

Responding To Consumerism In The World And The Church

Introduction

It was about twelve years ago. I was sitting in my study at church when the phone rang. "Hello, my name's Matthew, I've just graduated from Oxford University and I'm starting my first job in Wakefield next month. I'll be moving in three weeks and I'm looking for a church, I wonder if you would mind answering a few questions about your fellowship?" Ten minutes later, after I'd given a series of one sentence answers to enquiries about worship style, theology, age profile and the like, I wished the cold caller well and told him we'd be pleased to see him when he came to visit (apparently it was his intention to make a try-before-you-buy trip that weekend.) Matthew was openly church shopping and his approach was deliberate, blatant and therefore just a little shocking, but it was far from unusual. I was to discover just three years later, when for the first time in twenty years I got to decide which church I wanted to join, that I was as much a consumer of ecclesiastical services as young Matthew. I was just less well organised. When I moved to Manchester I spent two or three months casually church-browsing before settling on the model that I thought would best meet my needs.

Consumerism has become a deeply ingrained part of our identity in the church because it is such a major feature of society at large. I write these words in between Christmas and New Year, that period when millions who have spent more than they can afford on things they don't really need do battle in the stores so they can spend a little less on their next bit of stuff. It's also just five weeks since Black Friday when our TV news bulletins made it apparent that Britain has become a society where we are prepared to trample on others, literally, if we can save money on the latest consumer gadget. Many of us, I guess, watched in horror, a horror magnified by the sneaking suspicion that while we weren't part of the stampede at Asda we were nonetheless, to some extent at least, looking not through a window but into a mirror.

The reports reaching me these days from the front line of congregational leadership would seem to suggest that while the Christian version of consumerism might be a little more genteel it is no less virulent. Matthew and I are not on our own. I am told that: more and more people in our

churches are content to consume religious services but reluctant to commit to Christian service; our congregations are increasingly marked by passivity; commitment is becoming a scarce resource; dutiful, loyal and sacrificial church members are an endangered species which we have only learned to appreciate properly as their kind teeters on the brink of extinction. Bird flu might struggle to jump species but worldly consumerism it would seem has easily made its way deep into the blood stream of the body of Christ.

I think that's why I've been asked to write this article, a piece of theological reflection to help church leaders to understand consumerism and to combat it in our congregations. That's what the editor asked for. Happy to have a go. But first it might be wise to pause and ask just what we are dealing with.

1. What Is Consumerism?

At its simplest consumerism is *a condition in society where shopping and the attitudes and practices derived from shopping have come to hold significant sway over everyday life*. The more we depend on acquiring rather than making, purchasing rather than growing, buying-in rather than doing for our selves, the more consumerist we become.

1.1 More Shopping

Shopping plays a bigger part in our lives than ever before. The icons of consumerism become ever more prominent. As David Lyon points out,

“The strip of tarmac, bordered with bright neon signs, seducing all and sundry to the pleasures of consumption – whether food, furniture or film, it matters not – is the first indication that you are driving into a North American city.” (Lyon, *Postmodernity*, 1999, p. 74)

While this is less uniformly true in Britain it is nonetheless a recognisable phenomenon. Consider also the sheer number of advertisements that we encounter each day of our lives. I occasionally set students the task of keeping a tally for just twenty-four hours. It is virtually impossible to keep track. Try it. Or try looking round the room where you are now and see how many logos and adverts you can spot.

1.2 More To Shopping

Another feature of a consumerist society is the way that shopping becomes so much more than just a means of acquiring stuff.

For my mother's generation shopping was a daily chore. Now it has become *a gleefully chosen leisure pursuit*. It is about far more than obtaining goods. Often it is not the goods themselves that matter but the complex of desiring, discovering, acquiring and consuming. Increasingly shopping is styled as an "experience." I even saw an ice cream van the other day advertising "the ice cream experience".

Shopping is also seen as *a route to greater well-being* – the assumption behind the phrase "retail therapy" is that shopping makes us feel better. Notice, *shopping*, not necessarily the thing we buy which all too often quickly loses its appeal and completely fails to satisfy.

Increasingly shopping becomes *a means by which we construct and project our identity, our lifestyle, our sense of self*. When, a number of years ago, I lost eight stone in weight over eighteen months and twice had to buy myself a whole new wardrobe I became aware as never before that in deciding what to *buy* I was deciding what to *say* about myself, more than that, I was deciding, to a certain extent, the kind of self I wanted to *be* - casual, smart, sporty, traditional or urban. I wasn't just buying garments I was constructing and articulating a sense of self. We may regret this state of affairs but it's hard to escape. Even choosing to avoid brands and attempting to eschew style as self-expression inevitably says something about our values, "We are not the kind of person who goes in for that sort of thing."

1.3 More Than Shopping

Consumerism then is about the prevalence of shopping and the change of shopping into something more significant than merely acquiring goods and services. But it is also important to note that consumerism is not just about shopping *per se*. The consumerist mind-set also has a huge influence over other areas of life which at first sight have very little to do with buying stuff. Life becomes shaped by attitudes derived from shopping. David Lyon again,

"What may be fairly obvious in a world of rock videos, theme parks and shopping malls has also seeped into domains once thought to be beyond the market such as

science, religion, gender, ethnicity and the human body.”
(Lyon, Postmodernity, 1999, p. 70)

At a level much deeper than mere shopping, consumerism is the adoption of a transactional approach to more and more areas of life in an attempt to create, by our choices, a life that suits our own individual desires at a price we deem worth paying. We find ourselves living in what Michael Moynagh has called “the it must fit me society.” (Moynagh, 2001, p. 31) This attitude is neatly captured in [this advert for the Vauxhall Meriva and Zafira](#). (Vauxhall, 2008)

Since the days of the Blair governments the language and logic of the consumer and the rhetoric of choice has found its way into every corner of the once monolithic, unresponsive, provider-determined *public sector*. Take a look for example at [this speech](#) by the then prime minister back in October 2004. (Blair, 2004) We are lead to believe that we ought to be able to choose not only our favoured brand of breakfast cereal but also our school and our doctor. And when we have chosen we should expect to be treated like customers.

Or take *religion*. We no longer accept faith as a given with its content decided by the institutional powers that be, instead we seek to create our own spirituality, one that suits, one that fits, one that promises to meet our needs.

Similarly, for some at least, *ethnicity* has become commodified, it is transformed into a project rather than an inheritance. When a black friend described a member of her band as “white chocolate” I hit my online urban dictionary to discover that the phrase usually refers to,

... a suburban, caucasian, teenaged to young adult male, adopting habits of dress, speech, and lifestyle of the African-American ghetto mystique. (Scootyloo, 2003)

M & M's are coloured candy. Eminem is white chocolate.

Even the human *body* has become negotiable. If we have the means and the inclination - and more and more of us do - we can reshape, enhance, tattoo, pierce, reassign our gender, and enhance our flesh with technology reaching out to become trans-human. More than ever before, the body has become a construction site where we create our identity, a base for self-extension and a stage for self-expression.

2. What Are We To Make Of Consumerism?

Ok, so that gives us a bit of a handle on what consumerism is, but what are we to make of it theologically?

2.1 Consumption Is Not Inherently Evil

This may at first sight seem like a surprising statement. Nonetheless, I believe it to be true and I think it is important to start by acknowledging it. Part of what it means to do theology is to think again in the light of scripture and the Church's reflection on scripture about those tenets of belief that many have come to regard as self-evidently true. In the discourse of today's church about the evils of contemporary society there is little less controversial than asserting that consumerism is bad for us. Well, yes, but ...

Let's not forget that God created us to be consumers. To be human is to consume. For Adam and Eve, Eden was an eat (almost) all you want buffet. Prophetic portrayals of the age to come often drew on pictures of plentiful produce for all. The Psalms, unafraid of metaphors drawn from the delights of the world of consumption, invite us to taste and see that God is good. Jesus' ministry is punctuated by parties and in John's gospel in particular it is marked by an abundance of stuff, from wine fish. One of, if not the, ultimate expression of Christian worship is an act of conspicuous consumption, "take, it, eat it, drink it, it'll do you good". We mustn't allow our justifiable disquiet about consumption getting out of control to blind us to the good of stuff and the delights of consumption. The church is not unfamiliar with a kind of twisted dualism that is suspicious of the material just because it is material. As I said earlier, I am writing at Christmas and we would do well to remember that part of the meaning of Christmas is the sanctity of the material world, human flesh is shown to be *capax dei*, stuff is good enough for God.

2.2 Consumption Has Nonetheless *Become* An Evil.

If an ascetic anti-materialist dualism is one danger to which the church has been prone we are perhaps more likely these days to fall prey to the opposite error of materialism, thingamania, attributing too much significance to stuff. Living as if stuff and its acquisition is the route to joy and peace is supreme folly, gross idolatry and a twisted form of planetary stewardship (or to use more biblical language, bad gardening.) That is of course stark-staringly obvious. I'm almost embarrassed to spell it out. But it needs spelling out because it is equally obvious just how prone we are in the west to being seduced by the offer of abundance into a mass

gluttony that bleeds the planet dry and crushes the poor under the weight of our consumption. Rampant consumerism raises big issues of creation care and justice for the poor.

2.3 Consumerism Has Distorted The Image Of God

To a very large extent consumerism is just one particular form of good old-fashioned selfishness. Living true to our image-of-God-nature means refusing to try to make the world fit us. Each individual is not the centre of the universe. To be created in the image of the triune God is to be created as communal individuals. Both the sublimation of the individual within a collective mass identity, as in the worst forms of totalitarian communism, and the rampaging, unfettered individualism of the “free” market are a distortion of our God-given identity. True freedom comes from being what we are meant to be, living in line with our God-given nature and our divinely ordained purpose. Any ideology that sells us the lie that we should live primarily to fulfil our own personal desire to acquire, possess, control and consume will enslave us and diminish us. Unfettered consumption consumes the consumer and excretes an unpleasant form humanity.

3. How Might Local Church Leaders Respond To Consumerism?

If we want churches that are less consumerist, what can we do about it?

3.1 Get Serious About The Church As A Discipling Community

One of the ironies of consumer culture is that just about everything has become subject to consumer choices precisely at a time when the individual consumer has only the flimsiest of moral narratives to shape and direct those choices. Obviously then part of the response of church leaders as the local theologians of the Christian Church, is to teach otherwise, to articulate a coherent and attractive alternative, scriptural vision to the “it must fit me” narrative. But this on its own will not be enough.

We need to realise just how deeply consumerist attitudes run. It’s no good as leaders simply telling people to stop being consumerist. It’s not that easy. Like it or not being consumerist has become a part of who we are.

Learning not to live according to the consumerist script is a long-term project that will involve helping one another to unlearn old ways and to learn new ways. We will need to re-socialise one another into living

according to Jesus' sub-version of reality. This can only be done by a church that knows it is meant to be a community, a formational community, a nursery for disciples. Only a community has even a chance of resisting the incessant, daily inculcation of alien values by the world at large. If leaders do not enable churches to become communities of unlearning and learning then there is little prospect that the way of Jesus will survive as an option in our land. This of course will be a hard sell. It will require costly commitment to living as a community rather than just "going to church." Which of course is something of a catch twenty-two since part the problem are seeking to address is a lack of commitment on the part of many in church.

This puts squarely on the table an ancient dilemma that the people of God have often had to face, namely, how do we resolve the tension between the importance of costly, radical obedience to Christ on the one hand and the laudable, if dangerous, desire to be attractive to the mass of the population on the other? I suspect that a church community that is serious about trying to help its members to live in more Christ-like ways is not likely to be attractive to most of our neighbours, or at least not initially. I fear we have to choose. I fear that in the past we have made the wrong choice. I fear the choice before us now is actually quite clear. I fear it might mean losing church members and making the challenge of fruitful evangelism even more daunting. If we are to build communities that live as if abundant life does not equate to abundance of possessions, as if it is more blessed to give than to receive, as if greatness lies in service not in being served, as if individualism finds its proper place only within community, then we mustn't underestimate the extent to which this will put us out of synch with deeply held mainstream values. So be it. Faithfulness is more important than attractiveness.

3.2 Get Serious About Leading By Example

If, as church leaders, we want our churches to make this choice of embracing communal discipleship as the only realistic way of combatting consumerism, then I suspect, as always, that we leaders have to begin by making this choice for ourselves. First of all, we could do worse than examine the extent to which we ourselves have adopted a form of consumerism in our own approach to leadership. Is it possible that some times we have effectively "consumed" the time and energies church members in pursuit of our vision for the church? When we become carelessly enthusiastic in promoting *our* vision for *our* church do we not run the risk of treating our sisters and brothers as a resource to be used (up), spent in pursuit of ecclesial prosperity?

Secondly, we have to realise that we can only risk asking church members to make such a commitment if we ourselves are ready to pay the price. I know that too often in the past I have tried to lead by force of persuasion rather than by force of example. In the past when visionaries within the church have come to the conclusion that the Christian community has grown to resemble the world a little too much in its love of wealth and comfort there have been those who have been prepared to take a vow of poverty in order to point as clearly as possible in another direction. Now, I'm not suggesting that all Baptist Church leaders should take monastic vows, but I am asking, "If I am serious about leading a congregation that offers an alternative to society's orgy of consumption, shouldn't I seek to adopt a much simpler lifestyle than the one to which I currently find myself enslaved?"

3.3 Seriously Rethink Our Approach To Evangelism

I have a sneaking suspicion that part of our problem with consumerist attitudes amongst church members is partly a consequence of our approach to evangelism in recent years. Overly consumerist evangelism will lead to an overly consumerist church. If we have marketed Jesus primarily as a needs-meeting sort of saviour, stripping the gospel of most of its ethical content, perhaps we ought not to be too surprised if we have a problem a few years down the road when it comes to helping those who have responded to such a message to live as if they are part of the kingdom God rather than members of a religious mutual aid society. I suspect if we are to build the kind of church community that we need, we will have to recover an approach to evangelism that is about recruiting people for the cause of the Kingdom rather than just selling them a religious product.

Conclusion

This article has ended up being a lot heavier, a lot preachier and, indeed, a lot longer than I intended. I think this has happened because the issue of consumerism and our response to it is probably one of the biggest and most difficult challenges facing the church in the UK today. I think if we treat it with the seriousness that it deserves we will soon discover that there are no quick fixes, no seven step programmes leading to guaranteed outcomes. Instead we will find ourselves being driven to ask questions about the very nature of nature church, discipleship, mission and leadership.

Taking It Further: 12 Assignments And Questions For Personal Reflection / Group Discussion

1. Try keeping a tally of the number of adverts you come across in a given twenty-four hours.
2. Try looking around the room. How many logos and adverts can you spot?
3. Check out the Vauxhall advert (see link above.) In what ways and to what extent does it typify consumerist attitudes?
4. If Tony Blair's speech is indeed indicative of the spread of consumerist attitudes into the sphere of government services, is this a good thing or a bad thing? Why?
5. To what extent does your church see itself as a community of unlearning and learning?
6. Is it fair to say that the church sometimes consumes its members?
7. To what extent are church leaders to blame for encouraging consumerism in the church because we have wanted people to be dependent on us and to serve our vision?
8. Is it realistic to suggest that church leaders should set an example of living a simple lifestyle?
9. What counter-consumerist practices can you think of that it would be good to develop and practice in the church?
10. Is there something about bigger churches that are more inclined to inculcate consumerism?
11. It has been suggested that we treat the offering in worship and the financial giving that lies behind it as a sacrament of resistance to consumerism? What do you make of this idea?
12. Check out this list of nine features of consumerism produced by Episcopalian priest and sociologist, Duncan MacLaren (MacLaren, 2004) and ask to what extent a religious version of each feature is apparent in our churches. Can you think of examples?

1. The Primacy of individual choice

The assumption is that individual choice is the only path to personal freedom.

2. The expectation of novelty

The new sells – consumer desires are insatiable and economic growth depends on innovation. We seem to be on a restless quest for stimulation.

3. The belief in a right to abundance

“Our markets, major shopping thoroughfares and superstores ... mimic a new found nature of prodigious fecundity. These are our Valleys of Canaan where, in place of milk and honey, streams of neon flow down over ketchup and plastic.” (p. 174)

4. The acceptance of obsolescence.

Consider how quickly mobile phones and computers become unacceptably outmoded even when they function perfectly adequately. Society relies on this feature to stimulate economic growth.

5. The duty to be happy

We are to spend on yourself, “Because you are worth it.” According to the advertisers, even shampoo can give you an orgasmic experience (see the Herbal Essences adverts.) This is not just pleasure in the object, which is temporary, but also pleasure in the act of shopping which becomes addictive.

6. Objects are consumed not just for their utility but for the meaning they confer

Marketers market not a product but a brand, a lifestyle, a status, a sense of self, a sense of belonging - or at least of association.

7. The meanings we purchase are how we construct identity

Where you shop and what you buy says who you are. Shopping at Aldi or shopping at Waitrose; driving a Daewoo or driving a new Mini says something about us.

8. Shopping is framed as a leisure activity

The shopping mall is a temple of pleasure where we enter into the retail experience.

9. Consumerism as a means of social control

The freedom we are sold is illusory and the advertisers don't simply meet our needs, they generate our wants.

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