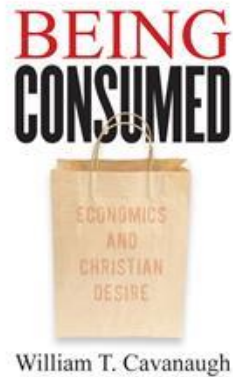


**William T. Cavanaugh. *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008. Pp. xii + 103. ISBN 978-0802845610. Paperback \$14.**

*Being Consumed* is a clearly-written, intelligent little provocation by American Catholic theologian William Cavanaugh (DePaul). Cavanaugh's specialty is theological interventions in politics, culture, and history; and this book is no exception. In it he offers a moral critique of consumerism, globalization, and the assumptions behind them, as well as giving theologically-based answers to the problems he describes. His critique is not of the free market as such, but of free market theory unaccompanied by an ethics based on a theological account of human nature.



He begins in chapter 1 by contesting the freedom of the “free market” as advocated by Friedman and Hayek. The free-market thinkers are chiefly concerned only with “negative” freedom—the absence of restraints on exchange, but fail to consider the “end” or proper goal of human desires. The free market is supposedly the mechanism that best harmonizes scarcity, price, and desire so that any transaction can satisfy both buyer and seller. But free-market thinkers “are agnostic” (p. 6) on what makes desires themselves desirable—what makes them “good.” They have no philosophy of human nature to direct their theories.

Cavanaugh turns to Saint Augustine’s theological anthropology to argue that, in fact, free-market participants are not free. They are instead like the addict that

is profoundly unfree and cannot free himself. In order for him to regain freedom of choice, he cannot be left alone. He can only be free by being liberated from his false desires and being moved to desire rightly. (p. 9)

In sum, “the absence of external force is not sufficient to determine the freedom of any particular exchange. In order to judge whether or not an exchange is free, one must know whether or not the will is moved toward a good end” (p. 13). So free-marketeers grant freedom only in an external sense, while ignoring the internal chains.

Another question Cavanaugh considers is whether, in an advertising-saturated culture, people are choosing what they really want. According to Friedman (as summarized by Cavanaugh), you distinguish between real and artificial desire based on “what people in fact choose” (p. 7). “The problem with the ‘free-market’ view is that it assumes that the abolition of objective goods provides the conditions for the individual will to function more or less autonomously” (p. 16). The problem with this assumption is that advertisers are not just informing choices; they are much more shaping the desires, or even the very self, of the consumer. Advertisers are brilliant storytellers: they craft enticing narratives, portray characters, and attract the senses with music and imagery—all to forge “emotional bonds” between audience and product.

The second chapter discusses a central paradox of the free market as considered without a transcendent or theological dimension: on the one hand, people are more attached to things insofar as free market theory is functionally materialistic; on the other hand, people are paradoxically detached from things as such, insofar as the immanentized free-market *reduces everything to a commodity*. The chapter boils down to a theological critique of consumer culture, but I don’t think Cavanaugh is clear enough on the free-market connection. He is saying that free-market theory implies a low view of material things, because it views consumers as autonomous choosers of anything (they can afford), regardless of their created ends, community, or other standards of fittingness. In other words, its commodification of material things results from its reduced view of human nature and human freedom. It expects people to use and discard objects rather than treasure them. The theory, in other words, is descriptively right—it predicts the consumerism we in fact have.

But, according to Cavanaugh, it is prescriptively wrong. We should not relate to matter this way, neglecting its personal, divinely created and sustained aspects. A sign of our neglect is that consumerism has to fill the vacuum of transcendence by investing “[t]hings and brands...with mythologies, with spiritual aspirations; things come to represent freedom, status, love” (p. 48). Such commodification and consumerism devalues human creativity and can reinforce—though it certainly doesn’t cause—the objectification of people and their bodies. Thus it also detaches people from each other—virtualizing community on social media while reducing virtue to sentiment. “The virtual becomes a substitute for concrete political solidarity, or to put it another way, a fundamentally different act—consumption—is substituted for political action” (p. 51, quoting Vincent Miller).

In reading this chapter, by the way, I was troubled by a possible implied critique of my own mainstream Protestant evangelicalism. Does it tend to collude with consumerism by marketing denominations, local churches, programs, personalities, and Christianity itself as just one more “choice” of consumption? Perhaps so.

More cheerfully, Cavanaugh’s theological perspective plays a constructive role in the discussion at the end of the chapter. For him, it is not enough simply to criticize consumerism in theory, not enough even to abstain in practice. We must transform our entire relationship to matter through a practice *opposed* to consumerism: namely, the liturgy of the Lord’s Supper. By participating in this communal meal, “we are absorbed into a larger body. The small individual self is de-centered and put in the context of a much wider community of participation with others in the divine life” (p. 55). Our autonomous selves, with their auto-hedonistic purchasing habits, become the (body) parts of the Church whose head is Christ. This is not passive mysticism, although it is a mystery. “In the Eucharist, Christ is gift, giver, and recipient; we are simultaneously fed and become food for others” (p. 56). The Eucharist is the event that empowers us to *be consumed* instead of consuming, to serve instead of

being served, to love actively instead of merely showing sentiment. On this reading, the Eucharist is nothing less than a new basis for both freedom and an economy of self-sacrificial giving: participants remember, and are spurred to imitate, the ultimate self-sacrifice.

The next chapter deals with globalization and multi-culturalism, and here again the connection with the previous chapter is less clear than it should be. Put simply, our relation to things via consumption carries over to our relation to culture as a whole. We think we can sample cultures and traditions, like foods from a global buffet, apart from their fittingness to place and time. So what if I have Chinese food in Kansas on Christmas Eve? I'll try the Mexican place next door tomorrow. As previously, Cavanaugh is keen to point out the paradoxes that ensue with globalization. On the one hand, the free market sees the world—regardless of ethnic, traditional, or spatial boundaries—as one giant fund of material and human resources to be churned into profits. Multinationals, sometimes colluding with corrupt local officials, plunder third-world countries for cheap labor, preferring profits to human flourishing. (Even corporate philanthropy in these countries is “consumed” as advertising credit.) Cavanaugh gives the usual examples of brand-name products made in sweatshops, and one could mention the more recently revealed conditions at the plants of Chinese Apple supplier Foxconn.<sup>1</sup>

In this discussion, Cavanaugh follows common usage in equivocating “labor” and “work,” and then distinguishing “creative” from repetitive, mind-numbing work. It would be useful, in my opinion, to distinguish labor and work, as Hannah Arendt does in *The Human Condition*.<sup>2</sup> “Labor” is activity aimed mostly at perpetuating the cycle of life—feeding, clothing, sheltering—with little “human” (rational or imaginative) input and little duration. On the other hand, “work” is activity that leaves

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<sup>1</sup> “Apple under fire again for working conditions at Chinese factories.” *The Guardian* (December 19, 2014). <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/dec/19/apple-under-fire-again-for-working-conditions-at-chinese-factories> (accessed 7/25/2017).

<sup>2</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), ch. 11.

something behind, like a statue, painting, or poem—something stamped with human ingenuity and left to beautify the world. The Industrial Age shifts much of human activity from work to labor, while mass production (e.g., famous photographs on posters at Wal-Mart) transfers “works” into the cycle of consumption.

In any case, Cavanaugh’s point here is that globalization damages and expends the “local.” But, on the other hand, it intensifies, multiplies—by commodifying—the local. Hence the phenomenon of finding cuisine from all over the world in a single “restaurant row” in the average suburb. Of course one can do better at the mall. There one can find similar cheap imitations of ethnic cuisine in the same tacky shops but then, after getting sick from the high-fructose corn syrup, you can shop for ethnically-inspired clothes made by under-compensated workers from all over the world.

The end result of this “universalization and fragmentation” (p. 61) is the devaluing of the very “local” flavors, textures, designs, and sounds that are now encountered everywhere, but in a commodified, bastardized Western form. Cuisine over-sweetened for the American palate and “foreign” movie soundtracks with ethnic melodies over a hip-hop beat, are just two examples.

In our commodified, one-world shop we tourist-consumers are ever haunted by the exports of our free market profiteering. We are at once everywhere and nowhere.

To this dismal situation Cavanaugh opposes the reality of Christ as the “concrete universal” and the Catholic Church as the “unification of the many through attachment to the local Eucharistic community” (p. 85). I found this section the least helpful of Cavanaugh’s theological interventions, nor did I find the Hegelian jargon he borrows from Von Balthasar especially illuminating. Approaching the subject through the language of Scripture would probably have been clearer. Still, Cavanaugh draws some important practical conclusions from his systematics. “Without God [as revealed particularly *and* universally in Christ], there is

nothing really unique; the temptations will always be to absorb the individual into the universal, the person into an all-encompassing nature" (p. 82). Moreover, "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 center of economic relations, as Pope John Paul II has repeatedly insisted" (p. 86). And in his next and last chapter, on "Scarcity and Abundance," he turns to a famous passage on Christian ethics from the Gospel of John ("I was hungry and you gave me food" [25:35]) to argue that God himself underlies and should motivate our concern for the Two-Thirds World that supports our consumption.

At this point I would like to offer some contextualization and evaluation. *Being Consumed* is not quite so *sui generis* as some readers might think. It bears the mark of many of the theological interventions emanating from the "Radical Orthodoxy" school within British theology, which stems from John Milbank's epochal *Theology and Social Theory*. (For example, Cavanaugh's comment, "Globalization as I have been describing it often takes the form of a parody of true catholicity," echoes Milbank's point that modern social theory is a heretical form of theology.) *Being Consumed* bears comparison with D. Stephen Long's *Divine Economy* and Phillip Goodchild's *The Theology of Money*, which are more-or-less within the RO camp. I am also reminded of Long's dialogue with economist Nancy Ruth Fox in *Calculated Futures*.<sup>3</sup>

Some readers of *Being Consumed* will wonder, as Fox does in *Calculated Futures*, what theology has to do with economics. Economics is often seen as an amoral, math-based science that prescribes the fairest system of exchange between buyer and seller, while taking their specific desires for

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<sup>3</sup> John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006); D. Stephen Long, *Divine Economy: Theology and the Market* (London: Routledge, 2000); Phillip Goodchild, *Theology of Money* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009); D. Stephen Long and Nancy Ruth Fox, *Calculated Futures: Theology, Ethics and Economics* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007).

products and profits, along with their ultimate goals, as given. Conceived as such, economics suffers from the same mathematical reductionism that plagues the other social sciences; its practitioners claim the same false rigor (one critic has called this attitude “mathism”<sup>4</sup>); and it is similarly over-specialized and isolated from the humanities (which, to be fair, have their own problems). By contrast, Radical Orthodoxy seeks to return theology to its traditional position as *Queen of the sciences*, therefore in some sense “ruling” economics.

One needn’t buy into every aspect of this movement to agree with Cavanaugh’s criticisms of free-market theory. His point, put simply, is that economics needs an ethics to be complete; and such an ethics, in turn, needs a theological metaphysics to be complete. A system of exchange, to avoid the massive damage of globalization and consumerism, needs a view of the good life—of the ultimate good for human beings—to know what kinds of desires, choices, and community one should advocate.

This is the point to bring a specifically Christian libertarian economics into the discussion. It seems to me that the libertarian has a fuller set of values guiding his theory than the typical free-marketer. The libertarian, after all, calls (at the very least) for a return to the scope of the federal government as designed by the Founders. On the other hand, the libertarian might fear moral legislation, or some threat to economic freedom, as if Cavanaugh were suggesting people vet their transactions with the local priest.

Cavanaugh is not “doing economics,” and readers with specialist training in economics will find much oversimplification. What he is doing is offering a theological ethics *of* economics in response to problems that have issued from a certain economic system (free-market capitalism), especially when effected on a global scale. For this reason, Christian

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<sup>4</sup> Alan Jay Levinovitz, “The New Astrology: By fetishizing mathematical models, economists turned economics into a highly paid pseudoscience.” *Aeon* (April 4, 2016). <https://aeon.co/essays/how-economists-rode-maths-to-become-our-era-s-astrologers> (accessed 7/25/2017).

libertarians ought to sit up and pay attention. What, after all, do we mean by “Christian”? Cavanaugh’s theological framework is informed by traditional Catholic social thought, Aquinas, Augustine, and Von Balthasar. (Predictably, as a Protestant I found myself wishing for more biblical input, such as in the writings of Gary North.) Cavanaugh has a keen eye for how doctrine is expressed in ritual, and how ritual feeds back into doctrine. This is important if you think, as I do, that beliefs and practices shape who we are, and therefore the purchasing choices, systems of exchange, and overall cultures we engage in. On this view, Christianity is not a private hobby just for Sundays and holidays, but a world-shaping way of life that streams out of our fingertips into every moment of the week. Cavanaugh has a thickly described, concrete and ramifying “Christianity,” which is something I think many Christian libertarians need.

It is in this area of concrete practices that *Being Consumed* provoked me most. How can I oppose consumerism, materialism, globalization, etc.—in my own life? Some of Cavanaugh’s suggestions, like supporting sustainable, ethical employment practices, were par-for-the-course. However, he also advocates “turn[ing] our homes into sites of production, not just consumption...[S]imple acts such as making our own bread or our own music can become significant ways to reshape the way we approach the material world” (p. 57). First of all, I appreciate his awareness throughout the book of how liturgy shape shapes worldview. (James K. A. Smith has been writing much on this topic in recent years.<sup>5</sup>) But this recommendation also provoked further self-evaluation. For example, perhaps I should resist buying pre-packaged, creativity-killing toys and games for my kids for the same reason—so that they have to learn to re-imagine and reshape the humble but potent raw material the Creator puts in their way. Cavanaugh has several of these simple, practical suggestions near the end of nearly every chapter. It is, among other things, his balance

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<sup>5</sup> See for example, James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016).



of critique and program that makes his slender volume such a rewarding read.

Bret Saunders<sup>6</sup>  
Rapid City, South Dakota

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<sup>6</sup> Bret Saunders (PhD Philosophy, University of Dallas) is Associate Professor of Humanities at John Witherspoon College.