

William T. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2008). xii + 100 pages.

Economics plays a significant role in how we seek to understand and organize our lives – globally, nationally, and personally – so it makes sense for economics to be a major area of Christian theological reflection. Theologian and theological ethicist William T. Cavanaugh has ventured into this field with a remarkable book engaging economic theory and practice with the aid of the Christian scriptures and the Roman Catholic theological tradition.



William T. Cavanaugh

It is worth acknowledging at the outset that – refreshingly – Cavanaugh is not advocating a complete disavowal of modern capitalist and consumerist economic systems. ‘The call to Christians is not ... to replace abstractions such as “capitalism” with other abstractions’ (p. 86), but instead to explore alternative, authentically Christian modes of economic life.

Published in 2008, as the Global Financial Crisis brought the world’s financial institutions to their knees, *Being Consumed* presents a stark challenge not only to the philosophical underpinnings of the global capitalist system, but more pointedly to the way those underpinnings form us into particular kinds of people and particular kinds of communities. Consumerism – the driving force of the modern global economy – provides a particular lens through which Cavanaugh engages economic thinking and practice. He does this in conversation with several influential economists (Milton Friedman, Adam Smith) and Roman Catholic theologians (primarily Augustine). Cavanaugh uses these conversation partners to unpack some of the key beliefs of modern economics.

One such belief is the freedom of the market. Cavanaugh argues that the notion of ‘freedom’ inherent in ‘free market’ economic theory isn’t really freedom at all. Free market freedom is defined as the absence of limitations on the individual pursuit of desires. A Christian vision of freedom, in contrast, is not a ‘freedom from’ but a ‘freedom for’. In fact, unlimited pursuit of desire leads to addiction – a form of slavery. Taking his lead from the famous opening of Augustine’s *Confessions*, Cavanaugh argues that the ‘restlessness’ of the endless consumerist pursuit of desire needs to find its ‘rest’ in God, for whom we were made.

In one of the most startling and incisive moments in the book, Cavanaugh argues that our modern problem isn’t materialism; if anything, our consumerism means we aren’t materialistic enough. ‘What really characterises consumer culture is not attachment to things but detachment. People do not hoard money; they spend it. People do not cling to things; they discard them and buy other things’ (p. 34). Rather than a rejection of the spiritual in favour of the material, consumerism is a ‘spiritual disposition’ with shopping – not buying – at its heart. In this way consumerism is a form of moral formation, shaping the way we see the world such that a product is never just a ‘thing’ but becomes part of a web of symbolic identity–markers through which we make and remake ourselves with each new purchase.

This articulation of the nature of consumerism is perhaps the most important observation of the book, and calls for Christians to take much more seriously the forces around us seeking to order our desires away from God and toward the profit of corporations. We cannot escape the need to consume – ‘Everyone must consume to live’ – but we do need to ask ‘what kinds of practices of consumption are conducive to an abundant life for all’ (p. 53).

In the final chapter the question of scarcity – central to modern economics – is addressed with reference to eschatology. Scarcity paints a picture in which all of us are in danger of not having enough. In one of the most brilliant theological moves in the book, Cavanaugh argues that consumer-driven capitalism presents us with a rival eschatology – or, rather, presents a world without eschatology. Just as the ‘free’ market posits the absence of a direction for our desires in favour of no restraints, so the struggle to bring abundance from scarcity is served by the absence of limits. Through the ‘invisible hand’ of the market (Adam Smith’s phrase), the self-centred consumptive decisions of each individual work together for the common good. This, Cavanaugh says, represents ‘an eschatology in which abundance for all is just around the corner.’ No final in-breaking of the kingdom of God is necessary to finally see to abundance for all of God’s creatures; instead, if we just carry on as we are, eventually that will take care of itself. In this way, ‘consumerism is the death of Christian eschatology’ (p. 93).

Contrastingly, Christians believe in a God who has come near to us in Jesus in order that we might have life in abundance (John 10:10). The abundance of God is seen in the Eucharist, in which the body and blood of Christ never runs out; rather, we partake in it, week in, week out. We are people who have received every spiritual blessing in Christ (Ephesians 1). Knowing this theological truth, we are able to challenge the fear of scarcity that underpins our economic and consumptive practices. ‘[The] body and the blood of Christ are not scarce commodities’ (p. 94). We experience the abundance of God in the present, while awaiting the greater abundance to come at Christ’s return. Christians thus have both the capacity in the present and the necessary vision of the future with which to do something concrete about our economic practices in the present.

As such, participation in the body of Christ opens up new possibilities for us to live a different way – in our economic practices just as in every other. Examples of such practices are the highlight of the book. Building relationships between churches and local farmers, supporting Fair Trade movements, and establishing cooperative business models in which profits are channeled into social ends are all presented as highly practical ways in which Christian communities can express and embody the abundance of God in our day to day economic practices.

In tackling these issues Cavanaugh is seeking to reframe our conversations about economics. Questioning some of the basic assumptions of modern economics, we are forced instead to ask questions such as ‘When is a market exchange free?’ As members in Christ’s body, how might ‘our’ possessions become ‘ours’ as we give and receive in community? What kinds of exchanges instead promote the flourishing of God’s creatures towards the ends for which he has made them? How might God’s Trinitarian nature and self-giving in Christ encourage us toward better integrated and more just economic exchanges?

There are many other issues on which this deceptively short book touches: global labour relations, sustainable agriculture, our detachment from the people and processes who produce the products we consume. On each of these Cavanaugh has something significant and insightful to contribute. The intersection of theology and economics is a growing field, to which Cavanaugh’s book is a welcome addition. While there are other works which are fuller and more exegetically engaged, *Being Consumed* is a deeply insightful critique of consumer culture and modern economic practice that challenges us both to think carefully about our own desires and to establish concrete economic practices that better embody the life of God with his people.

Read this book as a spur and a foundation for rethinking how you and your Christian community might embody the abundant grace of God in your economic practices and relationships.

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