relationships possible. It makes love possible.⁴¹

Focusing on 'loving their neighbour' through their consumption practices, Goodwin tells the story of how this commitment impacted their concern for those who produced their goods.

Two weeks into our experiment, after tracking down the squash at Siemens Farm and a bunch of other items from local farmers, we sat down around the dinner table and lowered our heads to pray as we always do. We predictably thanked God for the food, but then our prayers spontaneously went into uncharted territory, thanking God for the farmers and producers. We thanked God for Mr. Siemens and prayed for his struggles and the injustices in the marketplace that allow his crops to rot. We thanked God for Mrs. Fortuna who made our spaghetti sauce. ... Our prayer became an inventory not just of the food but of the people whose work had gone into producing it. Every food item on our plates was connected to a person we knew, a person who was sorting out a life of hopes and dreams and struggles. These were our neighbors, and that night, through our prayers, we were able to love them like never before.⁴²

Millar argues that sacramentality is a positive resource for countering consumerism not "because it challenges consumer culture by critiquing consumption but by challenging the abstract dynamisms of commodification itself."⁴³ Millar draws on the language of de Certeau to argue that a 'sacramental operation' has a subversive

⁴¹ Craig Goodwin, *Year Of Plenty*, 34.

⁴² *ibid.*, 34.

⁴³ Vincent Millar, *Consuming Religion*, 189.

tactical value against commodity abstraction. “It directly frustrates the abstraction inherent in commodification by tying the significance of symbols to their particularity.”⁴⁴

Likewise, Dominican Christopher Kiesling, writing in the 1970s, marvels at the shopping mall, which brings an “endless variety of goods in abundant numbers and gathered them from all over the world for us here in this one place, so that we may consume them.”⁴⁵ He observes that a shopping mall is a massive achievement compared to the earliest humans existence in caves, and their survival through daily hunting expeditions for the “meagerest of life’s necessities.”⁴⁶ However, he challenges people to think longer and deeper in order to come to the realisation that this wonder exists at the expense of vast numbers of people throughout the world who are exploited to provide all these goods. “But,” he notes, “few of us think that far in the mall. We are simply stimulated by the goods and services offered us to indulge our tendency or drive to consume in keeping with the consumer economy in which we live and breathe.”⁴⁷ Like Millar, Kiesling comments that while consumerism provides large quantities and varieties of goods and services, it also trivialises objects. This occurs both because of the abundant supply and also the inferiority of “craftsmanship and beauty”. Many goods, Kiesling notes, are simply made to be thrown away after extremely limited use. As a result, consumerism does not cultivate reverence of things, a care for them, or a contemplation of them.⁴⁸

Valerio comments that because contemporary consumerism relies on detachment, and consumers do not know where a product has come from, how it was made or who made it, it is necessary to stand against that detachment and build up the links and connections between consumers and the products they buy.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, 190.

⁴⁵ Christopher Kiesling, “Liturgy and Consumerism,” *Worship* Vol 52 no 4 (July 1978), 361.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, 361.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, 361.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, 366.

⁴⁹ Ruth Valerio, *Just Living*, 241.

Cavanaugh affirms that buying locally is one way of increasing the chances of accountability and also of love.⁵⁰ This is one of the realisations that Goodwin picks up in his year of buying locally.

We decided to buy goods from local producers, manufacturers, or growers.... We wanted to place value on things in a way that wasn't based solely on their price, forming a new economy of consumable goods anchored in caring relationships with people we know.... We agreed we would seek to do field trips to as many of these local producers as possible, meeting the people involved in bringing our goods to market, learning their way of life, their hopes and dreams and challenges.⁵¹

Emphasising the particularity of goods, Matthew Sleeth links the reduction of waste in a unique way to the suffering of others in the two thirds world.

Our family's first home mission was to try to keep a third world farm family on their land. Recycling an aluminum can helps prevent an African mountain from being leveled by dynamite and earthmovers. Not using throwaway chopsticks can keep an eight-year-old out of a brothel in Indonesia. God calls us to get involved in every aspect of saving humanity.⁵²

The ability to consider the essentials of life with a degree of reverence and wonder was mentioned specifically by one of the participants. Interviewee 11 commented that:

When I have time for supermarket shopping, when it wasn't such a pressure thing, I found it quite enjoyable and it was a good time for contemplation and

⁵⁰ William Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed*, 57.

⁵¹ Craig Goodwin, *Year Of Plenty*, 15.

⁵² Matthew Sleeth, *Serve God, Save the Planet*, 156.

reflection. You could watch people and think about where each product came from and so it was a positive time of reflection.

The ability to connect products to their origins was important for the participants, not simply as a way to consume ethically, but as an opportunity to experience God.

Interviewee 12:

With Freetset - whenever I look at their website, and whenever I look at their products I'm quite struck by God's presence, more in terms of feeling "God is in this", you know. God is love, and there seems to be love shown in that organisation and amongst the people. And maybe it's just a really clever website [laughs] that portrays that in good marketing [laughs] - but anything I see on Freetset, or hear people talk about - I've never been there or anything, but it just feels they're great. It just feels like God is in there, and the Spirit of God, in terms of that love for your neighbour and looking after each other, is there.

Interviewee 18:

If [someone] looked at my life they would probably see me making a whole bunch of things with my flatmates, that I get a whole bunch of pleasure now out of making. There's a great satisfaction from being connected to where the things that we use come from - so if I can buy the raw materials, and know where those raw materials have come from, and then craft those raw materials into something I can use - like making your own candles - I find that really satisfying now. I didn't use to. But now I like knowing the supply-chain of the things I'm connected to, because I know it actually connects me to the people on the other end. So they would see me making a whole lot of my own stuff, they would see me not supporting particular companies, and hopefully they would see me enjoying that process because it's not a burden.

Because of the possibilities provided by sacramentalism as a resource for Christians for countering consumerism, further consideration will now be given to this posture.

A sacramental view of the world embraces the notion that material objects can be a means for humanity to experience God. It is rooted in understandings of the sacraments found in Christian tradition, where physical objects such as water for baptism and bread and wine for communion are recognised as a means God uses to convey grace. Sacramentality expands this possibility to all things within creation. Shawn McCain explains that reality, viewed through the sacraments, emphasises that God is not somewhere else, too busy, or unconcerned with the created order. Rather, all of creation is “charged” with the goodness of God and every part of it participates in the life of God.⁵³

Pope Francis captures this impulse in his Encyclical *Laudato Si* when he says that the “entire material universe speaks of God’s love, his boundless affection for us. Soil, water, mountains: everything is, as it were, a caress of God.”⁵⁴ Similarly, William Cavanaugh explains that a Christian is not meant to choose between God and creation, because all of creation sings of the glory of God.⁵⁵ He concludes from this that Christianity must be lived out in concrete practices “For it is only.... in the concrete and not the abstract, and only by attachment to – not detachment from – the concrete that the universal Christ is encountered.”⁵⁶

Looking to specific examples of this sacramental attitude working itself out in consumption practices, Goodwin explains:

⁵³ Shawn McCain, “Introducing The Sacramental Imagination,” September 30, 2015 <http://anglicanpastor.com/introducing-the-sacramental-imagination/> (12 Oct 2016)

⁵⁴ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, 2015 (10 May 2016) .

⁵⁵ William Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed*, 36 .

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, 86.

My abstract conceptions of holiness gave way to what some might call an earthy spirituality. I'd been snookered into thinking that the metaphors and the ideas would give me access to the sacred spaces, but I was learning that the simple, tangible act of buying something—or not—is a sacred event itself, an access point into the kingdom of God.⁵⁷

Among the interviewees a focus on experiencing God in the mundane everyday-ness of activities like shopping was expressed. Interviewee 17 relayed such an experience:

There was this one time I saw a dress that I really liked and after much thinking about it, I bought it. And then I really felt God challenging me about it, and just being, like, "You don't need it... you just don't need it" because it was a dress that I wouldn't wear very often. It was really, really nice, and I really, really liked it, but it was quite interesting, because I sort of had the option of "do you actually believe in this or not?" Not that God doesn't like dresses, or He doesn't want us to have nice things, I think,... I think it's okay. But in this particular instance he was challenging me - so I took it back.

Taking Goodwin as an example, once again, the sense of the sacramental was extended as he learned to preserve food.

For me, instead of reaching out of the secular abyss toward heaven, I found myself moving away from the constant focus on the transcendent to sink my hands into the holy materiality of the world. That has been my pole-shifting, planet-flipping experience. My version sounds something like this: Something was about to happen in my Master Food Preserver class that would change forever the progression of my life. What happened is I learned how to make chutney and can salmon.

⁵⁷ Craig Goodwin, *Year Of Plenty*, 131.

It doesn't quite have the intrigue of prayer, but this would be among my transformational practices. It was part of my slow but sure move away from the grandiosity of mastering the divine toward the skills of paying attention to the fruits of the earth, the wonder of the everyday, the incarnate God who defies our dualisms by proclaiming all things important, all things worthy of redemption, all things caught up in the drama of resurrection.⁵⁸

A similar sentiment was also captured in the interviews.

Interviewee 14:

I could buy a dishwasher - that would mean I would spend a lot less time doing dishes. I find that you spend a lot of time doing dishes in life, and I could buy something to fix that, but it would have a higher environmental footprint and so I see doing dishes - this is going to sound a little bit funny - as a really simple spiritual practice cos it's hard because it's really repetitive and we don't like doing dull, repetitive, monotonous chores every day - but I actually see it as a gift. I try to reinterpret that, my spirituality is trying to inform that, and reinterpret it, and see it as a gift to this sort of amorphous 'other.' Cos consuming more electricity and resources has a really quite a tenuous connection, but it is traceable. You can actually connect it to greenhouse gases and weather events in Africa, and the price of power for low-income families in New Zealand, and the other things that we can't do with that power - the good things that we can like providing good jobs for people.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, 129.

Interviewee 7 also expressed a sense of the divine in the everyday:

We have a vegetable garden which we started on a piece of land near our house as a way to - I don't know what the word is - I mean, it could just be a vegetable garden, but for me it has a more cosmic significance, which is the idea of redeeming land that was sitting there not being used.

While activities like shopping and doing the dishes are not the usual location of theological discussion, it is, Diana Butler Bass claims, part of a growing global trend. Butler Bass, in her 2015 book *Grounded*, notes that for several centuries, the primary questions regarding God and the world were concerned with dogma or practice: "Who is God? What must I do to be a good person or to be saved?" Such thinking emphasised the transcendence of God, at the expense of God's immanence. Mary Catherine Hilker continues this line of thinking, noting that this view stresses the distance between God and humanity. God is hidden and absent, meanwhile the sinfulness of human beings, the paradox of the cross, the need for grace for redemption and reconciliation are emphasised, along with the 'not-yet' character of God's promised reign.⁵⁹

Goodwin notices the ways in which churches entrench the conceptual understanding of a transcendent, but not fully immanent, God. He recalls notions of "escaping everyday life" in church, as if everyday life represents a distraction from the divine. "It is assumed that God is hidden in the midst of daily necessities," he notes, "but is more available outside of these pressing rhythms. We are invited into the church sanctuary or retreat center to find God."⁶⁰ However, in line with Butler Bass's assertion that the questions people are asking are different, Goodwin asks:

⁵⁹ Mary Catherine Hilker, *Naming Grace* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 1997), cited in Jeanne Follman "What is the Sacramental Imagination?" <http://www.aquinasblog.com/blog/2010/02/04/what-is-the-sacramental-imagination/> (13 Oct 2016).

⁶⁰ Craig Goodwin, *Year Of Plenty*, 85.

What if we're mixed up in these assumptions? What if we've got it all wrong? What if, in fact, the most fruitful places of spiritual formation and connection with God and community are not in the removed, abstract places, but rather in the midst of the most mundane daily realities? What if God is among us at all times and all things, and the daily rhythms of life are the raw material of the spiritual life.⁶¹

Goodwin observes that in his own journey it was not through imagining the abstract holiness of God that he found a deeper connection to the divine but by paying greater attention to the world around him, particularly in the details of everyday living.⁶²

Butler Bass affirms that faith questions now center on the issue of finding God. Queries of 'who' and 'what,' along with the authoritative answers provided by religious institutions, have been exchanged for the experiential and open-ended concerns of 'where' and 'how.'⁶³ Butler Bass describes this shift as a "re-enchantment" of the world.⁶⁴ "We experience this," she notes "when we understand that soil is holy, water gives life, the sky opens the imagination, our roots matter, home is a divine place, and our lives are linked with our neighbors' and with those around the globe."⁶⁵ This thinking rests on the notion that "the world, rather than heaven, is sacred."⁶⁶ Butler Bass compares this emerging theological trend to the habits and thinking of mystics found in all the world's religions, where the "personal, mystical, immediate, and intimate is the dominant way of engaging the divine."⁶⁷ Butler Bass believes that the emerging trend corrects the "saddest philosophical missteps of Western culture,"⁶⁸ which separated the physical from the spiritual and

⁶¹ *ibid.*, 85.

⁶² *ibid.*, 31.

⁶³ Butler Bass, *Grounded*, 10-11.

⁶⁴ *ibid.*, 10.

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, 26.

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, 26.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, 9.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, 19.

placed greater emphasis on the transcendence of God at the expense of God's immanence.

Anthony Balcomb identifies three ways that the theological change described by Butler Bass is evident in religious enquiry, namely: pantheism with an upsurge in interest in paganism being witnessed; panentheism, which has been defined as "the belief that the Being of God includes and penetrates the whole universe, so that every part of it exists in God."⁶⁹ A consequence of this, for Balcomb, is an emphasis on bottom up, rather than top down, notions of God resulting in engagement as an 'epistemological necessity.'⁷⁰ Balcomb includes scholars such as Leonardo Boff, Sallie McFague, Paul Tillich and Jürgen Moltmann.⁷¹ Thirdly, Balcomb also points to a revival in popularity of orthodox and Trinitarian theologies of the patristics as further evidence of a newfound interest in an enchanted universe.⁷²

While a potential philosophical shift towards the everyday has been noted, it has been claimed that within Catholic theology this thinking has always been present particularly in notions of sacramentality. Thomas Howard points out that in Catholic thought, the point where the divine touches humanity, is physical. This sacramentality emphasises the events of Creation; clothes for Adam and Eve; the Ark; the Tabernacle; the Womb of the Virgin; the flesh of God Incarnate in Jesus; splinters, nails, whips, as well as torn flesh. The entire Gospel is physically enacted, Howard observes, in the Catholic liturgy.⁷³

American priest and sociologist Andrew Greeley, credited for recently popularising the concept in his book *Catholic Imagination*, says:

Catholics live in an enchanted world, a world of statues and holy water, stained

⁶⁹ Anthony O. Balcomb, "Re-enchanting a Disenchanted Universe," 85.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, 84.

⁷¹ *ibid.*, 87.

⁷² *ibid.*, 84.

⁷³ Thomas Howard, "Sacramental Imagination," *Christianity Today*, (11 Oct 2016).

glass and votive candles, saints and religious medals, rosary beads and holy pictures. But these Catholic paraphernalia are mere hints of a deeper and more pervasive religious sensibility which inclines Catholics to see the Holy lurking in creation. As Catholics, we find our houses and our world haunted by a sense that the objects, events, and persons of daily life are revelations of grace.⁷⁴

Not surprisingly, the Anglo-Catholic stream within the Anglican Church embraces a Catholic, Sacramental imagination. In the 1930s Anglican Archbishop William Temple declared that Christianity was the most materialist of all the religions. Temple introduced to a more protestant audience the notion of a sacramental universe in his published lectures *Nature, Man and God: Being the Gifford Lectures Delivered in the University of Glasgow in the Academical Years 1932-1933 and 1933-1934*.⁷⁵ Continuing the sacramental emphasis of Temple, Rowan Williams cautions against the frequent use of abstract expressions to signify God. Such thinking, he fears, can lead to the discussion of faith and belief in a vacuum effectively creating a pseudo-world that forgets that materiality of earthbound existence.⁷⁶

For Christians responding to consumerism, sacramentality encourages an individual to seek communion with God by not turning away from the world, but by engaging more fully with its materiality as a means of experiencing more fully divine love and grace. While the notion of finding the divine in the mundane reality of everyday life is more readily found in Catholic theology, there are aspects of commonality within Evangelical theology which may explain the presence of this thinking in the participants who have primarily been shaped by evangelicalism.

⁷⁴ Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 1.

⁷⁵ William Temple, *Nature, Man and God: Being the Gifford Lectures Delivered in the University of Glasgow in the Academical Years 1932-1933 and 1933-1934* (London: Macmillan, 1934).

⁷⁶ Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2000), 200-201 cited in Brian Douglas and Terence Lovat "A Sacramental Universe: Some Anglican Thinking," *Pacifica* 24 (June 2011), 9.

Evangelicalism has within it a sense of the immanence of God found in the notion of a 'personal relationship with Christ.' This thinking allows, and often even expects, an experience of the divine as part of everyday life. However, this tendency has been criticised for reflecting too closely the surrounding therapeutic culture while casting God as a 'daddy,' as a sufferer on our behalf, and as an extravagant lover.⁷⁷

Expressed and experienced in this way the notion of God's immanence is not helpful in countering the self-focused nature of consumerism. For this impulse to be useful in opposing consumerism it needs to be directed away from the self and towards serving others.

A personal experience of God in the mall could well be an invitation to share divine love and grace more widely. Kiesling encourages Christians to engage fully in their experience in the mall, looking for God encounters as well as opportunities to share God's love. He directs people to consider the real materiality of the goods that are purchased in the course of everyday life. He encourages consideration and contemplation of their nature with the hope that human consumption might be a location for experiencing and sharing grace, not just meeting wants and needs. He proposes two questions for Christians to consider to this end: "Are we enjoying this gathering of goods and services for our use at the expense of some human beings suffering injustice?" Kiesling asks further: "Do we use this assemblage of goods and services as Christian agents of change (graced ministers of God's redeeming action in Christ for the world), so that we work toward minimizing the injustice involved, or do we use it oblivious to any other end than the satisfaction of our own needs?"⁷⁸

It is these questions posed by Kiesling in the 1970s that were clearly evident in the thought processes and subsequent practical outworkings of the participants of the

⁷⁷ Marsha Witten, *All is Forgiven: The Secular Message in American Protestantism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), cited in John Suk "Your Own Personal Jesus" *Christianity Today* (March 2006).

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2006/march-online-only/your-own-personal-jesus-is-language-of-personal.html> (25 Nov 2016).

⁷⁸ Christopher Kiesling, "Liturgy and Consumerism," 362.

study. In finding the divine in the banalities of everyday life those interviewed were able to connect their beliefs with their practices in concrete form in the context of consumerism.

Conclusion

The participants in the study showed evidence of interacting with the consumer culture in which they live in two overarching ways, described here as 'postures.' The first posture common to the interviewees was a commitment to living simply. This posture saw them eschew opportunities for making more money in favour of living in a way deemed more fulfilling. They were also committed to consuming less. These choices can be seen to address the concerns about consumerism raised by Protestant authors. Any idolatrous obsession with the accumulation of increasing amounts of material possessions is countered by the impulse towards simplicity. However, this response does not address the detachment from the environment and from the producers of goods that consumerism encourages.

The second posture of 'sacramentality' addresses these issues, but was only evident in a few of those interviewed. It is worth examining further, however, because of its potential in encouraging a more faithful understanding of, and relation to, the material world and because there is a growing body of literature in this area. The posture of 'sacramentality' describes the practice of seeing and encountering God in the mundane realities of material existence. This posture infuses acts of shopping and consumption with spiritual significance. Notably, these actions provide an opportunity to show love to the neighbour and, in doing so, to demonstrate in practical terms a love of God. Consumption becomes an opportunity to overcome the detachment inherent in the system of consumerism and to recognise the producers of goods, particularly those who might be suffering through the exploitative practices of the capitalist economy. This posture addresses the concerns of Catholic theologians by placing the notion of loving the global neighbour as a key

point of reflection and engagement.

Chapter Ten: Polity

The discussion so far has shown the particular concerns of the participants about consumerism, as well as their attempts to mitigate the negative consequences of consumerism in their own lives. This chapter will now consider their broader views concerning how they felt they should participate in the surrounding culture. After considering the thoughts of the interviewees, attention will turn to the theoretical work within theology that addresses the relationship between Christians and the society they live in. It is noted that this has been an area of debate for most of Christianity's history. The historical works of Ernst Troeltsch and Richard Niebuhr, though somewhat outdated, will be acknowledged before contemplating the argument of Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon. Their claim that Christians are 'resident aliens' in the surrounding culture will be considered. Kathryn Tanner rejects this notion, arguing that Christians cannot escape the structures and influences of the surrounding world and are taking an exclusionary approach if they try to do so. In comparing the views of Hauerwas and Tanner to the reflections of the interviewees, I will argue that there are problems in both approaches. A more useful way of understanding the interactions with surrounding culture is found, instead, in the writings of Walter Brueggemann and his notion of the 'prophetic imagination.'

Resisting Consumer Culture

The participants in this study were adamant that Christians are called to resist consumerism's destruction of the environment and exploitation of fellow humans. They believe that Christians need to have a way of life that embraces different values.

Interviewee 15:

When we consume, we buy into systems which are degrading our environment, our natural environment, and exploiting our brothers and sisters elsewhere and because we know of this, because we know this connection, I think we have to be actively resisting that, and no longer be complicit, as much as we can.

Interviewee 20:

I think: one; Christians need to be the light of the world, and two; their lifestyle actually needs to be different from the people around them, otherwise there's often not much to distinguish the difference between a Christian and a non-Christian. I think it's wrong of Christians to not care about environmental issues, or recycling, because we do have a responsibility to God's earth, as well as God's people.

However, the rejection of practices that contributed to the destruction of the environment and involve exploitation of others was not the only response. Alongside these concerns participants also expressed the view that consumerism is a culture that was different from and opposed to Christianity.

Interviewee 3:

I've grown to think more and more that Christianity and consumer culture are in conflict, whereas, before I would have taken for granted consumer culture, and not thought that it had anything against Christian faith. Now I think they're strongly in opposition.

Interviewee 7:

Most Christians just totally engage with [consumer culture] without even a second thought, and buy into a lot of the principles of it without a second thought. So I think that's the main thing Christians need, is to go, "This is a separate culture to our culture." It's kind of like we're time travellers or refugees and we've been moved. We're in this other culture, but we know we have a different DNA or genetic makeup that makes us kind of aware of the foreign-ness of that culture.

The language used to express the opposition of the culture of the world to a Christian culture was often couched in biblical expressions about the 'Kingdom of God' versus the 'world.'

Interviewee 9:

We're to be "in this world but not of this world." ... Jesus talked about the Kingdom a lot, versus the world's culture. And in Scripture we see there's a different system of kingdom culture, to what the world values. So that's led me to challenge our culture and its values.

Interviewee 15:

There's kingdoms in this world. There's God's Kingdom and consumer culture is completely and utterly opposed.... We don't realise [consumer culture] is evil and it's completely destructive, and it completely pulls us away. It's one of the biggest things we have to fight against. Jesus says "Where your treasure lies, your heart will be also" and so many people's treasure is heavily in consumer culture. Maybe nearly all of us. And so huge amounts of our hearts and our lives are just completely pulled away from what Jesus would have us do.

However, despite noting their opposition to consumer culture, the participants were all adamant that withdrawing from the wider society was not a solution to the challenges posed by consumerism. In discussing the need to stay connected to the culture there was a reasonably strong condemnatory attitude towards those who disengage; the Amish were mentioned twice as a negative example of this.

Interviewee 7:

A part of me wants to say just step back totally and disengage from consumer culture entirely and grow all your own food and be self-sufficient and go off the grid, but a part of me feels like that's a real cop-out for everyone else who's actually still engaged in it.

Interviewee 18:

I don't want the extreme of completely withdrawing into some Luddite or Amish existence on the back of a West Coast farm because, regrettably, to do that you'll disengage. So there's always this tension. We are always complicit in all of our attempts - but that it's worth attempting, because the whole process of attempting to live more holistically and cleanly is part of what it means to be more fully human, I think. And to more fully take into account the fact that my story - including everything I buy and consume - connects me to the story and the lives of other people.

Interviewee 20:

There's this potential conflict between being in the world and wanting to not be too radically different because you don't want to scare the neighbours and actually try a radical, plausible alternative to the status quo. And I'm not sure Christians do either particularly well - because we either tend to completely blend in, like most people do, because we don't like to be rejected but on the

other hand - if you just isolate yourself and be too radically different you end up being classed as 'a bunch of weirdos' and people write you off for that reason.

In contrast to the idea of disengaging, there was a desire expressed, instead, to remain within the surrounding culture.

Interviewee 8:

I guess I totally embrace consumer culture - and I'm not saying I agree with everything within it, but I think if you don't embrace where you live, rejecting it to the extreme makes you Amish.

Interviewee 12:

And also I like the way we are called to live in the world, and particularly - as a result of consumer culture - our society that we live in is so fragmented, so Christians need to continue living in whatever subcultures they're in.

In staying within the surrounding culture the participants acknowledged this meant living with a degree of resignation about having to compromise their beliefs, particularly in their practices of consumption. A number of very specific areas of compromise were mentioned. These obviously troubled the participants. This was particularly true in relation to the financial costs of consuming ethically. Within these compromised choices it was clear that a fair degree of pragmatism, rather than idealism, came into play in decision making.

Interviewee 14:

At some point you have to make a decision, like if you want a pair of running shoes. So I'm not perfect, and I understand that we sometimes have to make

compromised decisions 'cos there ain't no alternative... and I think it's good to run, so you have to make these balanced decisions sometimes. But you do have to have that tension, you do have to hold that tension and ask those questions. It's quite exhausting after a while... it's easier just not to buy stuff, wherever possible.

Interviewee 18:

One of the biggest tensions is that I also have a job, and the job makes me busy, and everything in consumer society is about busy-ness - partly because it falls down if there isn't the constant striving for 'more' - it's not just for stuff. So when I get busy, living in a slower or more deliberate way, or choosing one product over another, or making it myself takes longer. And so one of the big tensions is - because I'm not trying to enforce these things on myself legalistically - to what degree do I go "Oh, I'm just going to do this, this time. I really want a chocolate bar, but there's only Nestle chocolate bars here, so, you know, just this once." I have a huge amount of questions about the oil industry generally - we fight wars, and we mess in other people's countries in order to keep our supply of oil flowing free, or we do horrendous environmental practices, and as much as it would be nice to say "Let's just leave it in the ground," I ride a motorbike, that uses less fuel than the car, but I ride a motorbike. So where the cut-off point is between being engaged, in order to hopefully help be part of the transformation, and disengaging in a way that means I can live exactly how I want, that's a tension.

The additional cost of ethical consumption came into play for a number of participants.

Interviewee 1:

Ethical consumption usually involves higher cost, and sometimes I just swallow the cost and pay the extra money, and sometimes I can't bring myself to pay four times more for organic food, for example.... I don't make great decisions all the time and I guess I kind of excuse myself because there's the whole, you know, living in a way that's trying to bring about the ideal world, but then, I kind of tell myself, when I feel like I can't live up to that ideal, that I'm just one small person and one more of this thing bought that's unethical isn't actually going to make a world of difference.

Interviewee 3 honestly described his decisions around purchasing choices:

If I have to buy something then I'll want to buy ethically, buying ethically is good, so I want to buy because of that. So [that priority] comes into it when I feel like I need to buy something. But it's not my only priority, I have other priorities, like not having an unlimited amount of money, or information, and convenience as well.

Likewise, Interviewee 20, one of the most environmentally aware of the participants explained: "a lot of our choices don't come down to environmental choices - they come down to money," But the resolution for him was: "consume less. It's just simpler, it'll cost you less. And I guess, if everyone acted like me, parts of the economy would be completely ruined."

It was clear that in the midst of the compromised decision-making there was evidence of a degree of grace that the participants extended themselves. A number were wary of being too hard on themselves. They also were keen to avoid the delusion that they had the capacity to 'change the world' through their efforts alone.

Interviewee 17:

It's really tough, because the more I look into supply-chain stuff and company stuff, you realise that the majority of companies have some bad stuff going on - but they've also got some good stuff going on, and you have to actually make a choice. Do you support the company for the good little environmental project that they've got on this island, but ignore the union rights that they're abusing in this country?... I think I get around it more by just trying to buy as little as I can. Then, it is tricky too, because some things there are just no alternatives to. I've been through phases when I've felt really guilty and I've not bought stuff and expended huge amounts... I get to the point where I don't know if that's the best use of energy, compared to say, writing a letter to some companies and encouraging them to be better.... I'm gradually coming to terms with the enormity of the problem. It's been quite depressing at times, but it's also helpful, in that "Ok, this is the extent of it". Maybe it lets me be gentler on myself about things that I can't necessarily find alternatives for.

Interviewee 11:

Having thought about it a lot, I'm also aware that we're actually, I feel, quite powerless, in this respect, in confronting these problems. I think that what I observed within myself and in others who've tried quite conscientiously to do something, that I don't think it was a completely healthy move.... Part of being in the world means living with a degree of compromise in these areas, and I'm not sure if God asks us to fix the world's problems, cos... what can I do? I could [choose to] not drive my car - but then my children couldn't participate in all the activities that other children participate in, even getting to school would be very... I couldn't go to work because I couldn't take my children to the childcare centre. So I need to use my car, on the awareness that global warming is a factor in climate change and that it's not a sustainable use of energy. And similarly with all the food production - it's actually extremely

difficult to produce all your own food, and if you do that then you won't do a whole lot of other things that God might say is primary, maybe.... If I didn't work so much, I could live more simply and would have time for other things. But I don't - I think that God calls different people to different things, and at the moment that's where I feel called - so there's not a dogma here that I look to.

Interviewee 7:

You can't help but be shaped by [consumer culture]. There's kind of a lot of give and take between the two. And I think for me that's how I mostly think of it.... We're kind of living inside this culture, we're trying to work out how to come to terms with that and work in with it. So it's kind of like a refugee comes to NZ. They can't just say: "I'm only going to speak my language, I'm only going to do my practices." To live here, there has to be compromises on your previous culture.... I think there's some saying in the Old Testament that when you're in exile, you make peace in the city you live in.

The need to extend grace was also considered important in interactions with other people.

Interviewee 14:

If someone wants to go out to McDonalds today, I'm less likely to make a big fuss about that than I was in my twenties... I'm less likely to be judgemental of them. So, if I go to someone's place and they serve non-free-range chicken or pork - to know how pigs and chickens are looked after on conventional farms, that really hurts - but I think I have a higher duty to be a good guest in that circumstance, and to not be really harsh and judgemental. So I have to live with the tension of eating something that I'm really morally opposed to, but also I think there are higher duties to be a good guest in those sorts of

situations and not make them feel bad, because they might not be at the same part of the journey that I'm at.

However, the grace extended was balanced alongside the call to justice. In light of the way of life exhibited by the participants, it would be wrong to interpret this grace as any sort of excuse for not deeply engaging at a practical level wherever possible with the issues of exploitation in the production chain of consumer goods wherever possible. Rather, the appeal to grace involves a reluctant acceptance of limits to doing good within a system marred by the fall.

Interviewee 13:

There's multiple, multiple issues, and I think in our present society we cannot get anywhere near to consuming ethically, and I think there's just so much fodder in the Bible either which way, for such a diversity of Christians. Some of them need to be encouraged in the way of more ethical consumption choices, and others, perhaps on my end, need to hear those messages of grace. I heard a quote, I can't remember where it comes from, it was some feminist, who was talking about the feminist movement, and she said: "I don't want to join the movement if it means I can't dance," and so there's messages around that as well. A key part of our Christian culture is release, and joy and freedom, and unfortunately we're in a situation where we have to live at odds with our ethics, and that's stressful enough as it is. But because there's all this myriad of consumer choices we make every day, it can be hard to let up on yourself and know that you just have to walk with grace, so that's a strong message as well. But it really does depend which end you're on, I think.

Despite the challenge of trying to manage compromises, staying involved in consumer culture was seen as a clear way to engage and transform the culture as well as offering the opportunity to demonstrate a viable alternative.

Interviewee 7:

Actually having the courage to say “what would it look like for us to actually redeem this culture or for us to interact with it in a way that we can be really proud of?” Also, recognising that Christianity offers a lot of hope to a lot of the bad parts of consumerism - the kind of negative spin-offs, like the stress and the anxiety and the need for more and more and more. Christianity is like an antidote to that. My experience is that people who come into contact with that find it so refreshing, such a relief to go, "Oh, this isn't everything there is to life" and for me, this is the greatest potential for Christianity to have an impact and to grow again in developed countries... and said, "We're actually offering a hopeful message that isn't, go away from consuming forever and turn your back on it and live in a monastery" but it's actually, "How do we redeem it and repurpose it for good?"

For some participants, engaging with the culture meant seeking to challenge legislation. Two of the interviewees worked in politics; one worked in their local council in an education role, and another two people worked in advocacy positions with an NGO that seeks legislative changes in social and economic policy.

Interviewee 9:

I get really caught up in the tension ‘cos my convictions are so strong sometimes, and they drive me to buy differently and to live differently, and then I get overwhelmed by how large-scale it is, and I'm just a spit in the pond, and I think there has to be a legislation level if we're going to see major change. The problem is, to bring the legislation that makes changes, there has to be a social revolution.... and I guess Annie Leopard's [from the 'Story of Stuff'] a bit of a hero in that she champions for political and legislation change from a social revolution standpoint, which hacks me off, to no end, that it has to come to that. It makes me so frustrated when I think: all the government would have

to do is make a few small legislations around packaging alone, to reduce huge amounts of waste - let alone ethical standards of where we're buying and purchasing from. Like, it's so simple to legislate. Yes, our prices would go up, but what a brilliant stand to make, so simple, and yet our government's got no backbone to care enough about the poor.... But the thing is, it benefits the world and us, ultimately, so it seems so short-term thinking, to me that those changes aren't being made. So Annie Leopard's all about that social revolution and that's shaped me.... I'd like to be a proponent for change, I'd like to be a catalyst for change in this area.

Interviewee 11:

I don't believe in micro-solutions particularly. I think we need to think at the macro-level to do anything significant with these questions. Not so much the ones about personal integrity and how you respond to consumer culture - I would say there is something important for every person to think of and decide upon as to how they respond to those kinds of pressures and promises of wealth.

Another possibility talked about for Christians within consumer culture was the endeavour to transform the culture through the prophetic act of living a transformed life that demonstrates a set of values in opposition to consumerism.

Interviewee 18:

I think if we become complacent or content - or if we find ourselves completely comfortable in consumer society, without any discomfort or pressure that there is another way - I think that's when we know that it's all gone horribly wrong for us. So rather than defining it as 'this is what the lifestyle would look like', I'd like to define it by saying: because the Christian story is so radically subversive and different and transformative to the dominant story we find

ourselves in, that sense of discomfort is the key thing - however that works itself out in your life and practice is not as important as your wrestling those questions... that we're constantly trying to strive to make our life look more like what we consider the Kingdom to be. And that's going to look different for me than for someone else, but we need to be wrestling with it. So, the ideal way to live out the Christian life in consumer society would be that we live a life ill-at-ease with consumer society; we acknowledge our complicity in that society, that we can't be completely absent from that society; and we wrestle to transform that society - not as an outward thing, but we, first and foremost, wrestle with transforming that... first and foremost we should be seeking to gain some sort of inner sense of freedom from it, ... ultimately we're looking for an inward transformation that allows us to live slightly at odds with a consumer society.

Key in this for Interviewee 14, was the expression of grief at the state of the world as well as the demonstration of Christian hope in the face of destruction and exploitation:

I think faith is an integral part of my sort of 'hopeful' outlook on life, but also it gives me a sense of the profound so it enables me to be hopeful, and yet see the world for what it is, in its brokenness, and actually grieve that as well... and also try and bridge those two worlds, as well, by finding ways to survive and be an ethical, responsible, mature person.

This chapter will now turn to consider Christian writings concerning the relationship of Christians to the surrounding culture. They will be critiqued in light of the real struggles and issues raised by those interviewed.

Theoretical Reflections on Christians and Culture

Critical reflection upon how Christians relate to surrounding culture goes back to the beginnings of Christianity.¹ Arguments about the relationship of the new Gentile converts to Judaism that emerged in discussion around the necessity of Jewish practices such as circumcision and the following of dietary requirements illustrate this. Underlying these concerns were questions about whether new converts had to embrace a foreign culture by adhering to a recognisably Jewish lifestyle² or whether Gentile Christians could maintain a distinct ethnic identity with different, and at times clashing, practices. Having concluded that salvation existed outside of, and could be expressed differently to, Judaism and its accompanying social practices, debate in the New Testament then centred on what a Christian lifestyle might entail with regard to the surrounding culture.

Reflecting on this Tanner asks:

Do Christian social practices form an independent society comparable in its range of functions to the Roman society left behind? Does a Christian way of life mean life in a new and separate community so that Christians constitute a new people comparable to, but different from, Jews, Greeks, or Babylonians? If so, Christian identity would seem to require for its maintenance withdrawal or separation from Roman society, say, in desert communities or in some sort of self-sufficient monastic life. If Christian identity does not require societies like these, need it have a social side at all? Perhaps it just involves ascetic or spiritual practices of individual purification. The Christian could then try to withdraw from social relations altogether in a solitary desert existence or try to remain engaged in social relations while being attentive solely to the state of

¹ Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), 97.

² It is acknowledged that there were a number of different ways of expressing Jewish identity and religious practices at this time. However, while there wasn't one monolithic Jewish culture there were a few traits such as circumcision and kosher food requirements that were religious identity markers.

the interior life. Or, if a Christian way of life does not involve the formation of an alternative society, does it perhaps gain its identity as the religious wing of a Christianized Roman Empire? The identity of Christianity would then be linked, not to some separate community, but to the Roman society of which it is a part.³

Some recent biblical scholarship has emphasised the separateness of the early Christian community. N T Wright, for example, comments that outsiders were struck by the church's 'total way of life,' or as Wright terms it, its 'culture.' He notes that the very word used to describe the new community of God, namely, 'ekklesia,' referred, from the fifth century B.C. onward, referred to an assembly of citizens called to decide matters affecting the common welfare. The Romans classified Christianity as a political society. "Christians," says Wright, "were seen not just as a religious grouping, but one whose religion made them a subversive presence within the wider Roman society."⁴ Wright argues that there can be no doubt that Rome consistently saw the early Christians as a social and political problem and treated them accordingly.

Wright comments that it is possible that the Romans misunderstood the Christians. However, the political language adopted by the church suggests otherwise. Had the early church wanted itself and its purpose to be construed in private and individualistic terms, there were many cultural and legal resources for it to use. The early church could easily have escaped Roman persecution by suing for status as a "private cult" dedicated to "the pursuit of a purely personal and otherworldly salvation for its members," like many other religious groups in the Roman Empire. However, it chose to face the wrath of the empire by distinguishing itself as a political entity.⁵

³ Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 97.

⁴ NT Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 350.

⁵ *ibid*, 350.

The early questions of how Christians might express their daily practices within a hostile surrounding culture were radically altered by the emergence of Christendom and, with it, a supposed Christian culture. As Christianity became accepted as the authorised religion under Emperor Constantine, the nature of the Church changed. By becoming the official mainstream religion, the Church became part of the establishment and absorbed the “values of political power, money, patriarchal hierarchy with a focus towards the rich and influential rather than the poor and marginalised.”⁶ David Janzen argues a ‘watered-down’ version of Christianity emerged, “focused on personal salvation that was assured by participation in the sacraments and belief in officially sanctioned doctrines.”⁷ Some Christians believe that this change caused part of the essence of Christianity to be lost. Margaret McKenna concludes that devoted Christians found themselves asking “where they could go where there was space for an alternative expression of the Spirit. Where was the ‘Holy Roman Empire’ and its military NOT in control? Where were they not building churches in the model of empirical (sic) halls funded by taxes?” In McKenna’s reasoning these Christians “found the answers to their questions in the deserts that surrounded the Mediterranean, in Syria, the Judean desert and in Egypt.”⁸ It was here, initially under the guidance of Anthony and the early desert mothers and fathers, that a group of Christians sought to live a radically different life that contrasted with the excesses and power abuses of the Roman Empire. Janzen notes that it was from this time that “the impulse to live a more faithful life of discipleship, in community emerged as a persistent minority critique of the alliance of state, dominant culture, and church called Christendom.”⁹

⁶ Ian Mobsby and Mark Berry, *A New Monastic Handbook From Vision to Practice*, 2.

⁷ David Janzen and a Community of Friends, *The Intentional Christian Community Handbook*, 75.

⁸ Margaret M. McKenna, “Mark I: Relocation to Abandoned Places of Empire” cited in *The Rutba House School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*, 16.

⁹ David Jenzen et al, *The Intentional Christian Community Handbook*, 75.

As Christianity once again moves away from a Christendom era, serious discussion of how to relate to the surrounding culture has re-emerged. I will now explore these discussions in relation to the issues and concerns raised by the participants in the study.

Early Attempts to Define Church-Culture Relations

Ernst Troeltsch, in the early twentieth century, posited the three categories of 'Church,' 'Sect' and 'Mystical' for understanding possible ways Christianity might find itself in the world. Believing that State and society were the main formative powers of civilization, Troeltsch expected the church to adjust itself to a political, social and economic order predetermined by state and society. His key question for the Christian church was "How can the church harmonize with these main forces in such a way that together they will form a unity of civilization?"¹⁰

Troeltsch favoured his 'Church' type, embodied by the institution or state church, because its institutional nature allowed it to relate to other social institutions. For Troeltsch this Church was able to include the multitudes in its communal life by moderating requirements for personal holiness. Since the church, he believed, inevitably desired to "cover the whole life of humanity," the 'Church' type was able to make concessions for the prevailing social order. Troeltsch believed the church must accept the secular order and help it "dominate" or "control great masses of men."¹¹

On the other hand, Troeltsch's 'Sect' type described a small, voluntary association that chose to exist apart from wider society and in doing so challenged society's

¹⁰ Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, trans. Olive Wyon (New York: Macmillan, 1931), 1:32.

¹¹ *ibid.*, 1:331, 334. Troeltsch's preference for the church-type is made explicit in *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, 2:1006-13.

basic assumptions.¹² 'Sects' were defined by their adherents' commitment to holiness and by their emphasis on law rather than grace.

The 'Mystical' type was an entirely individual, non-institutional manifestation. It replaced doctrinal formulations as well as formal liturgy with a religious experience that was personal and inward focused.

As the century progressed, it became increasingly apparent that Christendom was collapsing. Serious discussion about how Christians should relate to surrounding culture re-emerged. Particularly dominant in this discourse, for a number of decades, was the work of H. Richard Niebuhr. He came up with five possible scenarios based on his interpretation of some New Testament writing but primarily utilising theologians and Christian thinkers throughout history. Because Niebuhr drew primarily on classic thought rather than on thinkers of his own day and also avoided use of examples from his era, his work appeared to suggest that these types were universal.¹³

Niebuhr's first type, the 'Christ against culture' paradigm, "uncompromisingly affirms the sole authority of Christ over the Christian and resolutely rejects culture's claims to loyalty"¹⁴ In this view, which Niebuhr links to Tertullian, Tolstoy and the radical reformers, Christian faith is incompatible with the State.¹⁵ Instead of loyalty

¹² *ibid.*, 1:331-343.

¹³ George Marsden, "Christianity and Cultures: Transforming Niebuhr's Categories," delivered February 2, 1999, at the Austin Theological Seminary, Austin, Tx. <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=517> (8 Sept, 2008).

¹⁴ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1951), 45.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 61. Niebuhr's interchangeable use of words for culture such as 'State', or 'civilisation' or at other times the biblical phrase 'world,' is problematic. While he initially presents culture as all encompassing his application seems inconsistent. Marsden notes that "Most of the time Niebuhr was not thinking about things like language, agriculture, or hospitals. His examples have to do with just two general areas of culture toward which Christians have characteristic stances. The first is toward higher learning, secular reason, and the arts. The second is toward the dominant cultural structures represented by government, business,

towards the state, the believer is directed towards a new order, a new society and its Lord.¹⁶ Niebuhr acknowledges that this is widely believed to represent the attitude of the first Christians. However, he contends that such a position is foolish and unrealistic as it is impossible for anyone to truly reject the culture that has formed them and is an inextricable part of them.¹⁷ In his most withering criticism of any of the types, Niebuhr writes that “half baked and muddled headed men abound in the anti-cultural movement.”¹⁸

In Niebuhr’s ‘Christ of culture’ position there is no tension between the church and the world. Niebuhr relates this position to early Christian heresies such as Gnosticism¹⁹ where Christian thought is mistranslated through dominant thought patterns of the day. In this, Jesus Christ is seen as “the great enlightener, the great teacher, the one who directs all men (sic) and culture to the attainment of wisdom, moral perfection, and peace”.²⁰ Interestingly Niebuhr affirms the role that ‘accommodated’ Christians can play in helping to keep the church from becoming a withdrawn sect.²¹

Niebuhr critiques both of these first types the most severely of all his categories. He sees that the idea of human depravity is foreign to both of them and, in their own

and the common ideologies and values that underlie these.” (George Marsden, “Christianity and Cultures: Transforming Niebuhr's Categories.”)

¹⁶ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 48.

¹⁷ Taken to this extreme it is possible to see that a human can never exist apart from culture. Even hermits take with them their language and the knowledge of how to build a shelter and gather food. Carter writes that one can stand against killing, the exploitation of poor workers, consumerism, and the sexual revolution without being against classical music, the family farm, and the practice of medicine. The kind of all or nothing choice commanded by Niebuhr in *Christ and Culture* is a false dichotomy. (See, Craig Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 25.)

¹⁸ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 65.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, 85.

²⁰ *ibid.*, 92.

²¹ *ibid.*, 107.

way, neither allows room for grace.²² It is realistic to see that in his dealings with these two types Niebuhr is setting up two impossible 'extremes' to which a solution must be found. In his introduction to the next three, 'more reasonable', types Niebuhr affirms that "the main movement of the church is characterised by a certain harmony of conviction about the universality and radical nature of sin."²³ He seeks to demonstrate that in these types, which contrast with the first two, room is allowed for grace.²⁴

The first of the three 'solutions' to the dilemma Niebuhr has created is titled 'Christ above culture.' In this type "Christ is not against culture, but uses its best products as instruments in his work of bestowing on men what they cannot achieve by their own efforts."²⁵ Those within this type, such as Thomas Aquinas, seek to synthesise the Christian faith and culture by arguing for the church as the provider of all the great institutions in society. They seek to carry out the work of the world, such as health care and education, while maintaining the distinctiveness of the Christian faith and life.²⁶ Niebuhr cautions that a synthesist approach can lead to the institutionalisation of Christianity, which can succumb to the danger of corruption. He also believes that synthesists tend towards conservatism as they seek to maintain "their" institutions and can find themselves devoted to the restoration or conservation of a culture,²⁷ ending up more enamoured with the culture than with Christ and slipping into accommodationism.²⁸

²² For the radical this is because legalism comes to play a large part in the new community, whereas for the accommodated Christian all can be achieved apart from divine intervention so grace is unnecessary. (H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 65, 78-80.)

²³ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 118.

²⁴ It is interesting that Niebuhr seeks to show the lack of grace, particularly in the first type, while at the same time acknowledging that Tertullian said "the Christian does everything with a difference: not because he has a different law, but because he knows grace and hence reflects grace." (Tertullian in H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 80.)

²⁵ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 127.

²⁶ *ibid.*, 144.

²⁷ Niebuhr seems to portray a view that sees Christians as passive receptors of culture, ignoring the impact that they may unwittingly have on culture, in this type especially. While synthesists necessarily hold a substantial amount of power in this approach culture appears to change around them and outside of their control. While instances such as the

In the fourth type which Niebuhr labels “Christ and culture in paradox” the individual exists in a kind of dualism that involves, due to the corruption of all humanity’s effort,²⁹ a distinction between the religious self and the self operating in the everyday sphere of culture. Niebuhr points to Paul and Luther as representatives of this type. He believed that they were both only interested in bringing change to one area: religion.³⁰ For classical Lutherans, the revelatory Word of God presides only over the ecclesiastical sphere, leaving the world of commerce to secular governance.³¹ Niebuhr argues, erroneously, as I note below, that neither Paul nor Luther challenged the status quo of the day and that their faith required only an improvement of conduct but no change to the cultural context in which the problematic social habits were formed.³² According to Niebuhr, one problem with this approach is that the dualist sees the world around them as bad but does nothing

Reformation certainly demonstrate this possibility it should still be considered that, for the most part, the true synthesist actually has a lot of power within culture and impacts cultural change to a large degree.

²⁸ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 146.

²⁹ *ibid.*, 152.

³⁰ *ibid.*, 188.

³¹ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (Indianapolis: Wesleyan Publishing House, 1988), 38. The Lutheran theologian A. Mengue, however, challenges the view that represents Luther’s approach as compartmentalised. He argues that Luther said that vocation was a cross, and the distinctive way in which a Christian carried this cross was a powerful witness and testimony to the faith. (A. Menuge, “Niebuhr’s Christ and Culture Reexamined,” in *Christ and Culture in Dialogue* (Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1999). However, this still focuses on how the job is done e.g. honestly, as the witness to the faith not on the job itself as being a means to offer glory to God.

³² This view of Paul has been widely challenged in recent scholarship. Paul’s writing is seen to be very radical when the culture of his day is fully understood. Strom explains, in particular, the social milieu which saw slavery as a social class not dependent necessarily on ownership but on birth. In this situation treating a slave as a brother or sister in Christ represented a much more radical approach than simply “freeing them” into the hands of another slave owner. One of the most radical discoveries has been seeing that the passage of Colossians 1: 15-20 represents a rewriting of statements about Caesar, found on coins and statues, to make them descriptive of Jesus. (Mark Strom, *Reframing Paul* (Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2000). It is interesting that in his earlier but only recently published essay “Types of Christian Ethics,” Niebuhr uses Paul not as an example of this type but of the final conversionist type. (H. Richard Niebuhr, “Types of Christian Ethics,” in *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture*, ed. Glen Stassen et al. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 15.

to change it. A counter critique contends that those adhering to this position often support the powers of the State unquestioningly while seeking to be ‘Godly, moral citizens’³³

Niebuhr’s final type “Christ the transformer of culture” starts with a similar presupposition as the dualist approach, also affirming humanity’s corruption. However, it presents a much more positive view of the surrounding culture according to which “the eschatological future has become an eschatological present.”³⁴ The immediacy of God’s redemptive purposes gives rise to the possibility of the “transformation of mankind in all its nature and culture into a Kingdom of God in which the laws of the kingdom have been written upon the inward parts.”³⁵ Niebuhr cites John as his biblical example³⁶ and looks to Augustine and Calvin also. He believes that Calvin saw a more “dynamic conception of the vocations of men as activities in which they may express their faith and love and may glorify God in their calling.”³⁷ It is clear that Niebuhr offers this final type as his preference. The model

³³ A passage often used to reinforce the view that Christians should surrender to the State is Mark 12: 13-17 where Jesus is asked about whether the Jews should pay taxes. While Jesus’ answer seems compliant, his drawing the attention of a Jewish audience to Caesar’s image on the coin, who believed it was against the Second Commandment to make images, is really anything but. Perhaps Jesus was making a subtle condemnation of Caesar while at the same time challenging listeners who might desire those same coins.

³⁴ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 195.

³⁵ *ibid.*, 227.

³⁶ Don Carson argues that while John’s gospel presents a more realised eschatology than some other New Testament documents, John’s ultimate hope lies not in the progressive transformation of the world but in the final cataclysm: Jesus is going to prepare a place so that his followers may join him. (Don Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited*, (Nottingham: Apollos, 2008), 38. Carson also critiques Niebuhr’s view, pointing out that his interpretation of the bible in general, and the New Testament in particular, provides a number of discrete paradigms suggesting that we are being faithful to Scripture so long as we align our choices with any one of these paradigms. Carson warns that when considering Scripture we should talk about what the *bible* says, not just about what one part of the biblical tradition says. The canonical function of the text demands that we listen to all of these voices and integrate them appropriately. (40-42.)

³⁷ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 217.

of Christ as transformer of culture neither capitulates to culture nor irresponsibly detaches itself from the culture.³⁸

Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* provides, at first examination, a comprehensive account of five different responses Christians or the Church can make in determining appropriate cultural engagement. There is no doubt that this typology has been hugely influential. However, later discussion has questioned many of his presuppositions. His readings of the likes of Paul and Luther are criticised. Alongside this, the actual usefulness of the typology has been questioned. While historians have expressed respect for Niebuhr and for his influence, a number have argued strongly that his categories do not accurately capture the complex multiplicity of the relationships between Christianity and culture.³⁹

I contend that Niebuhr's typology fails to do justice to the form of engagement with consumer culture that is evident among the participants in this study. While Niebuhr's first type aligns to some extent with the 'disengaged' example referred to by the interviewees as the Amish model, it is much harder to use Niebuhr's types to classify groups like those I have interviewed. Is their radical rejection of the dominant values of the "world" enough to classify them as "against culture?" Or are they merely radical proponents of the transformation approach? Rather than promoting escapism, they call for engagement with the wider culture. In Niebuhr's typology it is not clear if you can be both radically against culture while also transforming it.

Niebuhr has been accused of still being captured by a Christendom mindset. Theologians Hauerwas and Willimon conclude:

³⁸ Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens, Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 39.

³⁹ See, for example, George Marsden, "Christianity and Cultures: Transforming Niebuhr's Categories."

We have come to believe that few books have been a greater hindrance to an accurate assessment of our situation than *Christ and Culture*. Niebuhr rightly saw that our politics determines our theology. He was right that Christians cannot reject “culture.” But his call to Christians to accept “culture” (where is this monolithic ‘culture’ Niebuhr describes?) and politics in the name of the unity of God’s creating and redeeming activity had the effect of endorsing a Constantinian social strategy.⁴⁰

Picking up on the notion of a Constantinian agenda, Rodney Clapp notes also that both Troeltsch and Niebuhr’s types are Constantinian, privatising and etherealising the church.⁴¹ “The Constantinian church, rather than recognizing itself as a culture embodying the communal stories of Israel and Jesus Christ, promotes the wholly unseen faith of individuals.”⁴² Clapp points out that with this kind of presupposition any social contribution the church has to make cannot be made by the church itself but must be made through, and ultimately on the terms of, the society. Politics, likewise, can only be done through or by the state. This is in contrast with the picture N T Wright paints of the early church. In Niebuhr’s conception, Clapp believes, it is impossible to imagine or enact the church as itself a culture or a ‘nation.’ The church cannot be a distinctive, theologically formed culture but must instead bring an individualised, abstracted ‘ethico-religious system’ to culture.⁴³ In contrast to this, Clapp advocates seeing and practicing church as itself a culture and a political community.⁴⁴

Resident Aliens

Clapp’s critique, and his argument positing Christianity as an alternate culture, draws on wider discussion which emphasises the ‘otherness’ of Christianity. Key in

⁴⁰ Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 39.

⁴¹ Rodney Clapp, *A Peculiar People* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 65.

⁴² *ibid.*, 44.

⁴³ *ibid.*, 64.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, 33.

this dialogue are Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon. In their seminal work *Resident Aliens* Hauerwas and Willimon argue that, “In baptism our citizenship is transferred from one dominion to another and we become, in whatever culture we find ourselves, resident aliens.”⁴⁵ Hauerwas and Willimon emphasise the important challenge this is for the church in Western societies. They contend that the identification of the church with Western civilisation has been so complete that “we have tended to forget that the church’s future is not the future of ‘western democracies.’”⁴⁶ For Hauerwas and Willimon the call to be part of the gospel, therefore, is a call to be adopted by an alien people, to join a countercultural phenomenon, a new polis called church.⁴⁷

Hauerwas’ and Willimon’s account of the church emphasises its distinctive identity as the alternative to the world. They liken Christianity to a colony: “an island of one culture in the middle of another.”⁴⁸ In his book *Community of Character* Hauerwas emphasises the importance of community to Christianity. Western Christians, he contends, have fallen into a bad habit of acting as if the church really does not matter as they seek to live as Christians.⁴⁹ However, what Christianity asks of people is difficult to do alone. It is tough for ordinary people to do the extraordinary acts as Jesus commands.⁵⁰ The church, therefore, exists in the difficult time between one advent and the next. Christians are dependent on this community,⁵¹ which communicates how to live well in order to “shine as beacon to others.”⁵²

For both Hauerwas and Willimon, the Christian claim is not that individuals should be based in a community because life is better lived together rather than alone.

⁴⁵ Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 12.

⁴⁶ Stanley Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 110.

⁴⁷ Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 30.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, 12.

⁴⁹ Stanley Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 69.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, 71.

⁵¹ Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 86.

⁵² *ibid.*, 34.

Instead, the Christian claim is that life is better lived in the church because the church is true. The church is the only community formed around the truth, which is Jesus Christ.⁵³ Therefore, Christian community is about the way of Jesus Christ. It is about Christians aligning their wants and needs with the truth of Jesus, which provides the ability to lead lives that are truthful. Being together happens in Christian community, but this should only be as a by-product of the core aim which is being faithful to Jesus.⁵⁴

For Hauerwas and Willimon, Christian ethics must be learned through being in contact with disciples of Christ. They argue that “there is no substitute for living around other Christians” in order to achieve this.⁵⁵ Hauerwas and Willimon place the church at the centre of this process and emphasise the importance of Christian worship, increasingly emphasising the role of liturgy in the process of formation. Hauerwas writes that it is “our duty to be a people who submit to the discipline of the liturgy, as it is there that we are trained with the skills rightly to know the story.”⁵⁶ It is in worship, Hauerwas argues, that Christians are being trained to see the world in its truest sense. “In worship, we are busy looking in the right direction.”⁵⁷

Because the discipling process is concerned with the habituation of Christian practices its emphasis, for Hauerwas, is not solely, or even primarily, concerned with achieving a clear understanding of the tenets of the Christian faith. “Salvation,” Hauerwas writes in *Sanctify Them in the Truth*, “is best understood not as being accepted no matter what we have done, but rather as our material embodiment in the habits and practices of a people that makes possible a way of life that is

⁵³ Stanley Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 77.

⁵⁴ Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 78.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, 102.

⁵⁶ Stanley Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today: Essays on Church, World, and Living in Between* (Durham: Labyrinth Press, 1988), 10.

⁵⁷ Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 95.

otherwise impossible.”⁵⁸ It is from this point that Christian social ethics emerge, as Christians attempt to conform everyday practices to the vision of reality seen in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.⁵⁹ The church seeks to embody the story of God at work in the world through Christ through everyday habits and practices. It is this embodiment of alternative practices that gives the Church its distinctive identity. As a result it “cannot help but stand in sharp contrast to the world.”⁶⁰ It is through this process that the church truly develops its ‘social ethics’ rather than through a process of developing theological convictions.⁶¹

Hauerwas’ and Willimon’s position has been criticised. It is accused, particularly, of being politically irresponsible. Emmanuel Kataongole represents the nature of the criticism: “Hauerwas’s affirmation of the Church as a distinctive and particular tradition... does not take into account the complexity of modern pluralistic societies but instead encourages a withdrawal (by the members of that particular tradition) into a tribal ghetto.”⁶²

Picking up on the concern that a withdrawal from wider society equates to a disengagement from political structures, Max Stackhouse observes that many ethical problems facing people and churches in Western society have to do with social institutions and intellectual developments outside the church. The church is not able to deal with these on its own. Matters such as responsible corporations, Stackhouse contends, are not concerns that can be built from the bottom up, through the formation of virtue within the churches alone. Rather, issues like this require a public theology able to clarify how responsible corporations should exist in

⁵⁸ Stanley Hauerwas, *Sanctify Them in the Truth* (Nashville; Abingdon Press, 1998), 74.
Nicholas M. Healy Hauerwas, *A (Very) Critical Introduction* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 28.

⁵⁹ Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 75.

⁶⁰ Stanley Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today*, 103.

⁶¹ Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Towards a Constructive Christian Social Ethic*, 91.

⁶² Emmanuel Katongole, *Beyond Universal Reason* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), xiii.

the world. An expansive scope is required, “along with a personal conversion and socio-institutional savvy if anything like sanctification, holy living, viable communities, care for the neighbor or a relatively just society is to be sustained.”⁶³ James Logan concludes “In general Hauerwas fails to account for... manifestations of God’s grace outside of the church. This is particularly true with regard to moral concerns that the church lacks the communal resources to deal adequately with on its own.”⁶⁴

Along with being critiqued about the potential for ghettoisation, Hauerwas’ and Willimon’s position has also been accused of leading to an overly abstract and ideal view, “which,” Healy claims “cannot make sense of the role of the individual Christian, or of those within the church who are not the kind of Christians whom Hauerwas desires.”⁶⁵ Logan argues that:

Ultimately it seems that Hauerwas makes the body of Christ an idol, holding to a faith that might rightly be called “churchianity,” a privileged social movement that must rely on something that Kathryn Tanner rightly warns Christians against being: namely, a dogmatic embodiment of the idea of being a closely guarded and readily defined boundary-marking and boundary-making people.⁶⁶

Consideration of the work of Hauerwas and Willimon reveals some resonance with the stories of those interviewed for this study, but also some areas where the proposals developed in *Resident Aliens* fail to address adequately the challenge of living faithfully as Christians within consumerist culture.

⁶³ Max Stackhouse, “In the Company of Hauerwas,” *Journal for Christian Theological Research*, 2 no. 1 (1997): 4.

⁶⁴ James Samuel Logan, *Good Punishment?: Christian Moral Practice and US Imprisonment* (Grand Rapids: Wm B Eerdmans Publishing, 2008), 248.

⁶⁵ Nicholas M. Healy, *Hauerwas A (Very) Critical Introduction*, 16.

⁶⁶ James Samuel Logan, *Good Punishment?*, 247.

Hauerwas' and Willimon's notion that the discipling process is concerned with the habituation of Christian practices is a useful insight for this research. The project is concerned with understanding the insights of ordinary Christians as they seek to put their knowledge of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus into action in their everyday practices. The interviewees showed clear evidence that they were wrestling with what it means to be a Christian in the face of the values espoused by consumer culture.

In the interviews there was a strong affirmation of the notion that Christianity represents an alternative culture to the surrounding foreign culture of consumerism.⁶⁷ Some of the language used suggests that the interviewees were perhaps familiar with Hauerwas' and Willimon's work. But, there was still a clear desire by some participants to be engaged in the wider political processes in society.

The usefulness of Hauerwas' and Willimon's claims around community is mixed. The notion that the primary way of learning to be disciples is by being in contact with others who are disciples seems to be borne out in the participants' comments. However, while those being interviewed demonstrated and highlighted the importance of community, this community was less likely to happen within the context of church than Hauerwas' writings might suggest. The church, in the form of local congregations or parishes did not play the significant role in "shaping people's ability to see" in many of the lives of those interviewed. As discovered in the previous chapter, universities were more likely to have shaped the thinking of those being interviewed. Rather than showing how the church trains Christians to 'see the world,' this study highlighted that the church was not particularly helpful in equipping Christians for the everyday challenges of living in consumer culture. It

⁶⁷ For example Interviewee 7's comment: "We're kind of living inside this culture, we're trying to work out how to come to terms with that and work in with it. So it's kind of like a refugee comes to NZ. They can't just say: "I'm only going to speak my language, I'm only going to do my practices." To live here, there has to be compromises on your previous culture.... I think there's some saying in the Old Testament that when you're in exile, you make peace in the city you live in."

seems that for Hauerwas and Willimon the church's role is still based on abstracted, ideal notions rather than on reality. Because of its emphasis on an abstracted notion of church, Hauerwas' and Willimon's account of the value of formal worship in equipping Christians may be overstated.

Of value from Hauerwas and Willimon, then, is the notion of being resident aliens within a dominant culture. However, this insight on its own is similar to de Certeau's notion of living within a system too vast to be able to escape from.⁶⁸ Like Hauerwas' and Willimon's concept of embodied Christian practices, de Certeau posits the importance of everyday practices or 'tactics' that can be developed in order to create an escape from consumer culture and a meaningful dimension to life. It is this process that "patiently and tenaciously restores... an interval of freedom, a resistance to what is imposed."⁶⁹ Hauerwas and Willimon offer a Christian perspective on the same concept, but the interviews don't support their idea that formal worship empowers members of consumer culture to resist its influence.

Christianity: Not a Culture

In contrast to the arguments of Hauerwas and Willimon, Kathryn Tanner believes that Christianity cannot be seen as a separate culture. She examines the arguments of those who claim that Christianity forms a distinct culture and believes that the idea that Christian life is led in a new society is difficult to sustain empirically. This is despite the fact that theologians emphasise the difference between a life lived with Christ and life without him.⁷⁰ Tanner contends that "the majority view in Christianity, for most of its history, has never favored efforts to make Christians into

⁶⁸ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, xvii.

⁶⁹ Michel de Certeau, Luce Giars, Pierre Mayol, *The Practice of Everyday Life Vol 2 Living and Cooking*, 255.

⁷⁰ Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 101.

a social group that modern anthropologists would identify as possessing its own way of life.”⁷¹

Tanner notes that the incredible expanse of Christian practice across different times and places, and the diversity of what Christians say and do, makes the status of Christian practices as a distinct culture questionable. She also raises the question of whether Christian social practices include enough to constitute a ‘way of life’ in the all-encompassing anthropological use of the phrase. Tanner points out that “the social practices of Aborigines or U.S. residents seem a way of life in that they encompass the full range of human functions—reproductive, economic, political, and so forth.” But she notes that Christian social practices can’t be said to cover anything like the same range.⁷²

Taking a more inclusive view than the earlier stance noted by Wright, Tanner points out that in the first five centuries of the church, Christians continued to participate in many of the activities of the wider Roman society. She argues that they withdrew only from those that seemed inextricably linked to pagan religious practices. Tanner observes that Christian communities did not try to replace the educational, economic, familial, or political functions served by Roman institutions with their own. “Christians may have partaken of meals together, but Christian societies were not literally where they made their bread. Christian communities might have been a family in many ways but nobody was literally born and raised there.”⁷³ Christian social practices, Tanner maintains, have only managed to encompass a fuller range of human functions by incorporating institutional forms from elsewhere. In the early medieval period, Christian social practices took on the character of a society comparable to the Roman world by borrowing from it, its laws and its political structures. In order to become a social alternative to the Roman Empire, Christian social practices still had to borrow from the very society they opposed. There is,

⁷¹ *ibid.*, 97.

⁷² *ibid.*, 93.

⁷³ *ibid.*, 97.

Tanner proposes, no answer to a question such as, “What is the educational institution of Christian society?” Christianity does not have a school system of its own, rather it takes one over from elsewhere, and shapes it to its own needs, or does without.⁷⁴

Alongside the impossibility of a distinct Christian culture, Tanner also questions the possibility of individuals creating a defined Christian identity free from external influence. She notes that people do not discard their other identities when they take on a Christian one.⁷⁵ Moreover, Christianity, as noted, is always infiltrated by borrowed material that makes up Christian words and deeds.⁷⁶ This was certainly illustrated by the number of secular sources mentioned as key influences by the interviewees in their responses to consumerism.

Having noted the sociological problems with seeing the church as a new culture, Tanner also provides a theological critique. She notes that while Christian theologians commonly talk about conversion as a new birth, and as the coming into existence of a new creature, construing that change as a difference between the way humans live outside and inside Christian communities makes the change “so extreme as to jeopardize the oneness of God.”⁷⁷ Tanner believes this view portrays God as the one who just brings the church into existence as opposed to the one who creates and governs the world that encompasses communities outside of the church. In the view that posits the church as a separate culture, the world outside is simply left behind rather than redeemed by Christ.⁷⁸

Tanner also argues against the emphasis placed on the distinctiveness of Christians from the world, noting that the early church worked hard to overcome social distinctions, not reinforce them. She believes that the construction and maintenance

⁷⁴ *ibid.*, 98.

⁷⁵ *ibid.*, 109.

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, 148.

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, 101.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*, 101.

of a special society with its distinctiveness and accompanying superiority is a theological concern. Such “Christian self-concern, alternating as it does between pride and defensiveness, is, if I might hazard a theological judgment, nothing short of idolatrous.”⁷⁹

Having discarded the notion of Christianity as a distinct culture Tanner asks what the alternative is. She notes that while not being separate from the wider society, Christianity should not be bound inseparably with what it means to be a member of that society. When this happens, Tanner believes, Christian identity is too enmeshed with the wider society to allow Christians to be critical of that society.

For Tanner, the two positions of either being separate from society or being inseparable from society are inadequate; however, a third option remains. Christians form a voluntary association within a wider society, rather than a separate society in and of themselves. In contrast, then, to seeing the church as a distinct culture, this association engages the context outside of the association itself. However, this does not mean the identity of the Christian association is locked into step with the surrounding society. Rather than being inextricably part of the wider culture, these associations can, and should, be critical of the wider society. In this view, the church would be analogous to a new social movement. It is an association with a social agenda that accepts people in order to change both their own ways, but also the practices of those outside the association.⁸⁰

Tanner concludes that a whole Christian way of life is brought about by such an association, but that Christian social existence is ultimately without a homeland in some territorially localisable society. Instead, “Christians lead lives as resident aliens in the society of which they are a part, without, however, having migrated

⁷⁹ *ibid.*, 101.

⁸⁰ *ibid.*, 103.

from any other society—they have no other homeland—and without setting up an alternative society of their own in a new land.”⁸¹

While Tanner’s overall argument critiques authors like Hauerwas and his use of language like ‘culture’ to describe the church, her ultimate formulation actually uses the same language of ‘resident aliens.’ Examining the distinctions between Tanner and Hauerwas William Werpehowski observes that, despite Tanner’s position against the idea of Christians as a distinct culture, “nothing that Tanner says can or does preclude a theological vision of the sort that Hauerwas brings forward.”⁸² Rather, she just requires that it be done “without idolatrous appeals to irrevocably privileged social movements,” and without “relying on the idea of a tightly defined boundary marking, and making, Christian identity.”⁸³

Werpehowski identifies the helpful insight from Tanner’s critique that Christianity is not a self-contained, self-originating whole, disconnected from other forms of social life. Tanner recognises that no sharp cultural boundary exists marking the difference between the church and other cultures that operate on separate terms. He concludes that Christians need not and simply cannot purify Christian practices from outside influences of their possible corrupting effects.⁸⁴

The points Tanner raises pose a real challenge to the work of Hauerwas and Willimon and the emphasis made by many of the interviewees concerning the distinction in their thinking between the ‘Kingdom of God’ and ‘the world.’ Her observation that there can never be a distinct Christian culture, however, also explains some of the tensions that the participants were wrestling with. Tanner’s desire to see Christians maintain the ability to critique the surrounding culture but at the same time accept that they are fully part of it and cannot rid themselves of its

⁸¹ *ibid.*, 103.

⁸² William Werpehowski, *American Protestant Ethics and the Legacy of H Richard Niebuhr* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 194.

⁸³ *ibid.*, 194.

⁸⁴ *ibid.*, 192.

influence encapsulates the interviewee's struggle. Tanner's critique allows greater scope for the direct political engagement discussed by some of the participants.

Tanner's argument for seeing Christianity as a voluntary association picks up the importance of community, but while Hauerwas and Willimon attempt to describe how this community might be helpful in forming Christians, Tanner merely uses this categorisation to describe Christians' relationship to the wider society. What is missing from her critique is an explanation of how a member of the association might construct their own everyday practices in the face of opposing values from the surrounding culture.

While Hauerwas and Willimon, along with Tanner, directly address the abstracted notion of how Christians should relate to the surrounding culture, a different tack is seen in the writings of the biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann. This approach does not start by seeking to answer the question of how Christians ideally should relate to wider society. Instead, Brueggemann applies the biblical story of exile to today's context and finds resonances from the experience of the Israelites in a foreign land.

Prophetic

An alternative way to consider the place of Christians within consumer society starts, not with discussion concerning the church's proper place in society, but rather with an examination of the practices of the Jewish people in times of exile into foreign culture. Brueggemann examines the critical role a prophetic imagination plays in such a circumstance. He contends that there are lessons in this for Christians in consumer society.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986).

In his 1986 book *Hopeful Imagination*, Brueggemann considers the messages of Jeremiah and Isaiah. Brueggemann notes that Isaiah wants to assert a specific identity for the Jewish community, namely exile. This metaphor of exile is more important for this literature than the geohistorical fact of Babylon.

While the term 'exile' may mean 'deported, displaced, or transplanted,' all of these are geographical terms, whereas exile as an intentional identity can be seen as a theological concept. 'Exile' indicates that the new place is not home and can never be home because its realities are essentially alien. Brueggemann suggests that accepting identity as an exile is an act of polemical theological imagination that guards against cultural assimilation. Exiles have a stake in stating clearly, perhaps even in exaggerated form, the differences between the identity and faith of the community and the seductive urgings and promises of the empire.⁸⁶

In the message of Jeremiah the world that God wills is held to be in profound tension and finally in opposition to the ordering of reality in seventh-century Jerusalem.⁸⁷ But Jeremiah knows of a new reality, that God has destined the end of the known sociopolitical arrangements. Jeremiah's energy and imagination were devoted to the act of "conjuring a new world out of God's powerful promise."⁸⁸

The task of Jeremiah and Isaiah is to announce that God's faithful people may expect to receive from God a new mode of public existence. Life can begin again in a new community that is obedient to the covenant. Such a theological reading of reality, which envisions the destruction of idols and the emergence of new community, will inevitably encounter resistance.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ *ibid.*, 110.

⁸⁷ *ibid.*, 4.

⁸⁸ *ibid.*, 31.

⁸⁹ *ibid.*, 5.

These poetic traditions do indeed subvert conventional readings of reality and conventional arrangements of power. These traditions evidence the process in ancient Israel of presenting and making available an alternative world that often seemed unwelcome and unreal. Its welcome and its reality are based only on the conviction that God's resolution of Israel's history is one to embrace in obedience and to celebrate in praise. Such obedience and praise are a practice of a dangerous alternative and a rejection of a world designed apart from and against the rule of God.⁹⁰

Brueggemann draws a 'dynamic equivalent' between Israel's exilic situation and that of the American church.⁹¹ He observes the "reception of a new world from God ... in our time" noting the emergence of new communities with dreams of justice and equity, often experienced as revolutionary. These communities dare to affirm that old structures may be transformed to be vehicles for the new gifts of God. "Thus," he concludes "we are at the risky point of receiving from God what we thought God would not give, namely a new way to be human in the world."⁹²

Brueggemann picks up these themes again in his 2001 book *The Prophetic Imagination*. This book suggests a need for a "counter-consciousness" for the Israelites after their exodus from Egypt.⁹³ This alternative consciousness serves to criticise the "royal consciousness" that makes up the overriding narrative of the Egyptian empire. Brueggemann contends that the story of the Exodus demonstrates a "radical criticism" and a "radical delegitimation" of this royal consciousness, undermining the Egyptian empire.⁹⁴ The alternative consciousness criticises and, in doing so, undoes the dominant consciousness. It seeks to reject and delegitimise the way things are ordered. The alternative consciousness also energises people and

⁹⁰ *ibid.*, 5.

⁹¹ *ibid.*, ix.

⁹² *ibid.*, 6.

⁹³ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* 2nd edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 21.

⁹⁴ *ibid.*, 9.

communities by holding out the hope of a future time that the community of faith can move towards.

Brueggemann notes that “the reality emerging out of the Exodus story is not just a new religion, or a new religious idea, or a vision of freedom but the emergence of a new social community in history, a community that has a historical body, that had to devise laws, patterns of governance and order, norms of right and wrong, as well as sanctions. The participants in the Exodus found themselves involved in the intentional formation of a new social community to match the vision of God’s freedom.”⁹⁵

However, Brueggemann cautions in this reading that he is not championing sectarian withdrawal, singling out Hauerwas and Willimon as examples of this thinking.⁹⁶ Nor is he advocating for disgruntled communities of never-ending protest and dissent. Rather, he proposes a community with practices of memory, hope, and pain that offer healthy human life in the face of the reality on offer in dominant culture. The defining prerequisite for such a subcommunity is a conviction that it can and will be different because of the purposes of God that will not relent. A subcommunity that will generate prophecy will still participate in the public life of the dominant community; it does so, however, from a certain perspective and with a certain intention.⁹⁷ The task of prophetic ministry is to “evoke an alternative community that knows it is about different things in different ways.”⁹⁸ The formation and sustenance of this kind of subcommunity requires a willingness to take part in acts of resistance and deep hope.⁹⁹

Once again Brueggemann links the Old Testament passages to society today, particularly to consumer society. He notes that it is “not so easy in our electronic

⁹⁵ *ibid.*, 7.

⁹⁶ *ibid.*, xvii.

⁹⁷ *ibid.*, xvi.

⁹⁸ *ibid.*, 117.

⁹⁹ *ibid.*, 117.

environment of consumerism to imagine prophetic discourse and prophetic action.” He maintains that consumerism is the foremost situation requiring prophetic faith in the Western world.¹⁰⁰ He observes that “the easy accommodation of church faith and practice to consumer commoditism make the urgency of prophetic consciousness palpable among us.”¹⁰¹ Comparing the worldview of Western society to the ‘royal consciousness’ of the Egyptian empire, Brueggemann describes the cultural situation in the United States as being “satiated by consumer goods and propelled by electronic technology.” Brueggemann notes that it is a culture of ‘narcoticised insensibility’ to human reality, arguing that “we in American society too easily live inside this imagination” which “robs us of our capability for humanity.” He issues a further challenge: “We need to ask if our consciousness and imagination have been so assaulted and co-opted by the royal consciousness that we have been robbed of the courage or power to think an alternative thought.”¹⁰² He contends, the prophetic imagination is capable of enabling us to live inside “God’s imagination.” “Clearly, human transformative activity depends upon a transformed imagination.”¹⁰³

A key element of resistance to consumer culture for Brueggemann is ‘grief work.’ He believes that real criticism begins in the capacity to grieve. Such grief is “the most visceral announcement that things are not right.”¹⁰⁴ Brueggemann notes that it is only in the ‘empire’ that people are urged to pretend that things are all right. It is only when the empire keeps the pretence going that everything all right, that criticism and grieving will not occur. However, the prophetic imagination challenges this. “There is mourning to be done for those who do not know of the deathliness of their situation. There is mourning to be done with those who know pain and

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*, xvii.

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*, xi.

¹⁰² *ibid.*, 39.

¹⁰³ *ibid.*, xx.

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*, 119.

suffering and lack the power or freedom to bring it to speech.”¹⁰⁵ Brueggemann sees this grief work as the precondition of joy.¹⁰⁶

Finally, Brueggemann emphasises that the ‘prophetic imagination’ is not merely an idea. Rather, it is a concrete practice undertaken by real believers who share the conviction of grief and hope that escapes the restraints of dominant culture.

“It is my hope,” he writes, “that my exposition of prophetic imagination is intimately connected to concrete practice and that it may, on occasion, evoke, generate, and authorize such concrete practice.”¹⁰⁷

Brueggemann’s call for prophetic, concrete practices as a response to the false values of consumerism can be read as a call for the kinds of practice being enacted on a daily basis by the interviewees. Like Hauerwas and Willimon, Brueggemann sees the need for practices that embody biblical values. In naming these actions as prophetic, Brueggemann captures the concern for the oppressed and the environment seen in those interviewed, the need for mourning with those who are in pain and suffer. The grief they experienced represents their awareness of the injustices inherent in the consumerist system. Naming the interviewees as prophets also helps explain why they might not have heard the message they are seeking to embody taught within some of their own church contexts. The participants can be seen as prophets to the church in Western culture. Their understandings of the injustices inherent in consumer culture present a challenge to other members of society who are not as aware or who remain complacent in the face of oppression. Brueggemann’s naming of the ‘prophetic imagination’ may empower the interviewees to speak out in their current contexts.

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.*, 119.

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*, 11.

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*, 121.

Conclusion

I have considered in this chapter the concerns raised by the participants about how to engage with wider culture. While those interviewed saw Christianity and consumerism as forming two distinct cultures, the participants all affirmed the need to stay connected to and a part of consumer culture. For the participants, this meant compromising on some of their strongly held beliefs.

In this chapter, I have looked to wider theological discussion to seek to understand appropriate ways of understanding the Christian's place in wider society. I have considered the theories of Troeltsch and Niebuhr and concluded they were strongly influenced by a Christendom mindset. I then looked to the more recent work of Hauerwas and Willimon, Tanner, and Brueggemann. Hauerwas, Willimon and Tanner provided helpful insights that resonated with the insights of participants on a number of levels, however, their tendencies towards abstracted and idealised notions meant that an alternative framework from the work of Brueggemann was a useful supplement. This located the participants of the study within the prophetic tradition – railing against a complacent religious group in the face of injustice. These participants were concerned with the injustices being perpetuated by consumerism and their way of life reflects this concern. The stance they take is one that could be reasonably adopted by all Christians seeking to live out Christian beliefs in the face of consumer culture. It provides a way of understanding how to relate to the surrounding society. The notion of Christians being prophets to the wider society will be considered further in the conclusion. Thought will be given to how the church might support Christians in this prophetic task as individuals take steps towards a way of life in which concern for the poor is matched by appropriate action.

Chapter Eleven: Conclusion

Consumerism is spreading at a rate that is unsustainable environmentally, while manufacturing processes push down prices to a point that workers are exploited. Unfortunately, these realities are hidden from the consumer through the processes of distancing, in which numerous links between producers and consumers hide injustices being perpetuated in production; and shading, where manufacturing conditions are purposely concealed. These concerns are identified in sociological and historical critiques of consumerism. Alongside these concerns, theologians maintain that consumerism fosters values in conflict with traditional Christian virtues. Generosity and contentment are replaced with greed and selfishness. The command to love your neighbour is challenged when everyday consumption might be causing your global neighbour's maltreatment.

It is hard for Christians to hear and understand that their actions are contributing, both directly and indirectly, to the exploitation and maltreatment of others. But it is clear that the need to challenge consumerism isn't merely for the sake of individual virtue. Our current global capitalist economy treats workers as cogs in a machine designed to produce ever increasing commodities for those at the upper end of the economic scale. In contrast to this, the bible paints a picture of a God who loves and cares for all people and calls for those who seek to live according to his purposes to express that love in their treatment of others, particularly those who are suffering. The same energy and passion that drove the early Christian abolitionists needs to be brought to bear in our current economic situation. People need to have the same willingness to forego personal convenience and comfort as well as being willing to challenge unjust systems.

The wellbeing of the world's poor and of the environment depend on a radical reshaping of the culture of consumerism that drives Western and global society. While relations with much of the world's poor remain exploitative in a consumerist

system, engaging with others around the world in this way should be anathema to any committed Christian. Biblical sources call for Christians to care for the poor and the oppressed. They mandate the care of creation. It is incumbent upon Christians to align their practices with biblical values such as these, in the face of consumerism. In order to do this successfully it is both helpful and necessary for Christians to reframe their thinking about the surrounding culture.

When consumerist culture is viewed as a kingdom opposed to the kingdom of God, a useful way of understanding an appropriate Christian response can be formulated. Christians are called to resist the values and purposes of any kingdom or system that exists in opposition to the establishment of God's kingdom on earth. But, while Christians pray in the Lord's prayer for "God's kingdom to come here on earth as it is in heaven," they also need to live out the values of God's kingdom on earth.

Utilising Bruggemann's picture of a prophetic response to a dominant empire, I have argued that the appropriate Christian response to consumerism is a prophetic one that envisages care for the poor and a longing for justice as a core part of the Christian way of life. As Christians seek to live out an alternative ethic, which shows care and compassion to the most vulnerable on earth and a loving concern for the created environment, they take on a prophetic stance against the alternative kingdom of consumerism. Through everyday acts as basic as what is bought at the supermarket, Christians can make a stand against the rampant individualism and disregard for the poor and the environment that underpins the current model of consumption in the Western world.

While faithful Christian living in the face of the exploitative ethic underpinning consumerism calls for a prophetic cry against injustice, it is important to acknowledge that living out the values of an alternative kingdom is difficult. The study recognised a number of factors that contribute to this difficulty. One of the causes identified is an abstraction within theological discourse and a tendency to avoid consideration of everyday actions. As a response to that, this thesis contended

that the practical wisdom of people engaged in the task of challenging consumerism in their daily lives would be a useful aid in developing a response to consumerism.

Catholic theologian Vincent Millar argues that understanding the constructive theological moves being taken in the everyday theology of these Christians requires qualitative research methods. In this study the everyday actions of twenty Christians were examined, in order to discover patterns of living that may be exemplars for the wider Christian church. As their everyday decisions and struggles were uncovered a challenging picture of what following Jesus in a consumer society might look like was revealed. The participants showed what it means to be faithful to Jesus' message to love your neighbour as yourself in a society that often shows little regard for others, particularly those unseen.

By utilising Grounded Theory Method in a series of interviews, I also discovered the key influences on those interviewed and the resources that have helped them to sustain their commitment to a faithful way of life in the face of consumerist culture. The number one influence in developing their response to consumerism was discovered to be peers. Specifically, Christian sources were mentioned less than secular equivalents. Some participants commented that they had never heard consumerism being mentioned in a church context. The research uncovered the participants' own concerns about consumerism, which tended to reflect secular rather than religious concerns.

Seven patterns emerged from the examination of the everyday practices of the interviewees. They were likely to be engaged in work that was considered meaningful rather than financially rewarding; they tried to avoid consumption through activities like buying secondhand or hand-making items for use; they were committed to ethical consumption which was visible through their frequent boycotting of companies they deemed unethical and through a commitment to buy ethical goods through schemes like Fair Trade. The participants were generally working to consume food that was organic. There was evidence of vegan and

vegetarian diets. Only eating meat where animals had been treated well during their rearing was important for those that did consume meat. Reducing waste was also a common practice with one couple being committed to being completely rubbish free. Energy use was a further concern; many of the participants reduced their fuel consumption through riding bikes and avoiding plane use where possible. Finally, there were concerted efforts to avoid sources of advertising in order to limit temptation.

In line with Grounded Theory Method, the research then expanded on the findings from the research. Three areas were considered in greater depth by drawing on related concepts and theories.

The first area to be considered was the processes used to align beliefs and practices. The research discovered three keys on this journey namely, adopting a rule or new habits into daily life, implementing a praxis cycle of action and reflection, and utilising the support of a 'household of faith.'

It was clear from the participants that the level of change they had undergone had not been without commitment and often struggle. It was apparent from the practices of those interviewed that implementing rules to guide action was beneficial. For some these rules were small, encompassing one minor aspect of life e.g. not buying takeaways in non-compostable packaging, while for others the rules encompassed much larger aspect of life e.g. going completely rubbish free. When considering the implementation of a rule or the other gradual adoption of a number of smaller changes, concerns around legalism, particularly from the 1980s, were recognised. However, a recognition of the actual difficulty in changing practices without external constraints countered this. It was also apparent that, whether large or small, these rules led to further self examination and the addition of more rules.

The praxis theological method was employed as a helpful way to understand the process the interviewees undertook. The cycle of becoming concerned about injustice, acting on that concern, reflecting on the new practice and adding further

practices reflected the patterns seen in the participants. The praxis cycle directly challenges dualism, which separates belief from action in everyday life. It recognises that sometimes we can't think our way to new practices but have to practice our way to new thinking.

Finally, this chapter reported on the importance of a supportive community in being able to counter the pressures of consumerism and live by an alternative ethic. The study revealed that responses to consumerism are best undertaken in a supportive household. I have utilised the term 'households of faith' to describe these supportive communities which may comprise a couple, family, extended family, or a collection of people committed to one another in an intentional manner. Such communities may also take the form of a new monastic community, a strategy that appears to be particularly helpful for young adults. A key for the households is their mutual commitment to engaging thoughtfully and practically with the issues presented by consumerism. It required a degree of common commitment to the cause and a level of accountability not automatically found in everyday households. Households of faith are not merely challenging the exploitative underpinnings of consumerism but also challenge individualism, which trains people to think primarily of themselves and their own needs and desires. This worldview can blind people to the needs of others beyond themselves, allowing exploitation to flourish.

The second area examined on the basis of the findings was the postures of the participants. Two stances adopted by those interviewed were simplicity and sacramentality. The first posture was particularly evident in the interviews. Practices like choosing lower paid careers and avoiding consumption demonstrated this attitude in action. This stance answers the Protestant concern that material goods can become an idolatrous focus in life. However, it does little to overcome the detachment from the goods consumed and the tendency of information about manufacturing conditions to be hidden from consumers. The second stance of sacramentality addressed these concerns. It was less apparent across all the participants, but there were clear instances of people finding God in the mundane

and ordinary as a part of their stand against the detachment of consumerism. Seeing the act of shopping as a way to connect, and show love to others breaks down the distancing and shading techniques of marketing practices. Notions of sacramentality, and how it aids the love of neighbour, were explored in greater depth as a possible future resource for other Christians seeking ways to live faithfully in a consumer culture.

The final theme that emerged from the findings was the importance of polity. The participants all felt that Christians should live in a way that was different from that encouraged by consumerism. They were all also adamant that Christians should remain in society and not seek to form a separate culture. The impulse of the participants was then contrasted to a variety of theorists. The seminal older works by Troeltsch and Niebuhr were considered, but Hauerwas' and Willimon's notions of being resident aliens had more affinity with the ideas expressed by the participants. Tanner's criticism that the church is not able to create or maintain a distinct culture because people are too intertwined with surrounding culture is also an important consideration. As previously noted, a model that has greater resonance with the experience of the participants is Breuggemann's call for Christians to exercise a 'prophetic imagination.' The way of living exhibited by the participants represent an ethic at odds with the surrounding culture. They embrace the gospel imperatives to care for the poor and love their neighbour. They mark themselves out from those around themselves by a way of life that is distinct. They show a keen awareness of issues of injustice in the world and a clear desire to understand in greater detail and, importantly, to respond to the injustices they perceive. In this sense, they are prophets both for the church and wider culture pointing out a way to live that is faithful to the call to follow Jesus.

However, a key challenge to emerge from the research is whether the prophetic message of challenge and hope encapsulated in the way of life of the research participants can be adopted more widely amongst Christians. Alongside this is the question of whether the church has the desire or the means to facilitate this. It was

apparent from the interviews that traditional church structures that emphasise a weekly visit to a church service, and not much more, did not equip the participants to live the sort of prophetic alternative that characterised their response to consumerism. It is worth asking whether the Sunday church gathering did not feature much in the interviews because the service of worship is weak vehicle for encouraging faithful responses to the kingdom call for justice or because the churches that the participants were associated were not sufficiently aware of the ways in which consumerist culture conflicts with Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God. It is hard to know from this particular set of interviews but it does point to the need for churches to become much more engaged in articulating a prophetic witness to the kingdom of God in the face of the challenges posed by consumerism.

Churches need to consider whether they have understood the need for an alternative way of life within a consumerist culture and are they clearly explaining this.. Are churches highlighting the injustices inherent in consumerism and the repeated calls from Old Testament prophets to care for the poor and oppressed that are as relevant as ever in today's consumer society? Is the church using the Sunday preaching platform to call people to live lives that reflect God's Kingdom rather than replicating the exploitative ethos of consumer culture? Are churches using smaller gatherings as a means of encouragement, accountability and challenge for individuals left with the often daunting responsibility of making all the mundane, everyday decisions that together create a way of life that either embodies God's care and concern for all people and the created world, or embodies an exploitative ethic.

A key resource which for churches to remind the people of God of the call to seek justice on behalf of the world's most vulnerable populations is the book of Isaiah. Here churches can remember the prophetic cry against injustice that is needed in the face of consumerism. Like other Old Testament prophets, Isaiah railed against those who oppressed the poor and who withheld justice, they took up the cause of those being exploited and those overlooked by a system that privileged the rich and

powerful. Isaiah was radically aware of what was wrong with the current condition of the world. Alongside this, he expressed a clear vision of what the reign of peace and justice of God's Kingdom would entail.

The very first few chapters of Isaiah declare God's concern for the poor and the responsibility of God's people to care for them and extend justice. "Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed." (Isaiah 1: 17a) Notions of the judgment of God against those who without justice or oppress the poor follow. "What do you mean by crushing my people and grinding the faces of the poor?" (Isaiah 3: 15a); "Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people." (Isaiah 10: 1-2)

There is an ongoing call throughout Isaiah for God's people to act on behalf of the oppressed: "and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday." (Isaiah 58: 10). However, in Isaiah, the ultimate promise is that God will send a redeemer who will enact justice for the poor of the earth. "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him... with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth." (Isaiah 11: 1-2a, 4).

The theme of justice for the poor expounded in Isaiah is also picked up in Luke's account of the gospel, where Luke identifies Jesus as the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecies. For many theologians, Luke's portrayal of Jesus is one of an 'anointed prophet.'¹⁰⁸ This is also a useful consideration in light of the prophetic edge required in the face of consumerism and another critical resource for the church.

Brueggemann argues that "Jesus of Nazareth... practiced in most radical form the

¹⁰⁸ Roger Stronstad, *The Prophethood of all Believers: A study in Luke's Charismatic Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 37.

main elements of prophetic ministry and imagination. On the one hand, he practiced criticism of the deathly world around him.... On the other hand, he practiced the energizing of the new future given by God.”¹⁰⁹ Jesus’ inaugural speech in the book of Luke declares the upending of the existing social order through the quoting of Isaiah 61:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. (Luke 4: 17-18).

Luke has already set the scene for the idea of a complete upheaval of society through Mary’s revolutionary declaration during her pregnancy:

[God] has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty. (Luke 1: 51-53).

For Luke, the prophetic nature of Jesus is demonstrated in more than prophetic declarations. Jesus’ ongoing actions demonstrated a concern for the oppressed and marginalised of the Roman Empire. Ultimately Jesus’ message outlined the upending of social hierarchy. Karl Kuhn notes that for Luke, the world desperately needed deep and pervasive transformation.¹¹⁰ Luke draws attention to the “dehumanising

¹⁰⁹ Walter Bruggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (2001), 116.

¹¹⁰ Karl Allen Kuhn, *The Kingdom According to Luke and Acts: A Social, Literary, and Theological introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 229.

inequity spawned by Rome and its elite class as well as the degrading influence of sickness and the demonic.”¹¹¹

It is in the context of this reality that Luke has Jesus proclaiming salvation and announcing the arrival of God’s kingdom. Kuhn observes that Luke’s gospel is “relentless and uncompromising.”¹¹² It offers a vision of heaven and earth that “turns the tables on what most people in Luke’s age professed and lived as true.”¹¹³ The way Luke described Jesus was revolutionary. Jesus shattered accepted patterns for ordering society and instead promoted a completely new way of life.¹¹⁴ For Luke, the gospel message calls on all of humanity to turn their allegiance away from the earthly empire to another kingdom and another King. The Kingdom of God is portrayed as a deeply subversive force that undermined the foundations of the Roman Empire.

Matthias Wenk points out the ethical implications of such a gospel. He summarises: “Salvation is the realisation of good news for the poor in all aspects of their neediness, it is the in-breaking of God’s kingdom and its saving benefits into this world (Luke 11:1-13).”¹¹⁵ Wenk contends that the prophetic act of declaring the good news has a creative and transformative force.¹¹⁶ The proclamation of God’s kingdom is one way that the kingdom is realised. However, alongside this proclamation, Luke also describes numerous acts of Jesus that demonstrated a radical new understanding of how to relate to the marginalised in society. These actions embody the values of the kingdom of God where the poor hear good news and the oppressed are set free. A key area of this was evidenced in Jesus’ welcoming the sick, the outcast, the marginalised and those different from the religious insiders.

¹¹¹ Graham Twelftree, *People of the Spirit: Exploring Luke’s view of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 204.

¹¹² *ibid.*, xiv.

¹¹³ *ibid.*, xiv.

¹¹⁴ *ibid.*, xvii.

¹¹⁵ Matthias Wenk, *Community-Forming Power: The Socio-Ethical Role of the Spirit in Luke-Acts* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 316.

¹¹⁶ *ibid.*, 120.

Alongside Jesus' prophetic speech acts and practical demonstrations of an alternative ethic, Luke portrays the fresh emergence of an alternative community in the early Christian church. This is an important concept for Bruggemann who contends that one of the key tasks of prophetic ministry is to evoke an alternative community that knows it is "about different things in different ways."¹¹⁷ This alternative community is visible in Luke's description of the earliest followers of Jesus in Acts 2.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. (Acts 2: 42-44).

Max Turner highlights that the salvation Luke portrays is not primarily individualised.¹¹⁸ Rather, as Wenk argues, that the Christian community welcomed the poor, the demoniac, the marginalised and the outcast thus "creating the eschatological community envisaged within the Magnificat."¹¹⁹ The church, as an alternative community, becomes a visible manifestation of God's kingdom in this world. The community continues Jesus' ministry, realising good news for the marginalised and the oppressed.¹²⁰

Articulating the call to stand against the injustices of consumerism is the first challenge for the church and the participants in this study provide a prophetic example of what it might mean to live out the same sort of alternative community in the current consumerist context. They highlight ways to love the global neighbour,

¹¹⁷ Walter Bruggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (2001), 117.

¹¹⁸ Max Turner, *Power from on High: The Spirit in Israel's Restoration and Witness in Luke-Acts*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 21.

¹¹⁹ Matthias Wenk, *Community-Forming Power* (2000), 316.

¹²⁰ *ibid.*, 316

where all humans made in the image of God are treated with dignity, as well as embodying care for creation. They demonstrate through their alternative way of living, that the concerns of God are not the concerns of this world and that to be faithful to the call be “imitators of Christ” (Eph 11: 1) means living in ways contrary to the prevailing consumerist ethos. Some of the differences in lifestyle seem mundane, while others are profound and take much work and practice.

The second challenge for the church concerns the creation of the support structures required to sustain change at an individual level. It was clear that personal relationships of friends, family members and fellow intentional community housemates were the kind of critical support structures necessary to live out the reality of an alternative kingdom. Churches would do well to consider how they might support equip and support households to implement changes to live more fully a life that remains faithful to the core of Christianity within an empire that promulgates an alternative set of values.

It was apparent in the results from the interviewees that being part of an alternative community was an important aspect of the stance taken against the pervasive impact of consumerism. Key in this task was the influence of ‘households of faith.’ Whether biologically linked, committed by marriage or united by some other shared agreement, a ‘household of faith’ can only become a prophetic entity through a common commitment to stand up to the injustices of the consumerist system and take concrete steps against it. It requires concrete decisions to change behaviour, whether through large steps or small in order to align practice more closely with belief.

In these households, the home became a place of accountability and challenge as well as encouragement and empowerment. They acknowledge the difficulty of individuals making significant changes without support. The households challenged the individualism of Western culture, regarding all people as God’s children whose well-being is bound up with our own. Households of faith become the place where

putting others first occurs on a daily, lived out basis. These households of faith have the capacity to become a prophetic community where the style of life is sufficiently different from the surrounding world that it acts as a critique of the society in which it finds itself.

Churches would also do well to foster communities that assist young adults to create households of faith suited to the stage of life between leaving a family home and the possible creation of a family of their own. Given the rise of new monasticism and its ability to create meaningful community with young adults, this would be a way of enabling a positive and supportive peer group to grapple with the issues and challenges that emerge from being part of a consumer society.

My research has highlighted that churches need to be more fully engaged in exploring practical ways to respond to the issues of injustice and exploitation inherent in consumerism. To embrace the biblical mandate to care for both the poor and oppressed as well as the environment requires a lifestyle change. This alternative way of life is marked by simplicity and sacramentality. It eschews the temptations of individualism and dualism and instead reflects Jesus' call to love the neighbour in even the most mundane actions. It is a way of life that challenges prevailing notions of convenience and in its place elevates discipline and sacrifice. It is a way of life that the church would do well to consider if it is to be effective in creating and maintaining an alternative community that embodies a kingdom ethic.

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Appendix

VICTORIA UNIVERSITY OF WELLINGTON
Te Whare Wananga o te Upoko o te Ika a Maui



PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Research project: Christian Responses to Consumer Culture

Researcher: Carolyn Robertson

I am a doctoral student in the Religious Studies programme at Victoria University of Wellington. As part of this degree I am undertaking a research project leading to a thesis. The project I am undertaking examines Christian responses to consumer culture, focusing on responses among people who have, or have previously had, significant involvement with evangelicalism.

You are being invited to take part in this research project by being interviewed. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please read the following information carefully, and feel free to ask questions if there anything is unclear to you or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

This project will document ways that Christians with evangelical connections resolve tensions between their faith and consumer culture. You have been asked to be a part of this project because you have, or previously had, involvement with an evangelical stream of Christianity. The project will interview a range of about 20-25 people in order to capture a variety of ways in which Christians think about consumerism and respond to it. The project seeks to explore how the Christian faith is informing and influencing everyday practices in a consumer society.

In agreeing to take part you will be interviewed for approximately one hour, discussing issues concerning Christianity and consumerism. The interviews will be fairly informal and you will be encouraged to speak freely about any thoughts and experiences you have. The interview will take place in a location agreed to by yourself and the interviewer; this may be your home, a café or other suitable space.

All the information that is collected about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. You will not be able to be identified in any reports or publications.

After the interview has been transcribed you will be provided with a copy to make any changes, additions or deletions that you wish.

Responses collected will form the basis of my research project and will be put into a written report in an anonymous basis. It will not be possible for you to be identified personally. All material will be kept confidential. No one else besides me, an interview transcriber, and my supervisors will hear this interview. No subsequent interview transcripts will identify you in any way.

The audio recordings of the interviews made during this research will be used only for analysis. No other use will be made of them and no one outside the project will be allowed access to the original recordings.

At the end of the project the results will be written up as part of my doctorate. A copy of this will be lodged at the Victoria University of Wellington library. Findings from the research may be written up at a later stage in different formats, for publication in an academic journals or periodicals of another nature. Findings may also be presented in a seminar, or in other talks and presentations.

If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. You may withdraw at any time without question prior to March 30th 2011. After this time your interviews will be incorporated into the wider research.

The University of Wellington has given ethics approval for this research.

If you have any questions or comments about the project at any time, please contact me: robertsonheggln@gmail.com, or phone 027 712 0549. Alternatively you could contact my supervisor, Dr Geoff Troughton: geoff.troughton@vuw.ac.nz, or at the School of Art History, Classics and Religious Studies, Victoria University, PO Box 600, Wellington 6140, phone (04) 463 5590.

Thank you,

Carolyn Robertson

VICTORIA UNIVERSITY OF WELLINGTON
Te Whare Wananga o te Upoko o te Ika a Maui



CONSENT TO PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

Research project: Christian Responses to Consumer Culture

Researcher: Carolyn Robertson (School of Art History, Classics and Religious Studies)

I have read the participant information sheet and I agree to take part in this research project through being interviewed. I understand that the interview will be recorded and later transcribed by a transcriber and that I will have the opportunity to read the transcription and make changes to it. I understand that the information I provide will be kept confidential and that I may withdraw from the project at any time prior to March 30th 2011.

Name of Participant

Date

Signature



TRANSCRIBER PRIVACY AGREEMENT

Research project: Christian Responses to Consumer Culture

Researcher: Carolyn Robertson (School of Art History, Classics and Religious Studies)

I understand that the material I am transcribing is strictly confidential. I agree to prevent anyone hearing the contents of the transcriptions in auditory form or reading the contents of the transcriptions in written form. I understand that I must not talk about the contents of the material being transcribed with anyone other than the researcher. I agree to store the material in a locked environment while it is in my possession. I agree to destroy any copies I have of the auditory and written material once the transcriptions are returned to the researcher.

Name of Transcriber

Date

Signature