Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire

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On the way back from the hardware store, while buying grass seed and some bales of hay, I was scanning for a country station when I came across “You’ve Got to Fight for Your Right to Party” by the Beastie Boys. In it, the band captures the revolutionary sentiments of that repressed class, the unprecedentedly rich and indulged modern teenager, urging them to the barricades to assert, against their loving but domineering parents, that most basic right: to party. I am assuming they were not talking freedom of assembly to form representational political groups.

There it is. A generation so spoiled that the only thing they have to revolt over is parental disputes about hair length and drug use while at home, and so out of control of their own urges to consume that they want to fight for them. Perhaps William Cavanaugh is right: our market system has consumed us, reducing us to the status of animals living for consumption and blind to any higher purpose than our stomach (Phil. 3:19).

And then the song was over (thank Heaven) and I returned to my search. Passing over a Christian station, I got to a country one just in time to catch “Jesus Take the Wheel.” This leads to the question: how is it that country music has managed to become popular with such songs, just megahertz away from Megadeth—that “out of the same [electronic] mouths come blessings and curses (James 3:10)?”

Cavanaugh would likely explain “Jesus Take the Wheel” as the market simply catering to a religious taste for music, a mass provision that relativizes the religious to the point of another personal preference. But this misses a critical dimension by failing to consider where the “taste” came from and why it continues to exist in the richest, most market saturated country on earth. The U.S. stands out in its religious practice. Why do so many people in America (in contrast to other countries both poor and developed, market and non-market, etc.) want to hear, write about, and worship Jesus even today? In not addressing this, Cavanaugh exemplifies an error common to the analysis of markets: failure to recognize successes in markets or failures in non-market systems hinders accurate assessment of the extent to which problems are due to capitalism, or to other—cultural, philosophical, or policy—factors. This also illustrates a more tragic point: how so many critics misdirect so much of their scarce time battling
markets when they could be so much more useful in building the kingdom of God by opposing the vastly more corrosive philosophies of nihilism and relativism.

*Being Consumed* is divided into four chapters: what constitutes true freedom in the market, attachment and detachment in consumption, globalization and the tension between the local and universal, and the Eucharist as an alternative model of consumption. Each raises good points from a Christian perspective challenging modern economic thinking. First, although by the term “free” economists typically mean “autonomous individuals free from state intervention,” the Christian understanding of freedom (e.g., described by Augustine) is freedom to pursue the true ends to which one is called, being no longer the slave of one’s own preferences. Second, Cavanaugh claims that we change goods so often that we have become detached from specific goods, but attached to the very process of stimulating desire. Third, he worries that globalization creates a distorted combination of universal and particular. Globalization simultaneously spreads some preferences everywhere (e.g., McDonalds) yet multicultural juxtaposition and rapid change imply that everything is relative, that there is no universal, even Jesus. This is contrary to the combination of Christ as particular yet universal and with people’s need for particular communities and traditions in which to grow. The final section on the Eucharist describes how, unlike physical consumption in which we transform what we consume into our bodies, in consuming the Eucharist, we are transformed, taken into the body of Christ, and come to care about others in the body of Christ.

Alas, the book does not stop there. Unfortunately, from these helpful theological observations Cavanaugh draws weak or misleading connections to poorly understood economic phenomena (the usual uncritically examined litany of sweatshops, child labor, fair trade, worker satisfaction, advertising, the race to the bottom of environmental and labor standards, advertising, etc., and of course Wal-Mart), and to propose ineffective or unnecessary solutions to them. The problems are not with the theology, but with the combination of the inappropriate stretching of theological ideas to applications for which they were not intended, and (as arguments against straw men) mischaracterizations of the free market that are not needed for a Christian defense of the market system. In addition, the theology is then brought to service critiques of the market for cases in which the circumstances are either not as bad as described or not as supposed; moreover, this theology is used to support solutions unlikely to be effective. Furthermore, much of this misleading analysis is driven by a general hostility to markets combined with an overemphasis on the idea
that economic practice/action matters for the formation of the person, a
good principle that becomes counterproductive when we fail to consider
the limits of how much individual practices actually do matter in the
circumstances, relative to other actions or the role of ideas.

Take his case of freedom. Cavanaugh asserts that people are not free
even in “free markets” because firms manipulate preferences of customers
with advertising, and exploit workers by offering low pay and poor working
conditions. Nowhere does he engage actual evidence about the extent of
either. For example, his case of GM as poster child for manipulative ad
power is not exactly helped by the $40 billion it lost in 2007. Similarly,
much consumption is neither for oneself nor connected with ads (e.g.,
the hay and grass I bought). Unexplored is the possibility that personal
identity (e.g., as a child loved by God regardless of the brand of clothes,
car, grass seed, or hay) may affect the efficacy of crass appeals to image.
Similarly, people in communist countries, “freed” from advertising, were
notoriously materialistic, while, as Arthur Brooks (2006) demonstrates in
Who Really Cares, market friendly/government skeptical devout Christians
in America, consuming a lot with their large incomes, nonetheless manage
to give the most time and money in service to the needy and society.

The same inadequate consideration hinders his analysis of worker
freedom in pay and working conditions. Greater efficiency of markets has
freed most workers in developed countries from the oppressive conditions
he describes, and is doing the same in other countries following that path.
Yes, many egregious examples exist which can and ought to be stopped.
But such statements as “The consumer’s pursuit of low, low prices at Wal-
Mart means low, low wages for the people in Asia who make the products
we buy” (p. 94) ignore the reality that wages in those countries are driven
more by low, low alternative opportunities and efficiency, than Wal-Mart’s
compensation. And it is particularly shocking to cite Asia as the example,
given that Asian countries which pioneered the cheap labor strategy for
entry into world markets (Hong Kong, Japan, etc.) ended with high,
high wages, while communist governments in Asia killed 60–70 million
to build worker paradises that never materialized (not to mention that
they imprisoned millions more in actual slave labor camps). Only since
abandoning such socialist and communist dreams to help labor have they
begun to lift the masses out of poverty, including hundreds of millions of
people in India and China alone. Nor does Cavanaugh recognize that Wal-
Mart itself is likely reducing poverty in the world faster than any other
single entity ever.

On the other hand, consider one of the practices he suggests to deal
with the problems he mentions: getting to know producers with fair-
trade products and community-supported agriculture (CSA): “avoiding the middleman, they personalize the food” (p. 87). Apparently, what the middleman does is not personal or production. “In this encounter, the person is seen as another self and another Christ, the universal in the particular” (p. 87). CSA “sets prices to ensure a sustainable living for farmers, who are otherwise subjected to the vagaries of the market” (p. 87). As opposed to the vagaries of government policy or luck? And what of the middlemen grocers? Does their income matter? And if their income does, and everyone else’s does, we are back to efficiency. And sure, getting to know your farmer and farm hands may be nice, but is this particular means of seeing the universal Christ really the best use of my efforts and scarce time? Why precisely will this teach Jesus as universal so much more effectively than an alternative like teaching Sunday school or running a Bible study? Why should this economic arrangement trump spreading the Gospel as the strategy for coming to know others, particularly those closest to us: as our families, friends, co-workers, church members, fellow volunteers, etc. or God himself?

Moreover, the understandable but idealistic drive to know producers also clashes with Cavanaugh’s desire to reduce poverty: he fails to perceive the tension between poverty reduction and personal connection. Poverty reduction will only happen via efficiency increases, and in many cases these will require production scales sufficiently large that getting to know the producer is no longer feasible. And once one is forced to realize this impossibility, the excessive attachment unravels: if not feasible in some industries, then in which ones, or why at all? I will not have time to know everyone, so it would seem natural to focus on those God has placed most directly in my life and wait for heaven to get to know the rest. Otherwise, I will sacrifice those closest to me in a quixotic attempt to get to know others more distant. If for the gift mentality is critical to have a sense of God’s gift to us, and I agree with Cavanaugh that it is, why is this so much more critical in our economic arrangements (where it is difficult and less natural) than in our families, churches, volunteer or social lives—all places in which the gift mentality would be vastly more apparent, natural, and easy to build up?

Cavanaugh’s discussion of the Eucharist is undermined by his simplistic misrepresentation of scarcity and the invisible hand. According to Cavanaugh, the focus of economics on addressing scarcity appears to contrast with the abundance of the Eucharist. From there, Cavanaugh argues that faith in the invisible hand results in the presumption that via the market, my consumption will provide for the needs of others, thus I do not have to consider them.
Sorry, but scarcity is not an invention of economics. And the fact of scarcity in the material dimension in no way detracts from God’s capacity materially or His abundant provision spiritually. A better interpretation may be that recognition of the inadequacy of the material world induces us to look to the spiritual?

Thus Cavanaugh’s book presents a harmful series of misrepresentations, because it results in too great an emphasis on economic arrangements and underestimates the importance of spiritual needs and of religious values and ideas themselves as contributions. First, despite there being in a section on the Eucharist, by “needs” the Cavanaugh means only material needs, not spiritual needs such as coming to know God directly. As with the rest of the book and the writings of so many theologians today, Cavanaugh never engages how aggressive secularism, driven by anti-religious elites, might be a problem in hindering people from coming to know about God and His provision for the material and spiritual dimensions of our lives.

Second, of course believing “the market will care for others thus I do not have to” is bad, as is “the government will take care of others thus I do not have to.” But then the problem is not the market, but an unreflecting confidence in any institution that undermines my concern and vigilance regarding the needs of others. On the other hand, rising productivity enables more people to better provide for themselves, thus meeting the concerns of subsidiarity and personal responsibility. The more market efficiency gains enable some of my brothers and sisters to earn a living on their own, the more I can focus my efforts on the material needs of those who remain, or the spiritual needs of all. If anything, Brooks’s evidence indicates that overconfidence in government action is more problematic than overconfidence in the invisible hand. If so, perhaps encouragement of religious practice might be a more effective way of meeting needs, spiritual and material, than new economic arrangements; this is something a theologian could do especially well.

Ultimately, Cavanaugh appears to commit the very fallacy John Paul II warned was at the heart of the socialist error: placing excessive faith in economic relations alone to provide for material justice and meaning in the absence of a theological vision of what it means to be human. This theological grounding may be what Cavanaugh intends, but he fails to consider what happens as people no longer care for the theology. Benedict XVI gets at this by criticizing the current “dictatorship of relativism,” which closes off public debate to theological input, consideration of spiritual needs, or the importance of a grounding of meaning. As more and more Christians (and others) absorb a secular framework for interpreting
the world and living their lives, this undermines their capacity to integrate a Christian worldview materially and spiritually.

In this way *Being Consumed* oddly twists John Paul’s argument. It misapplies theological principles to argue for specific economic relations, without considering spiritual needs and without ever mentioning the extent to which the Gospel itself might be the most important part of the solution to the challenges of the modern economic order, and that this Gospel is under attack by non-economic forces. Besides not helping materially, the economic solutions Cavanaugh offers as applications of his theological interpretations will mean little if the faith behind those theological principles is eroded by aggressive secularism. In what way does community supported agriculture in a no-longer-believing Europe help its participants to see the universal Christ or see others as members of His body? Sadly, many theologians seem to be spending more time on the economics than on defending the Gospel from these philosophical threats.

Why does this happen? Because many believe the economy to be a bigger problem than secularism. *Being Consumed* demonstrates this quite well. It is no wonder that a person so captivated by idealistic notions of seemingly wholesome (but ineffective) economic relations, so unaware of successes in markets and failures in other systems, so excessively negative about current circumstances, might think the economy is the biggest problem today.

This is precisely the error Nobel laureate Robert Fogel was getting at when he wrote (for the U.S. now, but with more general lessons in mind) “failure to recognize the enormous material gains of the last century, even for the poor, impedes rather than advances the struggle in rich nations against chronic poverty, whose principal characteristic is the spiritual estrangement from the mainstream society of those so afflicted” (Fogel, 2000, p. 3). Contrast theologian Cavanaugh’s assessment of the economy and society and his suggestions with Fogel’s recommendations. Fogel, the economist, argues that the greatest needs for people today are for the principles and values of religious groups, not alternative economic arrangements: “The most serious threats to egalitarian progress—certainly, the most intractable forms of poverty—are related to the unequal distribution of spiritual (immaterial) resources” (p. 3). Fogel worries that the focus on unfairness in the material dimension and the economy is not only misplaced, it fosters the very consumerism Cavanaugh criticizes by emphasizing only material well-being to the exclusion of considering how virtues and philosophical ideas themselves matter. Blaming the economic
order without sufficient attention to the spiritual dimension will “promote consumerism [but] will solve neither the problem of spiritual deprivation nor the profound alienation of neglected youths” (p. 3).

This is where Christian economists can make such a big difference today. I believe that quantifying the extent to which markets are materially just and affect the social/cultural/spiritual order will help us to realize that philosophical trends, not markets, are the biggest enemy we face today. Perhaps this will free up many people better trained for that battle to reallocate scarce resources to a more appropriate mix of economic and philosophical criticism.

References
