

FaithAlive!

This installment of our new adult-education package examines the difference between consumerism and a legitimate desire to earn enough money to provide for one's own needs and those of his or her family. What is "consumerism," and what's wrong with it?

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

I don't think many people I know would label themselves "consumerists." Their self-image isn't of someone who has turned possessions into an idol.

Some might say that unnecessary purchases they've made have complicated their lives. Some yearn for more simplicity in life and might comment that obtaining and maintaining what now are considered life's necessities can be seriously stressful.

I don't call myself a consumerist either. Like many others, though, I "get it" — I get the message about the force consumerism exerts. Actually, it would be hard as a parent not to do so. While children reluctantly, frustratingly and so gradually are learning to distinguish what they want from what they need, a parent might well sense that consumerism for his or her family is a stone's throw away.

It can be hard to say no to the next thing a family member wants. Yet, we sense that consumerism is harmful and that one who becomes a true consumerist adult won't be as adult as he or she could be.

So many people seem to admire others who live by a standard of noble simplicity. Do we sense that their lifestyle hasn't enslaved them?

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Editor
Faith Alive!

LEND US YOUR VOICE

An upcoming edition will include reader responses to this question: When you are tired, run-down, how do you refresh your spirit? If you would like to respond for possible publication, please write: Faith Alive! 3211 Fourth St. N.E., Washington, D.C. 20017-1100.

Is it wrong if one is a consumer?

Father Robert L. Kinast/CNS

At least two-thirds of the Sunday newspaper I read is filled with advertisements. When I go the grocery store, there are usually two or three choices for every item I want to buy. More than three-fourths of the mail I receive each day consists of advertisements and special offers. This is what it means to live in a consumer society.

A consumer society relies on the buying and selling of products and services; the strength of its economy depends on how much consumers spend. President George W. Bush made this clear when he proposed tax cuts at the beginning of his administration so that people would have more money to spend to stimulate the economy.

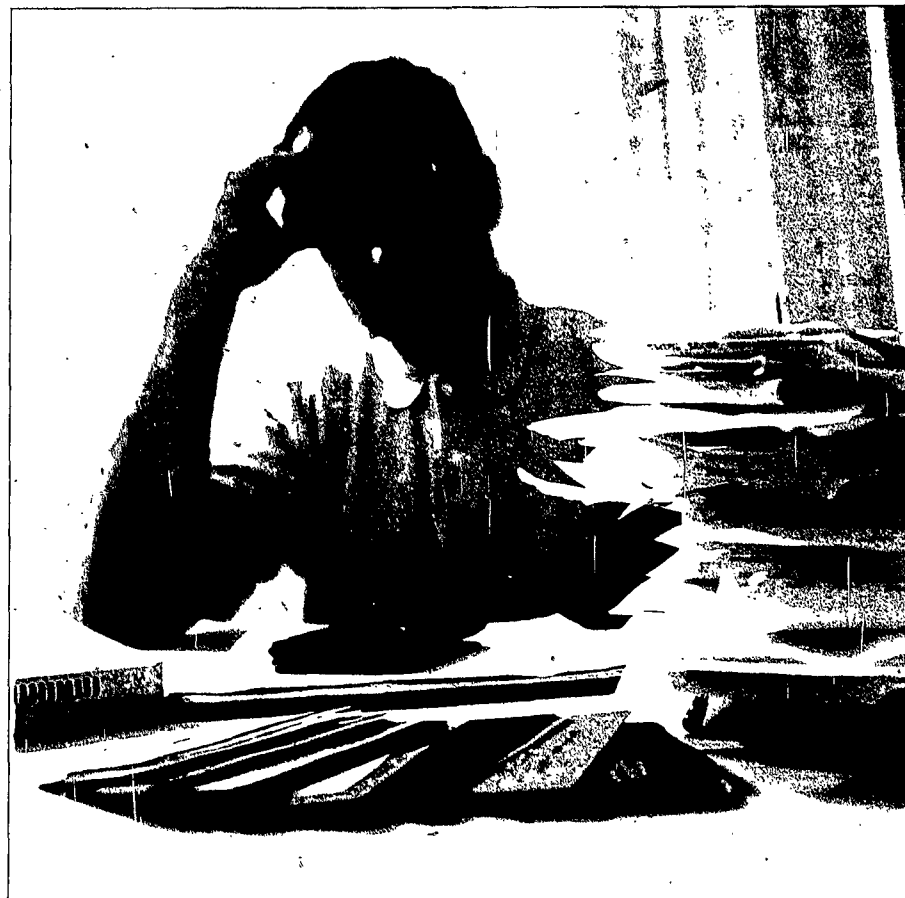
Is there anything wrong with this approach from a Christian point of view?

In itself, a consumer society is neither morally good nor bad. Buying products and services to meet basic needs and live a reasonably happy and comfortable life is no better or worse than bartering or living off inherited wealth. The problem occurs when a consumer lifestyle becomes consumerism.

Consumerism takes consumption to an extreme.

Consumerism values the production, marketing, sale and use of commodities above all else. Consumerism bombards people with marketing appeals that condition them to buy and acquire more products. Consumerism does not take into account how these marketing appeals affect those without purchasing power, how excess consumption in one part of the world keeps major populations in other parts of the world in poverty, or what impact the production and disposal of goods has on the environment. In this respect consumerism is incompatible with Christianity's concern for the common good, the poor and the natural world.

Consumerism is fundamentally materialistic. Its overwhelming interest is with the material objects a person can acquire and possess; to some degree it views people as commodities too. This preoccupation minimizes the spiritual and intangible qualities of life — such as trust, friendship, perseverance and hope — that Christianity promotes, and it creates a void that more clothes, larger homes, faster cars and more



CNS

"To encourage people to acquire and use more and more products, even if they don't have the financial resources to pay for them, consumerism advocates the use of credit. ... Debtors feel helplessly dependent," says Father Robert L. Kinast in his article on the difference between being a consumer and a consumerist.

versatile cell phones cannot fill.

A materialistic attitude tends to equate value with financial worth or some other quantifiable measure such as being the first, the biggest, the newest, the most popular. The value of a business becomes its profitability and return on investment, not its contribution to society's well-being.

And the value of those who cannot afford to buy and acquire is negated, dismissing their contributions to family, community and human experience.

Consumerism usurps human qualities and turns them into marketing tools. Intelligence is prized not for the art and pleasure of acquiring wisdom, but as a means of getting a better deal, outwitting the competition, buying more for less. Human desire and ambition are not directed toward solving social problems and improving the world, but toward obtaining a particular make of automobile or drooling over a brand of beer.

Under consumerism, of course, human sexuality is reduced to its most physical form in order to lure consumers into purchasing things the customer equates with sex appeal. Rather than valuing human experience as the highest expression of God's image, consumerism trivializes human experience by using it as a means to the end of marketing,

selling and owning products.

As a practice, consumerism runs against the grain of Christianity. It breeds competition not in the sense of challenging and bringing out the best in another but in the sense of defeating and overcoming the other.

To encourage people to acquire and use more and more products, even if they don't have the financial resources to pay for them, consumerism advocates the use of credit. Credit-card debt has become almost epidemic. Debtors feel helplessly dependent and discouraged about ever being free of debt, and it is hard to calculate the impact this has on their sense of self-worth and dignity.

Finally, consumerism urges individuals to satisfy their own needs and desires before anything else. Instead of a Christian sense of compassion and concern for others' needs, consumerism tends toward narcissism and a self-centered approach to life.

Living in a consumer society does not mean succumbing to the temptation of consumerism, but it does mean keeping alert to the ways consumer attitudes and practices can contradict, if not replace, Christian values.

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