

Crusade Against Consumerism:
Grassroots Religious Anti-Consumerism Movements in the US

Laura de Witte
3637069

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American Studies Program
Utrecht University
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Preface

The idea for this Master thesis arose many years ago, after watching an episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* on one anti-consumerist movement in particular: the Freegans. Oprah's reporter Lisa Ling followed and lived with a couple of Freeganists for a while. The principle of Freeganism is that people try to sustain their lives through as few items as possible. One couple, for example, lived as efficient as they could by buying their furniture second hand. The rest of their salary they would donate to charity. However, the Freegans were known across America because of their "dumpster diving," which meant that they would go at night to grocery stores and bakeries which throw away many packages than can still be consumed, according to the Freegans. First of all, the Freegans feel that it is a waste that food is thrown away, and second of all, it is free. I became fascinated with the subject of anti-consumerism in a nation which seems predominantly defined by consumerism. Hence, I wrote my BA thesis on anti-consumerist movements.

During a master course on Christianity in the US I realized that Christian beliefs and virtues seemed to be opposite from consumerism. For example, the stories about Jesus are about living frugally and considering your fellow human beings. In my opinion, nothing like that happened within the American consumer capitalist society. When I dug a little deeper the contradiction became even larger: if there was this ambivalence between religion and consumerism why did the two go so well together in the United States? A topic for my MA thesis was born.

After a while I realized there were many more anti-consumerist groups out there which acted out of their religious beliefs. Despite the fact that I am not religious myself, at times I started to appreciate some of their arguments. Perhaps I might make some frugal

decisions in the future. It is not my intention to convert people, but I would not be surprised if one day the anti-consumerist message would be picked up on a wider scale.

This thesis would not be in front of you if it weren't for the following people. I want to thank Jaap Verheul for giving me honest feedback, but also for getting me inspired again when I felt that my whole thesis idea had to go out of the window. Second, I want to thank my thesis counsellor David Bos. We got off to a late start but he had some great input and he was very supportive and lenient to help me get to the finish line on time with this project. Lastly, for all the help I want to thank Mark who hugely helped me make this thesis happen. He supported me when I felt stuck, he checked my work for language errors and other argumentative flaws. Thank you so much, I could not have done it without you.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The United States is an inherently religious country. The “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey,” conducted by the *Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life* in 2007, found that 78,4% of American adults define themselves as Christians. Also, 71% percent is absolutely certain that there is a God.¹ On the other hand, the nation has also built itself up to become a successful example of a capitalist economy. A capitalist society is built upon economic progress which is achieved through the market of buying and selling, labor and, on the other hand, commodities. Thus a system of consumerism is born in which people consume more than they need. Interestingly, these two key elements of American society, religion and consumerism, appear difficult to unite, yet this is what has happened in the US. In the period from the sixteenth until the eighteenth century, a saving ethic really helped contribute to the rise of capitalism.² However, in recent times it is often said that Europeans save, while Americans spend. Throughout recent history a lot has been written about the relationship between religion and economy. Often this was from the viewpoint of Calvinism which allegedly generated a work and saving ethic. At the turn of the 19th century when church attendance began to decline pastors began to publish books that contained religious stories but were written in an entertaining way to make religion interesting again for the people.³ However, there have been considerably less books and articles published on consumerism, which truly is the driving force behind capitalism today.

¹ “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey.” *The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life*. (2007) <http://religions.pewforum.org/reports> (accessed April 23, 2011).

² Read more on this subject in Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism*, on <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/weber/toc.html> (Accessed July 30, 2011).

³ Rodney Clapp, “Consumption & the Modern Ethos,” in *The Consuming Passion: Christianity & The Consumer Culture*, Rodney Clapp ed., (Madison, WI: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 9.

The US adopted capitalism to the fullest, and along the way invented consumer capitalism. The new consumer capitalist economy arose in the 1950s in the US when people increasingly had more money to spend on household appliances that became available around the same time. The rise of consumer capitalism will be discussed more elaborately in chapter two. With the rise of consumer culture in the 1950s some Christians struggled to combine their religious life with that new lifestyle. In general, however, most people adapted without hesitation. Also, churches and other religious organizations found ways to let consumerism work for them. Consider the televangelists who rose to fame in the 1960s and 1970s; for instance, Jim Bakker and his wife Tammy who convinced people that God wanted them to be rich, and if these people wanted to achieve that goal the Bakker's would help. The viewers would call in and make donations, in order for people to pray for their – financial – success. In turn, such telethons made televangelists such as Bakker very rich as well.⁴ On the other hand, there were people who were tentative whether consumerism was reconcilable with their belief, for instance, the Jesus People Movement, a group that flourished in the 1960s and 1970s. Rooted in the hippie movement, they rejected violence, exploitation and materialism. The Jesus People, however, did not yield much success, because of their abuse with drugs and problems with runaways and sexual abuse.⁵ Thus resistance against consumerism was neither substantiated nor widespread within the religious realm. The first academic essay that focused on the potentially difficult relationship between consumer culture and religion was John Kavanaugh who published *Following Christ in a Consumer Society* in 1982. This text, however, did not result in an extensive debate about the issue.⁶

⁴ Patrick Allitt, *Religion in America Since 1945: A History*, (New York: Columbia U.P., 2003), 192.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 133-34.

⁶ John F. Hoffmeyer, "Thinking Theologically about Consumer Society," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 49.4 (Winter 2010): 272.

Only recently, the discussion around this issue has begun to develop. What would ignite the academic discussion was the publication of two books in 2003: Vincent Jude Miller's *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* and Tom Beaudoin's *Consuming Faith: Integrating Who We Are with What We Buy*. These books wanted to make the public aware of the, alleged, contradiction between consumerism and religion. Consequently, the books influenced the academic world as well to start thinking about this subject. Miller's book is a critique of the negative influence of consumerism on religion. He argues that people have become passive consumers, also when it comes to religion. Yet, he also believes that grassroots religious movements could help people survive in a consumer culture.⁷ Beaudoin argues that someone cannot be a good Christian and a devoted consumer simultaneously. He continues by stating that Jesus would not be pleased about the fact that many American products are made by people in Third World countries which are being exploited. Thus, both Miller and Beaudoin offer very interesting, useful, but different insights in the tense relation between religion and consumerism. They will be further discussed in chapter four.

What the academic world then contributed were William Cavanaugh's *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire* and Lizabeth Cohen's *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*. However, besides these two imperative works, little has been published within the academic field. The journal *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* devoted an entire issue on this subject in the winter of 2010. What has been an underexposed subject for academics has recently become more popular. John Hoffmeyer explains in the opening article, that "there is a pressing need for more theological reflection on the topic."⁸ Nevertheless, the subject in general has been widely debated. The discussion of religion and consumerism fits within the larger

⁷ Vincent Jude Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture*, (New York: Continuum, 2005), 9.

⁸ John F. Hoffmeyer, "Thinking Theologically about Consumer Society," 272.

discussion of the role of consumerism in American society. What started with Karl Marx' critique of capitalism has grown into the socio-political anti-consumerism movement. Marx's ideas have been adapted in order to fit developments of consumer society. Marx argued that people were fetishized with commodities, that they did not realize anymore who had made it for them as it only became about symbolic value. In other words, consumer products are idolized; and people revere them because they have forgotten that they were initially made by men. Many theorists, such as Guy Debord, Herbert Marcuse, Jean Baudrillard, have contributed to the post-Marxist field. They argue that a superficiality has crept into American society, because most Americans seem obsessed with buying and consuming. Therefore, the satisfaction derived from a product does not stem from its functionality, but from its symbolism and status in society.⁹ This rather intricate theory is further discussed in chapter two.

Hence, post-Marxists feel that people no longer connect to a product, religious anti-consumerists believe that people moreover do not connect to God. On the other hand, there are also people who do not see a conflicting relationship between consumerism and religion. Most churches in the US, for example, have found ways to incorporate Americans' pursuit of wealth, particularly the televangelists, such as the aforementioned Jim Bakker. Hence, this group interprets religion as part of worldly affairs, but there are people who feel differently about this. The Bible is interpreted differently by anybody who reads it, though many people have found that Jesus called for spiritualism and not materialism. This is also what Rick Carlson argues in his article in the *Dialog* issue. According to Carlson, the Gospel of Luke in the Bible explains how materialism – often seen as an equivalent to consumerism – will lead to greed which will drain people of their

⁹ John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*, (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), 129-146.

energy and values.¹⁰ On the other hand, until recently nobody debated this issue, and the Americans were also appearing to combine the two in their lives, without much difficulty. However, the fact that the debate has arisen reveals that academics increasingly worry about this issue. Moreover, the last two decades have seen the rise of many grassroots movements, as mentioned by Vincent Jude Miller.

At the end of my research I hope to have answered the following research question: what is the connection between religion and religious anti-consumerism in the United States? By analyzing anti-consumerism groups as well as the current academic discussion on the subject, I hope to make clear what arguments these groups use and how their arguments could contribute to the larger discussion on anti-consumerism. Moreover, what does it tell us about American culture in general? This thesis is meant to contribute to both academic and social debates, because these relatively small and new religious anti-consumerism movements have remained rather invisible. A thorough analysis of these movements could result in new perspectives on the discussion surrounding consumerism. What is more, it could help the understanding of how two American keystones, religion and consumerism, seem juxtaposed yet coexist within American society.

For this thesis I intend to analyze these religious anti-consumerism movements who have arisen in the period after the 1960s when the consumer culture was incorporated in American society. I will focus on mainstream Christianity, while acknowledging its diversity. The focus of the majority of this thesis is on American Christianity – as opposed to other religions – which constitutes over three quarters of the American population. However, chapter three gives a general overview of many different religions and their criticism of consumerism. Accordingly, the research will be on anti-consumerism groups who find their grounds and motivations in Christianity for their arguments. Examples of

¹⁰ Rick Carlson, “‘Who then is the Faithful, Insightful Steward?’ Consumerism and Luke’s Stewarding Vision,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 49, no. 4 (2010): 283.

such groups are Sustainable Traditions, Alternatives for Simple Living and Advent Conspiracy. Miller and Beaudoin, among others, have tried to explain that the Christian faith and consumerism contradict each other and that Christians should take an effort in self-reflection. As these groups have not grown to nationwide popularity yet, it was difficult to find the groups at first. They are active on the internet though, and I have found these groups through mutual referrals. Hence, I have selected these groups for reasons of practicality as well as the fact that they have received the most exposure. These religious anti-consumerist groups will be discussed in chapter five.

Chapter 2: The American Consumerist Society

After a period in which there was not much interest in the anti-consumerist message, as opposed to the hippie culture of the 1960s and 1970s, increasingly there are individuals and groups who find that the current consumerist society is not one in which they want to live and conform to its standards. These people draw upon their different opinions in their religions and religious viewpoints as a basis for their opinions and beliefs. Additionally, there are also people who have critiqued consumer society from a secular viewpoint. In this chapter we will take a look at their arguments, and the differences and similarities between them. How did American society become a consumer society? How does religious criticism on consumerism fit in with the political critique of consumerism? Lastly, what does the (increasing) anti-consumerist movement say about American culture in general?

The 1950s

Today consumer capitalism is deeply integrated in American society, but it only has been that way for approximately the last half century. After World War II the American economy was booming and a new market arose with technical appliances and cars, among other luxury items. The US became a leader in the production of several goods such as cars which resulted in a higher income for Americans, hence more money to buy the products.¹¹ In short, America was prospering: “After the war, the boom roared on, fuelled in part by the military Keynesianism of high defense spending and the economic spinoffs of basic and applied research—but also by federal socioeconomic programs, easy credit, and population growth.”¹² The simultaneous rise of the mass media showed consumers to enjoy the new comfortable items that became available to them. Religion also changed during

¹¹ Pauline Maier and others, *Inventing America: A History of the United States* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003), 867.

¹² *Ibid.*, 900-1.

this decade as church attendance grew. People were more drawn to religion because of popular religious figures such as Billy Graham and Fulton Sheen.¹³

The 1950s influenced contemporary America by making it more focused on materialism as well as the growth of media power, Halliwell continues. The decade saw the rise of mass media, mass production and commercialization. These changes brought about heated debates immediately. Back then, some critics feared that cultural activity would be replaced by continuous consumption. Especially Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer were vocal opponents of mass culture. According to them, the standardization of production leads to “bland uniformity.”¹⁴

One of the reasons why consumerism works the way it does in American society, both Halliwell and the author of the book *People of Plenty* David Potter believe, is because of the prevailing myths in the US about the American Dream, democracy and equality. For instance, Halliwell argues that because of the American Dream people want to achieve the highest possible social status, and this goal can partially be achieved with the accumulation of prestigious goods.¹⁵ Potter adds that through the ideology of democracy and equality, Americans believe that everything should be available to all. Potter refers to Tocqueville as well who noticed the boundlessness of American territory when he visited in the early nineteenth century. Because of the opportunities America and American society offers its inhabitants will always strive for more, the author states.¹⁶ Potter’s book in general offers a critique on consumer society, and he particularly tries to tackle the advertisement industry. According to Potter, since the 1950s advertising has had more power than the

¹³ Martin Halliwell, *American Culture in the 1950s*, (Edinburgh: Edinburg University Press, 2007), 2, 16-22.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 4, 13-14.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁶ David Morris Potter, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 91-93.

“government, school and church.”¹⁷ The advertisement industry, moreover, really boomed in those years thanks to television. Potter argues then that more supply was being produced than people demanded, hence the necessity of advertising. Consumer culture, he continues, solely wants people to consume hence the products have to be made fast and low-cost. The advertisements are made simple to make them appeal to the public; people quickly recognize a brand in that way, Potter asserts.

Theories of Consumer Culture

Similar to Potter’s argument on advertising, Vance Packard argued in 1957 that advertisement worked because it appealed to deeper levels of consciousness.¹⁸ His line of argument is very close to the anti-capitalist and anti-consumerist critique of Post Marxists. As far as the political spectrum goes they are the most active within the debate. It started with Marx’s critique on capitalism which was the economic system he ostracized. According to classical Marxism then, due to the increase in – and the fragmentation of – production, workers become alienated from the products that they make. What he means with the term alienation is that in earlier times, one person would make an entire product from start to finish, but when the demand grows – which it did making producers want to earn more dollars – the production has to become more efficient. Hence, the assembly line ensured that many more people only made one part of the product. The negative result of this, Marx argues, is that workers lose the satisfaction and pride of making products. More important, Marx states that what a society produces, such as the products they feel they need to stay alive, also influences a society’s political, cultural and social spectrum.¹⁹ Marx also developed his idea of alienation into what he termed “commodity fetishism,” which

¹⁷David Morris Potter, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character*, 166.

¹⁸ Vance Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders*, (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1957).

¹⁹ John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*, (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), 97-98.

means that people do not appreciate things anymore for their use value, but for what the product symbolizes. Thus the price of a product no longer reflected the hard work that one man put into it.²⁰

However, since Marx's time his ideas have been further developed, as has society. Marx believed that at a certain point in time demand would disappear, yet it has only gone up. Neo and Post Marxism then offers new critical insights into consumer capitalism, beyond Karl Marx. Marxism wanted to see society change, and Neo Marxists also thought that this was still possible. All people need is to critically reflect their society to see its faults. However, since approximately the 1960s the school of thought Post Marxism arose, and these group of people thought that the consumer culture was inevitable and things could not be changed anymore. Theorist Guy Debord, for example felt that people were living in a "society of spectacle," in which they were lost and alienated. All they did now was watch (for example, television and advertisements) and consume. People's lives are conditioned by the media as they decide what we see, Debord argues. Therefore, people no longer see reality but only experience reality through representations and images. Debord also refers to commodity fetishism as he believes that people "become" something when they "have" something.²¹

The theorist which has had the biggest influence on Post Marxist thought is Jean Baudrillard. His theory is close to Debord's as he also believes that people living in a consumer society lose touch with reality. The term that Baudrillard uses then is "simulacrum," which means that everything is simulated and copied indefinitely. Thus nothing is original or real anymore; people do not live in reality anymore. Baudrillard argues that all reflection and critique in the post Modern American society is gone. Moreover, Americans are not aware of their history anymore and thus the meaning of

²⁰ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production*, Ed. by Frederick Engels, translated from the 3rd German edition by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, (London: Allen and Unwin, 1946).

²¹ Guy Debord, *La Société du Spectacle*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1998).

things have become lost, he writes in his book *America*. People see a lot of signs and are aware that, for example a certain brand car will give them more status than the other, however that status is not derived from the item's true value. The value, then, is decided by its comparison to other things. Moreover, Baudrillard continues, because true meaning is lost, people can create and do whatever they want. America is what Baudrillard terms a "hyperreality," where people cannot see the different between a simulation and reality.²² For instance, people start believing that what they see in soap operas is true, and they start writing letters to the characters as if they were their best friends. Or, in the same respect an actor who plays a movie villain is confronted in the streets.²³ Another illustration that Baudrillard gives is that across America all malls look the same, both on the inside and on the outside. Within there are the same stores which have the same look and feel and sell the same products.²⁴ Still American continuously desire new products, and in that way never stop consuming. Baudrillard and all the other Post Marxist critics argue that there is no resistance coming from Americans, however they also believe it is hard to offer resistance. The critics argue that people are still, and more than ever, alienated because all the products are made in Third World countries, thus they do not see the makers of the products at all anymore. Moreover, it is no longer about having a product but about being associated with a product. Signs refer to other signs, instead of its own meaning.²⁵

American Legacy

What can be said about American culture in general? First, the US has a true consumer society that, according to Baudrillard, is still untested in the world. In that way, America is

²² Jean Baudrillard, *America*, 1986, (London: Verso, 1999), 63, 28.

²³ John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*, 163.

²⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *America*, 28.

²⁵ Andrew M. Koch, and Rick Elmore, "Simulation and Symbolic Exchange: Jean Baudrillard's Augmentation of Marx's Theory of Value," *Politics & Policy* 34:3 (2006), 558.

seen as a role model; an example.²⁶ Second, that there are groups and people who feel concerned about the way their society works now. “Using latest figures available, in 2005, the wealthiest 20% of the world accounted for 76.6% of total private consumption. The poorest fifth just 1.5%,” meaning that the US, as one of the wealthiest countries in the world is truly driven by consumption. With that in mind, the US has inspired many other cultures around the world to follow in their footsteps, and continue to do so up until today and possibly for many years to come.²⁷ There are individuals and groups within the US who look at this phenomenon with suspicion, as we have seen. According to these religiously driven groups a society that floats on the principle of maximum consumption loses touch with reality and fellow residents.

Simultaneously with being a truly consumer society, the US is a zealously religious nation as well. These two qualities seem to be at odds with each other, however US society has been functioning with this juxtaposition for over two hundred years already. Even in the decades after World War II with their dramatic rise in consumerism, the contradictions between religion and consumerism seemed to be nonexistent. It is as if Americans trade their churchly religion with passionate consumption every time they are at a mall. Only a small group of people have felt the need to change their lifestyle. This reveals how intrinsic the system is to the US, as most people have not noticed the what some term “wrongs of consumerism,” or do not want to change their life as it is now.

The most substantial cultural criticism that has come towards capitalism and consumerism, from Karl Marx, has argued that it is too two dimensional. People are blind for its faults, Marx argues, and in that way cannot change the way it works. Interestingly, Marx said the same about American religion as well. Within religion, he states, there is no room for reflection or change. Today, religious groups appear better at critiquing and

²⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *America*, 116.

²⁷ Anup Shah, “Consumption and Consumerism,” *Global Issues*, March 6, 20110, <http://www.globalissues.org/issue/235/consumption-and-consumerism> (accessed July 30, 2011).

reflecting. Up until now religious individuals have not followed the example set by a few, and with America's long history with capitalism and consumerism it would not appear to change anytime soon. In that respect religious ideas do correlate with anti-consumerist ideals (the religious and the secular). Both feel that people need to be aware of their surroundings and the world they are living on. Also, they agree that people have lost touch with what is really important and that the need and search for the next brand product is not what people should aim for in life.

To conclude, the religious anti-consumerist groups which argue for lifestyle changes do so from a deep-seated religious belief. They are not from one certain denomination, but rather feel that Christians in general should all take better care of each other and the world. There is not a strong connection between established religion itself and these groups, predominantly because these groups are so scattered. Some of them do appeal to churches to help out with the cause, however not many have responded.

Chapter 3: Anti-Consumerism within Mainstream American Religion

The United States has traditionally been a religious nation, where for most of its history the inhabitants have been Christians. American religion today can better be characterized by diversity. The influx of new groups of immigrants during the nineteenth and twentieth century changed the US religious landscape, as many Catholics and Jews arrived. Since the 1950s, the US has often been characterized as a Judeo-Christian nation, but there is much more diversity within the American religious landscape.²⁸ American Christians are often classified into five clusters, i.e. subgroups, of denominations. 26.3% of US adults belong to the Evangelical Protestants, 23.9% to the Catholics, 18.1% to Mainline Protestants, 6.9% to Historically Black Churches, and 1.7% to the Mormons. These data were collected by the PEW Forum survey on Religion and Public Life's of 2007.²⁹ These clusters clearly reveal the contrasts between the Christian religions; on the one hand there are Protestants and Catholics, there is a distinction between predominantly white and black churches, and the Mormons are a completely separate group. Of the other non-Christian faiths, beside Judaism, Buddhism, Islam, and Hinduism are the largest, although all of these groups comprise of less than two percent of the adult population. Also, over sixteen percent of Americans define themselves as not affiliated with any religion.³⁰

Before determining what the connection between religion and anti-consumerism is, we will take a look at American religion in general. Then the focus will be narrowed to American Christianity, as that is also the focus of this thesis. Where and when did the discussion around religion and capitalist consumer culture start, and from which cluster of American Christian religion does the most anti-consumerist critique come?

²⁸ William R. Hutchison, *Religious Pluralism in America: The Contentious History of a Founding Ideal*. (New Haven, MA: Yale University Press, 2003), 196-98.

²⁹ "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey," *The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life*, 2007, <http://religions.pewforum.org/affiliations> (accessed May 18, 2011).

³⁰ Ibid.

Worldliness versus Godliness

The recent debate on the conflict between consumerism and religion, which particularly arose after 2003, suggests that the topic is quite new for historians, sociologists and academics to discuss. This is not the case, though. Perry Miller wrote two works that have contributed greatly to the historic field; *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century*, 1939, followed in 1953 by *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province*. In these two books, Miller traces back the conflict between knowledge and religion to seventeenth century Puritan America. Miller attributes his findings to important works of that time, written by Puritan leaders such as John Winthrop and Richard Mather – father of Increase Mather, and grandfather of Cotton Mather: all prominent Puritan ministers. The Puritans were aware of the conflict between what is now termed worldliness and godliness.³¹

From their provenance, Puritans believed that anything that happened to people and nature was God's judgement. There was nothing they could do, except put their faith in God.³² However over time, and Miller traces this to only to the second half of the seventeenth century, their godliness view turned to worldliness. Puritan society was confronted with diminishing religious values, as trade became more important. Because as society became more prosperous, the importance of religion decreased. Their changed views allowed Puritans to believe they could influence their own destiny, therefore making it also more plausible to want to achieve wealth in life. The economy became something people strove for, instead of devoting their lives to God. Hence, Miller was the first to discern this contradiction between religion and capitalism. In his opinion, money and wealth cannot be easily combined in life, whilst at the same time trying to be religious.³³

³¹ Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1939), 77.

³² *Ibid.*, 23.

³³ Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952), 31-41.

Other authors also argue that American culture is a result of its Puritan roots, yet their argument is the other way around. Authors such as Max Weber, Robert K. Merton and Sacvan Bercovitch argue, though all in different periods in time, that Puritanism helped capitalism and made it flourish in American society. Weber, above all, is the pioneer of that economic sociology theory. Weber wrote his famous essay on Protestantism and capitalism in the beginning of the twentieth century and Bercovitch developed these ideas further in the 1970s. He takes it a step further than Miller, arguing that religion has never been more than a tool for capitalism. In this scenario, religion and money reinforce each other.³⁴ Thus the subtle difference between both arguments is that Miller feels that for Puritans religion has been the utmost important from the beginning, whereas Bercovitch argues that the economy was likewise as important for Puritans from the beginning. Hence, Bercovitch believes that Puritans were more interested in worldliness from the start.

Despite their difference in opinion, both Bercovitch and Miller do excavate an antagonism in the workings between religion and capitalism. The discrepancy between religion and capitalism became perhaps bigger with the boom of consumer culture, and, over sixty years after Miller's publication, historians and sociologists are opening up the discussion on the antagonism between religion and consumerism. The next chapter of this thesis will address this discussion.

Judaism and the Capitalist Consumer Culture

Present-day US society is religiously very diverse, and there are a couple of Christian and non-Christian religions and denominations who call for anti materialism and anti consumerism, among other subjects. Judaism here can be treated almost as a separate category within the American religious landscape. On the one hand, Jews are often

³⁴ Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self*, (New Haven: Yale University Press), 1975.

stereotyped as being involved with money in one way or the other. What is true is that many Jews in America are part of the upper class, as they are the largest group within the highest income column, as concluded by the PEW survey.³⁵ The road for Jews to get to the highest class in American society has not been an easy one. When they came to America as immigrants they were often discriminated against and forced to live in a ghetto together. Therefore, it seems only admirable that they have come this far.

Unlimited consumption is also not a reality for those Jews who live faithfully by the Torah as they have many rules to live by: they cannot consume any food they want, for example, because it has to be kosher. What is more, they cannot earn money nor spend it on a Sabbath. Thus, being a Jew already requires many rules that would diminish consumerist influence. Yet, within Judaism there is also a simplicity movement urging people to live more simple and not consume too much. Jewish Voluntary Simplicity, as the movement is called, focuses on humility and gratitude towards God for the earth He has given to them. Similar to other anti-consumerist movements, Jewish Voluntary Simplicity urges Jews to focus on spirituality and the local community.³⁶

You Cannot Serve God and Money

A Christian example of a religious group that adheres to anti-consumerist philosophy are the Old Order Amish. Their tradition stems from the Mennonites, and they prefer to live simply and make no use of modern technological innovations, because these modern appliances will lead to a competition between people for the latest products, consequently providing people with status. The Amish prefer to stay humble, and focused on the

³⁵ "Income Distributions of Religious Traditions, *The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life*, 2007, <http://religions.pewforum.org/pdf/table-income-by-tradition.pdf> (accessed June 10, 2011).

³⁶ Moti Rieber and Betsy Teutsch, "Simplicity as a Jewish Path," *Reconstructionism Today*, 10.2 (Winter 2002/2003), <http://www2.jrf.org/rt/article.php?id=102> (accessed June 13, 2011).

community instead of the individual.³⁷ The Amish are most likely the first religious group that people think of when they think about anti-consumerism within American religion. Yet, they do not use the term specifically, because they choose the simple lifestyle to stay close to God and worldly possessions might distract them from their goal.

A non-Christian religious group which often takes an anti-consumerist stance are the Buddhists. They do not constitute a large portion of the American religious landscape; the PEW survey reveals that 0.7% of American adults define themselves as Buddhist.³⁸ Buddhists feel that life on earth is too focused on illusions, among which are material possessions. Instead Buddhists focus on finding the spiritual path, and also being socially and ecologically involved.³⁹ Buddhism came to the United States in the second half of the 19th century already, and there was a large influx of Buddhist immigrants in the 1960s and consequently gained much popularity among the hippie movement. The young people who were most active in the hippie movement were looking for ways to escape the conventional life as well as the materialistic consumer society. In this respect, Buddhism seemed to offer an escape into a life which was not solely focused on materialism. Moreover, the philosophy was peaceful, which attracted pacifists as well. The laureate novelists of the time, Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, were also Buddhist sympathizers. They detested the urge of Americans for money and other material possessions, instead people should live simply and in that way achieve a higher spirituality.⁴⁰ Monks are also an integral part of Buddhism, who vow to devote their lives to praying and frugal living in the monasteries, as well as begging in the outside world. Ajahn Pasanno, a western Buddhist monk himself, explains that the most important thing for a monk is mindfulness and simplicity. Being a

³⁷ John A. Hostetler, "Old Order Amish," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, 1956, <http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/O54.html> (Accessed June 2, 2011).

³⁸ "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey," *The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life*, 2007, <http://religions.pewforum.org/affiliations> (accessed May 18, 2011).

³⁹ Jane Lampman, "American Buddhism on the rise," *The Christian Science Monitor*, September 14, 2006, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/0914/p14s01-lire.html> (accessed May 30, 2011).

⁴⁰ Patrick Allitt, *Religion in America Since 1945: A History*, (New York: Columbia U.P., 2003), 140-143.

monk and a devout Buddhist means going beyond tangible possessions: “[g]enerosity is not just material but includes generosity of time and service and giving of themselves.”⁴¹

Coherently, critique on consumerism is often that it leads to too much material possession.

Within American Buddhism there is a group who believe that Buddhists are often too passive, while they should be socially active and these people are called engaged Buddhists. Out of this movement the Buddhist Peace Fellowship (BPF) has originated. People who are members of this community support social change visionaries and organizations who seek social change.⁴² One of the issues that BPF asks people to come in action for is called “Coca Cola – drink of the death squads.”⁴³ BPF urges people to support the related “Killer Coke” campaign, which claims Coca Cola exploits its workers in Third World countries. Their website lists several countries, such as Colombia, Guatemala, El Salvador and India, where workers, including children, are working under harsh circumstances. Moreover, any union efforts are hindered.⁴⁴ Exploitation of workers is also an often heard argument against consumerism, after all it is the key criticism of Karl Marx on capitalism. People want to consume a lot of products, and preferably for the lowest price, resulting in cheap labor. Buddhists reject this obviously, because people do not need to own so many goods. What is more, the exploited workers also have no liberty nor time to become enriched spiritually.

The International Network of Engaged Buddhists, or INEB, is another group of Engaged Buddhists. They argue that Buddhism teaches that people should not aspire excess because it makes them greedy, yet according to INEB, nobody has taken any consequent action towards this issue. There are, however, advantages to capitalism.

⁴¹ “Thirty Years as a Western Buddhist Monk: An Interview With Ajahn Pasanno,” *Fearless Mountain Magazine*, January 6, 2006, <http://www.urbandharma.org/udharma9/pasanno.html> (accessed June 1, 2011).

⁴² “About us,” *Buddhist Peace Fellowship: Cultivating Compassionate Action*, <http://www.bpf.org/about-us> (accessed June 1, 2011).

⁴³ “Coca Cola - drink of the death squads,” *Buddhist Peace Fellowship: Cultivating Compassionate Action*, <http://www.bpf.org/take-action/coca-cola-drink-of-the-death-squads> (accessed June 1, 2011).

⁴⁴ “Campaign to stop Killer Coke,” www.killercoke.org (accessed June 1, 2011).

Capitalism requires a constant flow of new products, author Santi Pracha Chamma argues, therefore asking a lot of creativity from its producers. Hence, people should channel that creativity towards meditation and worship. This ideology is called Buddhist economics, an initiative supported by INEB. True satisfaction is never reached for the consumer, because of the idolatry of the products, according to Buddhist philosophy. On the other hand, the author wonders whether it is possible to alter society into adopting the Buddhist thinking. Perhaps people can change, INEB believes that love and altruism is in all of the people.⁴⁵

Hinduism which comprises of 0.4% of the American adult population, according to PEW, and also has anti-consumerist characteristics.⁴⁶ Born out of the Hindu religion is the Hare Krishna movement, a group which also adheres to the anti-consumerist ideas. Followers of this movement strive to devote their entire thoughts and actions toward pleasing their Lord, Krishna. It also requires them to give up all their worldly belongings.⁴⁷ If Krishnas take good care of the world, their consciousness will be pure. Therefore, they advocate simple living, because the production of too many goods will lead to more pollution.⁴⁸ Consequently, the Krishna ideology encourages people to produce their own food. Guru and acharya – a Hindu guide on religious matters – A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, explains that modern technology and goods are marketed at people for providing them with comfort. However, in the process of acquiring all these goods people lose track of the true purpose of life, and that, according to the guru, is suicidal. People should take care of their soul, because the soul will live on forever, according to Krishna teaching. Instead, people are focused on providing comfort for the body, and it has made

⁴⁵ Santi Pracha Chamma, "Buddhist Economic," *International Network of Engaged Buddhists*, <http://www.inebnetwork.org/engagement/1-buddhist-economic/37-buddhist-economic> (Accessed June 2, 2011).

⁴⁶ "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey," *The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life*, 2007, <http://religions.pewforum.org/affiliations> (accessed May 18, 2011).

⁴⁷ Patrick Allitt, *Religion in America Since 1945: A History*, 145.

⁴⁸ "Simple Living," *Krishna.com*, <http://www.krishna.com/simple-living> (accessed June 2, 2011).

them “dull-brained,” states Swami Prabhupada.⁴⁹ On an interesting side note; the Hindus have a high income compared to members of other faiths. In the largest category surveyed by PEW, which entails an income of over a hundred thousand dollars a year, Hindus are the second largest group.⁵⁰

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, the biggest Mormon church in the US, is ambivalent about consumerism. From the beginning, the LDS has been focused on hard work and the family. Furthermore, today the church is faring well economically. In 1997, *Time* magazine published a story on the church, stating that at the time it was the wealthiest church in the world.⁵¹ The LDS church buildings are immense, since the church spends billions on their construction. The LDS also supports a large library which is specialized in family history, and a university. That followers of the LDS do not shy away from money and wealth was acknowledged in an article published in the Mormon magazine *New Era* in 1971. Richard Olsen argues in “Ecology, Pollution, and Consumerism,” that members of the church have not paid much attention to the issue of the environment. However, this can be explained, according to Olsen, because: “Our whole doctrine is based on giving man joy and upgrading his personality talents, traits, and environment.”⁵² Dr. Joseph R. Murphy, a LDS member, zoologist and entomologist, adds that people buy more products than they really need. LDS members, in that case, are no different. Moreover, according to Murphy, Latter-Day Saints should not be materialistic. According to their prophecy, Joseph Smith who is the founder of the LDS, was told that

⁴⁹ “Back to the Simple Life and Simple Truth,” *Krishna.com*, <http://www.krishna.com/back-simple-life-and-simple-truth> (Accessed June 2, 2011).

⁵⁰ “Income Distributions of Religious Traditions, *The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life*, 2007, <http://religions.pewforum.org/pdf/table-income-by-tradition.pdf> (accessed June 10, 2011).

⁵¹ David van Biema, S.C. Gwynne, and Richard N. Ostling, “Kingdom Come,” *Time Magazine*, August 4, 1997, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,986794,00.html> (Accessed June 2, 2011).

⁵² Richard Olsen, “Ecology, Pollution, and Consumerism,” *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*, September 1971, <http://lds.org/new-era/1971/09/ecology-pollution-and-consumerism?lang=eng> (Accessed June 2, 2011).

the earth is important for man, to make him stronger in spirit and body.⁵³ The consumption of too many products leads to more pollution which is damaging the environment. This argument is similar to the argument that the Hare Krishna's make regarding consumerism.

Recently, similar to the renewed discussion around anti-consumerism, several articles regarding the issue were printed in *New Era* magazine. For example, "Unselfish Service," published in April 2009. In this article, elder Dallin H. Oaks, argues that it is important as a Latter-Day Saint to be unselfish, and to devote time on earth to the values set by Jesus. People should only seek God to make themselves happy, Oaks continues, and not seek things they themselves desire. People today have become too selfish, only asking what they can gain. Rather, what is important Oaks states: "The plan of the gospel of Jesus Christ lifts us above our selfish desires and teaches us that this life is all about what we can become."⁵⁴

Thou Shalt Not be Poor

As the previous passages demonstrate, there are numerous religious groups in America who advocate anti-consumerism, while other groups reap the benefits of capitalism and consumerism. A large group is united under the term "prosperity gospel" with a following of within the region of tens of millions. Its message is also known as the Health and Wealth gospel, the Word of Faith teachings, and Name It and Claim It – which opponents have sarcastically labelled Blab it and Grab it. Adherents of this ideology believe that God grants his faithful followers wealth, in all areas. It arose and grew immensely after World War II, around the same time that America's consumer culture started to grow and people

⁵³ Richard Olsen, "Ecology, Pollution, and Consumerism," *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*, September 1971, <http://lds.org/new-era/1971/09/ecology-pollution-and-consumerism?lang=eng> (Accessed June 2, 2011).

⁵⁴ Elder Dallin H. Oaks, "Unselfish Service," *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*, April 2009, <http://lds.org/general-conference/2009/04/unselfish-service?lang=eng&query=consumerism> (Accessed June 2, 2011).

wanted to believe that that lifestyle could be available for anybody. The prosperity gospel originated in Pentecostal churches but has spread since then to evangelical churches as well. The first famous Pentecostal preacher to use “prosperity” language was Oral Roberts. The concept he developed in his church is still used today: “If people would donate money to his ministry, a “seed” offered to God, he’d say, then God would multiply it a hundredfold.”⁵⁵ This entailed that parishioners gave at least ten percent of their income to the church, in short this is called the tithe. The tithe is not an unfamiliar tradition in many American churches, as a majority asks its congregants to donate money. Without these resources many American churches could not stay in existence, as they do not receive governmental funds. Preachers must talk about money to make money. Recently, another PEW survey found that 66% of Pentecostals and 43% of “Other Christians” believe that God wants his followers to be wealthy.⁵⁶

After Oral Roberts televangelists such as Jim and Tammy Bakker followed his lead. Their message was that God wanted people to be rich, thus money and success became signs revealing that that person was in God’s favor. This message was not new as nineteenth century Methodists also preached about this, and even some seventeenth century Calvinists. The first step for people to take was to send money to the network to show that they believed God would send them twice as much. Bakker and his wife would often cry and tell the audience that the money was needed. Later when the Bakkers had their own television network, people could also call in for prayer, in exchange for money.⁵⁷ Another famous televangelist of the 1970s and 1980s was Jerry Falwell, who is said to have raised over one hundred million dollars in the 1980s. Susan Harding argues that he became so successful because he could create “a sense of crisis and impending doom if

⁵⁵ Hanna Rosin, “Did Christianity Cause the Crash?” *The Atlantic*, December 2009, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2009/12/did-christianity-cause-the-crash/7764/> (Accessed June 6, 2011).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Patrick Allitt, *Religion in America Since 1945: A History*, 191-195.

contributions were not forthcoming.”⁵⁸ Americans were eager to receive blessing from God, which Falwell offered them. In return for that gift people gave Falwell the only substantial gift they could: money.⁵⁹

There was a decline in activity in the movement with the scandals of Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart but recently prosperity ideology was renewed and it is now being personified by televangelist Joel Osteen. In the beginning the prosperity gospel preached that everybody could get money and wealth, but recently the message is turned into a more general positive message; people should go after what they want in life and God will help them reach their goals. Osteen explains that God wants his people to be happy, and in order to be happy they do need money to pay the bills.⁶⁰ Thus, the message is not about getting rich, but rather about getting wealthy in the other meaning of the word. Osteen himself rather uses the term positive preaching; and this has resulted in his congregation to grow from six thousand to thirty thousand members.⁶¹

A group that can be seen as separate within the prosperity gospel are the African American churches. In fact, the prosperity gospel has recently grown the most among African Americans and Latinos.⁶² Historically black churches have promoted economic and social advancement since the days when the slave system was still in practice. Churches back then helped runaway slaves, schools and the civil rights movement financially. Because the church has such a central position within black communities, the historically black churches today still feel an obligation to support their congregation, also financially. The African American Christians are also giving tithe and believe that God in exchange will let wealth come their way. A large majority of African Americans feel that

⁵⁸ Susan Friend Harding, “Sacrificial Economics,” in *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 109.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁶⁰ David van Biema and Jeff Chu, “Does God Want You To Be Rich?” *Time Magazine*, September 10, 2006, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1533448,00.html> (accessed June 6, 2011).

⁶¹ Carolyn Kleiner Butler, “Sermon with a Smile,” *U.S. News & World Report* 139, no. 2 (October 3, 2005), 57-8.

⁶² Hanna Rosin, “Did Christianity Cause the Crash?” *The Atlantic*, (accessed June 6, 2011).

they are the group that has been disadvantaged in American society and therefore feel entitled to wealth, because it is their turn now.⁶³

If God wants people to be rich, then there are also those who believe that the money should be spent on religious merchandise. In the US there is a very profound market for Christian paraphernalia, from books, to purity rings and cross necklaces to sweatshirts with statements such as “stick with Jesus” on it.⁶⁴ People who sell such merchandise have found consumerism and religion a good combination to make money, therefore they do not find there are discrepancies between the two.

The second largest religious group in the US are the Catholics, and that religion does not carry out a specific stance on consumerism. On the one hand, there is a lot of Catholic merchandise in circulation and some Catholic churches preach about the prosperity gospel as well.⁶⁵ However, on the other hand many Catholics also like to adhere to the gospel of Saint Thomas Aquinas which urges people to seek the love for God instead of products. People will not be satisfied by products. In general, Catholics are known for giving aid to the poor. Also, many popes have issued writings stating that enjoyment should not be a goal in life.⁶⁶ In the late nineteenth century there were even some Catholic initiatives who sought for an alternative to both socialism and capitalism. By buying products from local markets people would become self-sufficient, consequently people would start to care more about their local environments as well.⁶⁷ Despite these efforts, today there is not a major Catholic anti-consumerist movement in the US.

⁶³ Koch, Bradley A. “The Prosperity Gospel and Economic Prosperity: Race, Class, Giving, and Voting,” 2009, http://www.philanthropy.iupui.edu/Lakefamilyinstitute/docs/Brad_Koch_Final_Dissertation%208-5-09.pdf (accessed June 6, 2011).

⁶⁴ *Heading to Heaven: Your Christian Superstore*, <http://www.headingtoheaven.com/> (Accessed June 6, 2011).

⁶⁵ Hanna Rosin, “Did Christianity Cause the Crash?” *The Atlantic*, (accessed June 6, 2011).

⁶⁶ Andrew V. Abela, “Is Consumerism Harmful?” *Acton Institute*, November 7, 2007, <http://www.acton.org/pub/commentary/2007/11/07/consumerism-harmful>, (accessed June 14, 2011).

⁶⁷ John B. Cobb jr., “Consumerism, Economism, and Christian Faith,” *Religion Online*, August 2000, <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1089> (accessed June 14, 2011).

Conclusion

This chapter has given a general overview of American religion and their take on consumerism. From the five clusters, evangelicals and historically black churches are the most pro-consumerism. Their adherents believe that God will bestow upon them a lot of wealth and that they should receive that gift accordingly. The Mormons have also not shown much anti-consumerism, but there seems to be a shift in the LDS church recently. What can be concluded is that the most anti-consumerist religions in the US actually do not fall within any of the five clusters, with Buddhism and Hinduism emerging as the most anti-consumerist. Thus in general, American religions have not made outspoken remarks regarding consumerism. The anti-consumerist groups that will be studied in chapter four are more dedicated to the cause, and can therefore be defined as being an anti-consumerist group first, with a Christian basis second.

Chapter 4: Religion the Antithesis of Consumerism?

As the previous chapter has demonstrated, most Christian religions embrace the capitalist consumer culture to further their religious message. However, despite the seeming successful relationship between the two, there has been some discussion around the topic, e.g. by the aforementioned Perry Miller. Then in the early twenty-first century the discussion was picked up again, and with more contributing authors than there have been before. In this chapter we will take a look at these authors and what their argument is. Whereas not many people from the religious realm have argued this before, the following authors find that a true believer cannot be a true consumer. Hence, what is the critique from esteemed authors and academics on religion and consumerism?

All Consuming

In 2003, academic Lizabeth Cohen published her book *A Consumer's Republic: the Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*. In it she traces the beginnings of America's consumer culture to the 1950s when people were enjoying all the goods they could suddenly purchase. However, through time the downside of a consumer culture also came to light. First of all, it led to inequality because only a few could afford to buy all the luxuries.⁶⁸ Second, society became increasingly fragmented because of marketing techniques. Through advertisements and other product placements, companies were focusing on a certain demographic, and soon people started to see themselves belonging to that specific group. According to Cohen, it separated people because of difference in gender, class and race.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 254-56.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 288-9.

However, Cohen notes that most people are not aware of these consequences of consumer culture. On the contrary, Cohen argues that Americans are led to believe that they can help their economy and society by purchasing goods. Particularly in times of recession, as was recently the case after September 11. People today have become alienated from each other because of shopping, especially with the recent trend of online shopping.⁷⁰ Again, the term alienation was first used by Karl Marx, to explain that people become distanced from a certain product in capitalist societies. For instance, most of the goods produced today are made in other – often Third World – countries. The reverse of the coin is that the producers themselves have also become alienated from the product, because of the production line system a worker does not get to make nor even see the final product anymore.⁷¹ To sum up, Cohen argues that consumer culture has left the American consumer isolated and alone.

Cohen does not address the question of religion within a consumer society, but in 1998 an anthology was published with essays from theologians, sociologists and economists, among others, about the influence of consumerism on religion. Editor and contributor Rodney Clapp finds that within language the perilous development can be found; in today's society people solely talk about being a shopper in one way or a consumer in another way. However, Christians have not realized yet what the downside is of their consumer culture. The market is playing too big a role in people's lives, Clapp states, pushing religion, family and friendships into the background.⁷² In other words, life

⁷⁰ Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*, 401-3.

⁷¹ Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*, (1845), <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01a.htm> (accessed June 24, 2011).

⁷² Rodney Clapp, "Consumption & the Modern Ethos," in *The Consuming Passion: Christianity & The Consumer Culture*, Rodney Clapp ed., (Madison, WI: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 8, 12.

only revolves around consumption nowadays, and consequently Clapp terms it “all-consuming.”⁷³

Consumer Culture Overload

Vincent J. Miller finds in the 2003 publication *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* that not only have Christians themselves changed, but Christianity itself too. Miller, an associate professor of Theology, argues that religious beliefs, narratives and symbols have changed because of consumer culture. It is a dominant culture, which absorbs some cultural traditions, but leaves out others, Miller states. What is more, through the absorption, often the true meaning of traditions is lost. “This [process] changes our relationship to religious beliefs and practices profoundly. They continue to be revered and celebrated, but are increasingly deprived of their ability to influence and shape our individual, interpersonal, and communal lives.”⁷⁴ Miller wrote the book because he saw a discrepancy between the Puritan religious tradition of the US and its present-day consumer culture. This religious tradition, he continues, is characterized by being cautious about consuming for leisure, and also by temperance. Miller, then, calls it a “disconnect” between “religious belief and practice.”⁷⁵ Religious Americans should not allow consumer culture to undercut their religion any longer.

Another consequence of consumerism is growing globalization, according to Miller, and, religion has also become eroded by globalization, which has resulted in a conventional and diminished form of religion. In other words, it has become a mere “spirituality” from which people choose the characteristics that will enforce their current

⁷³ Rodney Clapp, “The Theology of Consumption & the Consumption of Theology,” in *The Consuming Passion* (1998), 169.

⁷⁴ Vincent Jude Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture*, (New York: Continuum, 2005), 179.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

lifestyle.⁷⁶ People want religion to be a “normal” experience, thus eccentric traditions are left out. As religion has become only a consummating part of someone’s life, Miller explains, there is not much time left that can be devoted to religion. Religion can be exclusive, but that is not desired in today’s society which upholds a lifestyle of conformity.⁷⁷ Moreover, people want to believe in God, but the relationship has to remain distant. As society becomes more individualistic, Miller feels so does religion.⁷⁸ Tom Beaudoin agrees with Miller that globalization has had a negative effect on religion, in his book *Consuming Faith: Integrating Who We Are With What We Buy*, published in 2003. Beaudoin discusses the fame of Pope and the Dalai Lama. These religious leaders are known around the world by people from many different religions. By making each religion, and its religious leaders, more global – thus more compromising – everybody can find something in that religion to relate to. But, Beaudoin argues that each – in this case – Christian must return to their religious roots. They have an obligation to adhere to their own traditions, Beaudoin feels.

Bill McKibben raises the issue of the environment in the 1998 anthology. First he lists all the environmental degradation that humans are faced with today: a growing world population, pollution, erosion, ozone depletion, and global warming. McKibben then wonders how it is possible that Christians have not realized yet that what they are doing is “decreation,” they are destroying what God once made for them. Additionally, it reveals how powerful humans have become, whereas they should let God stay in power, he argues. What people really need, according to McKibben, is a lifestyle change. They should strive for what Jesus already talked about: simplicity. Instead of always taking the car, people

⁷⁶ Vincent Jude Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture*, 89, 94.

⁷⁷ It is interesting to note, that there are some contradictory views on how exclusive religion should really be. A trend in contemporary America is that people tend to become members of churches and other religious groups which are very exclusive and ask a lot of time and energy of that person. Yet, what Miller is arguing here is the complete opposite. As to the reason for this, could be studied in another paper.

⁷⁸ Vincent Jude Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture*, 82.

could also take the bike or the bus. Without all those possessions people could find the real joys in life again, McKibben claims.⁷⁹

Empty Symbols

Beaudoin argues that branding is the aspect of consumer culture which is the most destructive for people living in such a culture. Branding makes people only go for the product because of its symbolism, and the history and context of a product is invisible. The power of branding in this respect is endless, Beaudoin continues: “[b]randing is a sort of religious system, a spiritual discipline, that can provide as persuasive a worldview as the scriptures or any traditional religion.”⁸⁰ A side effect of the power of branding is the continues search for new goods, which leaves people powerless to find true happiness and friendship. That is what Mindy Makant argues in her article in *Dialog*. The consequence of consumer culture has been that become have become restless. However, she continues, this is can be explained because St. Augustine has already said that people will be restless until they find God. Consumers will always continue to pursue the next item to be bought, but that means that they will never find friendship and happiness, Makant argues. People will experience friendship and happiness, but they will also discard it just as easily. Makant recognizes that this is what people do to the items they purchase as well. The only true friendship there should be, is the one people have with God, and for this argument Makant uses Aquinas to support her argument. God gives in the friendship he has with his followers, Makant states, hence people should also give in their friendship with others.

⁷⁹ Bill McKibben, “Returning God to the Center,” in *The Consuming Passion* (1998), 40-50.

⁸⁰ Tom Beaudoin, *Consuming Faith: Integrating Who We Are with What We Buy*, 7th ed., (Plymouth: Sheed & Ward, 2007), 39.

People will never be truly happy within consumerism; or as Makant puts it, “it sells us a false god and a corrupted story of ourselves.”⁸¹

Miller builds his argument around Marxist theory of commodity fetishism, which later turned into the theory of commodification and is quite similar to Beaudoin’s argument on branding. Commodification means that products have been commodified, that means that they have become desired for their symbolism and status, which results in people wanting to have more and more of such products to build up a lifestyle image.⁸² Miller also borrows from Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci’s idea of hegemony, which is to explain how a culture incorporates all different forces – also opposing views – to stay dominant.⁸³ Thus, consumer culture makes products meaningless, and this also goes for religious traditions and symbols. Miller continues: “believers encounter the elements of tradition in an abstract, fragmented form and are trained to engage them as passive consumers.”⁸⁴ Through consumerism and commodification religious traditions have lost their symbolic power and can no longer teach people about life.

In *Consuming Religion* several examples are given to support the argument that Miller is trying to make. One way in which religious traditions have lost their power is the celebrity status of religious leaders such as Mother Teresa, the Pope – in this case Pope John Paul II – and the Dalai Lama. All these leaders are famous throughout the world, however most people would not know any particularities of their respective religions, Miller argues.⁸⁵ In this respect, Beaudoin agrees with Miller. A second is the selling and marketing of religious merchandise, which was discussed in the previous chapter. Miller lists several paraphernalia, such as prayer beads, rosaries and henna tattoos. Another

⁸¹ Mindy G. Makant, “The Pursuit of Happiness: The Virtue of Consumption and the Consumption of Virtue,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 49, no. 4 (2010): 298, 291-299.

⁸² Vincent Jude Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture*, 3, 13.

⁸³ John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*, (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), 118-123.

⁸⁴ Vincent Jude Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture*, 9.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 95-98.

example of the devaluing of religion that Miller finds, are the televangelists. Televangelism is focused on a production to be profitable with a direct question to viewers for money. The fact that these traditions are embraced by consumer culture, is because they have a high visual and symbolic appeal. These items and practices are taken from their religious context and “used to decorate the everyday life of our own time.”⁸⁶ Thus, the items are also often used in a different way than what their original religious purpose was.

Christian Virtues Jeopardized

Clapp specifically states what he finds that makes religion and consumerism incompatible; a Christian receives traits from his religion such as patience, selflessness, and complacency, all of which are suppressed by consumer culture.⁸⁷ However, today people are never satisfied. There are simply too many choices, Clapp argues, and consumers do not know anymore whether the choices made really matter, or not. The irony of consumerism, Clapp continues, is then that consumers can never quite get what they are after; “fulfillment and lasting satisfaction are forever just out of reach.”⁸⁸ In Clapp’s opinion, God is the only thing that people should continuously desire for.⁸⁹ Another pitfall of consumer culture according to Clapp, is that it does not require people to stay faithful to one thing in life anymore, whereas they should devote their entire life to God and stay faithful to him. Yet people can simply make another choice and change their life and its direction. Hence, Clapp is increasingly worried about consumerism which is dominant and remains largely unquestioned. The Christian virtue of patience and self-control does not comply with consumption’s “instant gratification.” Clapp states that Christians are from

⁸⁶ Vincent Jude Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture*, 73, 78-81.

⁸⁷ Rodney Clapp, “The Theology of Consumption & the Consumption of Theology,” in *The Consuming Passion* (1998), 171

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 188.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 188-92.

tradition gentle, yet within consumer culture they become “overloaded, jaded consumers.”⁹⁰

Beaudoin argues that everybody is serving the brand economy, yet nobody is truly provided by it. What is more, Beaudoin continues, is that American Christians should think more consciously about consuming. Through the purchases that people are making and the brands that they are wearing, they are displaying a distinct identity. An identity of which being a Christian is also a large part, yet by wearing clothes that were made by people who are being exploited they are ignoring their Christian beliefs of looking out for other people. In other words, because of the economic choices they have made, they have renounced their Christian beliefs. They have not considered who is suffering to make those brands, Beaudoin argues. And that is exactly the point, because branding makes the exploitation disappear, as he has argued before.⁹¹ Beaudoin himself has done some research as to the origins of his own brand clothing. His research revealed that most of the companies he came in contact with were not willing to reveal the labor conditions of the workers. Beaudoin then wonders what would God want him to buy, as a Christian, for example. Moreover, what do the things he buys say about him as a Christian?⁹² Today, people have put their trust in logos, when they should have put their trust in God.⁹³ Consumer society asks a certain swiftness of people, everybody goes fast through life. Hence, the brand that somebody is wearing should quickly reflect something and bring across a message. Beaudoin actually terms this a “continues spiritual search” through which people define and express themselves.⁹⁴ Therefore, a product must at once reveal something about

⁹⁰ Rodney Clapp, “The Theology of Consumption & the Consumption of Theology,” in *The Consuming Passion* (1998), 193-4.

⁹¹ Tom Beaudoin, *Consuming Faith: Integrating Who We Are with What We Buy*, ix-x, 4.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 11-13.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

someone's identity, yet at the same time reveal nothing about its maker. However, there are many workers being exploited, especially overseas, Beaudoin argues.⁹⁵

Beaudoin structures his central argument around Jesus' own "economic spirituality," as he calls it. People reveal something about who they are through how they use their resources, according to Beaudoin. He continues by stating that through Jesus' economics people should know that they do not really possess things, since everything ultimately belongs to God. Second, they should only use their resources to do good in the world. Hence, also spending their money wisely. Thus, most of Beaudoin's argument is taken from the stories about Jesus in the Bible: "As God's economist, Jesus reveals a way of being in the world both economic and spiritual."⁹⁶ In another article published in the 2010 *Dialog* issue regarding consumerism, Rick Carlson has also studied the Bible to explain that God and Jesus would not approve of consumerism. According to several passages that Carlson distills from the gospel of Luke in the Bible, our possessions are never truly ours. Rather, a Christian living in the twenty-first century should give as much as possible to the poor. People should not live and consume solely for their own gain, because that results in the suffering and exploitation of other people. Following this line of argument, Carlson argues that God would tend to those in need, and in his image, people should do the same.⁹⁷

The Christian Solution

The majority of the authors discussed in this chapter find that something has to be done to help people become better Christians in consumer society. Several of the authors, also contribute by revealing some of their solutions. Miller, for example, recognizes that

⁹⁵ Tom Beaudoin, *Consuming Faith: Integrating Who We Are with What We Buy*, 10-11, 41.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 22, 35.

⁹⁷ Rick Carlson, "'Who then is the Faithful, Insightful Steward?' Consumerism and Luke's Stewarding Vision." *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 49, no. 4 (2010): 275-283.

consumer culture is here to stay, and therefore he is not arguing against consumerism. Rather, people who are religious should see and realize how consumer culture has altered their beliefs, and also see that consumer culture leads to economic injustice and the environment suffers too.⁹⁸ Miller explains how consumer culture works, and consequently how it has altered religion. Only with the knowledge of consumer culture's workings, Miller argues, can a religious countermovement rise.⁹⁹ When Christians know what they buy they will make more conscious purchases. Americans should not desire goods, but desire God.

Beaudoin agrees in the general sense with Miller that the way Christians are living today in America's consumer culture cannot be sustained. However, in contrast to Miller he wants Christians to find their spiritual path again, consequently aiming to diminish the influence of consumerism. Beaudoin feels that there is a role for the ministry, to help people find this path. It is not a given that this will work, but, Beaudoin argues, if people felt more secure in other areas of their lives, they would never make an unnecessary purchase. People should realize what makes them unique individuals. One example of this that Beaudoin mentions is that the church can help by supporting the creativity of its parishioners. Another thing that Christians could do is ignore any kind of media, such as television and the internet, making it more difficult for advertisements to influence people.¹⁰⁰ Clapp agrees with Beaudoin, and also feels that the church should have a large role in making people aware of the consequences of consumer culture.¹⁰¹

Shannon Jung offers her solution in the article "Consumption, Contrition, and Community," published in the 2010 *Dialog* issue. People have been too greedy, which Jung signals as a sin, and consequently the earth's ecosystems have reached a breaking

⁹⁸ Vincent Jude Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture*, 11.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 145.

¹⁰⁰ Tom Beaudoin, *Consuming Faith: Integrating Who We Are with What We Buy*, 98-104.

¹⁰¹ Rodney Clapp, "The Theology of Consumption & the Consumption of Theology," in *The Consuming Passion* (1998), 190.

point. People are experiencing too extremes, Jung continues, because on the one hand there is famine and on the other hand there is a growing group of people with obesity. Yet Christians are blind to this suffering, but the solution could be contrition, according to Jung. When people would recognize that the way they have been living cannot be sustained in a way that God would appreciate, they will find His love again. They have acknowledged that it is their own responsibility, and because of that God will forgive them, Jung argues. Consequently, Jung sees that all Christians with their new-found love in God will come together again to form a wholesome community in which people take care of each other again.¹⁰²

William Cavanaugh has the most extensive solution because he is arguing for a new economic system: one that is based on the Christian characteristic of community. His book *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire*, published in 2008, reveals his view of the free market system. According to Cavanaugh, the market is not free because consumers do not receive the necessary information about the products they are buying. Especially Christian consumers should have the knowledge of what they are buying and the information behind it; who made it, where is it from and who is going to receive the profit.¹⁰³ Cavanaugh continues; religion and economics are intertwined, yet most Christians do not realize that their purchases should be influenced by their religion. Consequently, he wants Christians to “create concrete alternative practices that open up a different kind of economic space.”¹⁰⁴ The church should promote other economic practices that are closely related to Christianity. If the economy is comprised of a close-knit community, then their capital, labor, and the people, could work closely together to make a

¹⁰² Shannon Jung, “Consumption, Contrition, and Community,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 49, no. 4 (2010): 284-290.

¹⁰³ William T. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 32.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, vii-viii.

more honest and more humanitarian economy.¹⁰⁵ What Christians should do is support people in need, and spend their money on items that will help others live a sustainable life too. People can buy things locally and put their money in smaller community banks. Moreover, people should know where the things they buy come from, but also use the things they buy “for the common good.” When people realize that everything on earth is made by God, albeit indirectly, then people would attribute more meaning to items and would also consume in a more sensible way.¹⁰⁶ Cavanaugh’s solution does not require drastic changes, yet in his opinion it will turn society upside down. “The goal is indeed revolution, to transform the entirety of economic life into something worthy of God’s children.”¹⁰⁷

In Conclusion

All the authors and academics discussed in this chapter share the same cultural criticism with regards to consumer culture. They all agree that consumer culture is a bad influence on society, religion, and Christian consumers in particular. In their opinion Americans are blind to the negative influence of consumerism on their lives since the signs are not obvious, because the system is integrated so well. The majority argues that consumerism has led to a form of disregard towards goods, people are not attached to their belongings. It is a circle of buying, selling and disposing of things.

Each author has found something different within consumer culture that does not stroke with Christianity. Consumer culture threatens the dignity of human beings, the future of the earth, but also the strong tradition of religion itself. Therefore, it is interesting to note that despite all these ambivalences within society, the capitalist consumerist system

¹⁰⁵ William T. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire*, 32.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 57-58

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, x.

still works. Each author also draws from different Christian sources to support their argument; for example St. Augustine, and different texts from the Bible.

In my view, these authors have given a thorough idea of Christian criticism on consumer culture. However, despite the fact that a large percentage of Americans are Christian, none of the authors discuss whether they all would adhere to a call from their religious tradition to consume less. As some of them pointed out, religion has become increasingly personal, and people might not understand the sort of obligation they could have towards their religious background. All of the authors seem to expect that if and when people would be educated, they would understand and adapt their lifestyle in the name of religion.

Lastly, several of the authors have tried to find a solution to make Christians more aware of their consumer habits. There is no consensus on one solution though, and the literature on this subject is still quite limited; the message has not yet reached the larger audience yet. In the next chapter we are going to take a look at some small-scale religious inspired anti-consumerist initiatives.

Chapter 5: Religious Anti-Consumerist Groups

Many of the authors discussed in the last chapter have one or more suggestions on how to take a stand against consumer culture through religion. For one, Christians should be aware of the, according to the authors devastating, effects of consumer capitalism on religion.

Second, a closer connection to God would make people less materialistic. Rodney Clapp demonstrates in his anthology that people from each class in society can realize they find something is wrong with their consumer society. Clapp has spoken to different people, one of which is Malcolm Street who considers himself to belong to the affluent class.

According to Street, the rich become shielded from the sufferings of the rest of society in a consumer culture. Being a Christian himself, Street believes that the greatest good a

wealthy Christian can do is to be generous. Clapp has also interviewed Lendol and Kathy Knight Calder who are identified as belonging to the middle class. The Calders feel that because of consumerism people do not enjoy their natural surroundings anymore, hence they do not enjoy God's creation. Similar to Street, the Calders also believe in generosity.

Consequently, Clapp concludes that such efforts by people can be a small resistance towards consumer capitalist culture.¹⁰⁸ In this chapter we will take a look at some

religious anti-consumerist groups who have taken on a practical approach to resist consumer capitalism as well. What are the key elements and characteristics of religious anti-consumerism? What do religious anti-consumerism groups such as Simple Living, Sustainable Traditions, Alternatives for Simple Living and Advent Conspiracy find is wrong with consumerism?

¹⁰⁸ Rodney Clapp, "The Theology of Consumption & the Consumption of Theology," in *The Consuming Passion* (1998), 195-98.

Eliminate the Unnecessary

The organization Sustainable Traditions explains in an article published on their website why Christians should turn around their consumer patterns, particularly when it comes to the consumption of nutrition. According to Caroline D'Angelo there are three reasons why Christians should turn to agriculture for survival. First of all, the Bible contains several dietary and agricultural laws which reveal that God is concerned with what people eat. Second, agriculture makes people become assiduous and self reliant, whereas industrial production leads to "exploitation." Third, D'Angelo argues that Jesus' first concern was to ensure everybody had food to eat, and Christians today should do the same which they could if they produced the food themselves.¹⁰⁹

Another way that people try to counter consumer capitalism is to lessen their consumption and simplify their lives. This anti-consumerist lifestyle is united in the "Simple Living" movement, which has been made known by leaders such as Ghandi but also religious groups such as the Amish and the Shakers, among others. Conversely, the Simple Living lifestyle has also enjoyed popularity among secularists, for example, Henry David Thoreau who lived on Walden Pond in Massachusetts for two years and tried to live simply and become self-reliant there. Hence, Simple Living is a large movement which exceeds religious and denominational lines.

There is one Christian couple who have tried to adopt the Simple Living lifestyle and wrote the book *Simple Living: One Couple's Search for a Better Life* to inspire other people to do the same. Frank Levering and Wanda Urbanska were writers living in Los Angeles before they traded that life to run Frank's family orchard in Virginia. The book is their personal life story, of why and how they went on to simplify their lives. Although neither of them is particularly religious, they do find their inspiration and motivation for

¹⁰⁹ Caroline D'Angelo, "Why Christians Should Support Sustainable Agriculture," *Sustainable Traditions*, July 30, 2010, <http://sustainabletraditions.com/2010/07/why-christians-should-support-sustainable-agriculture/> (accessed July 15, 2011).

the lifestyle change in their religious upbringing. Urbanska was raised Episcopalian but has not done much with that religion in her adult life, instead, she draws more to her husband and his family's religion. Levering comes from a Quaker family, which is a religious group similar to the Amish who vow to live their lives simply through what is known as the "Testimony of Simplicity." Quakers have several themes that they try to carry out and teach new generations, which they have termed "testimonies" because "they testify to the guidance of God as Friends have experienced it."¹¹⁰ At several points in the book his Quaker heritage is mentioned; for example they mention that Quakers believe that Jesus formed a lasting relationship with God through living in simplicity, and people today should do the same. Both Levering and Urbanska, then, believe that their quest for a simpler life has brought them closer to God and closer to creation.¹¹¹ Another Quaker tradition that Levering and Urbanska try to honor is helping out other people by doing volunteer work, for example. They hope that through their volunteer work, they can contribute to solving world problems.¹¹²

A befriended couple of Levering and Urbanska which have been an inspiration to them are Linda and Millard Fuller. The Fullers decided to simplify their lives because they were very committed to their Christian faith. They use the following quote from the Bible to support their motivation: "'A Man's life,' Jesus says in the Gospel According to Luke, 'consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth.'"¹¹³ Hearing their story made Levering and Urbanska realize that their lifestyle was justified from many different angles, thus also the religious angle. The most important thing in life, the Fullers argue, is the love and relationships that people build up, not money and wealth. "We've found real

¹¹⁰ "A Quaker Glossary," *Quaker Information Center: A Gateway to Quakerism*, <http://www.quakerinfo.org/resources/glossary.html#testimony> (Accessed July 20, 2011).

¹¹¹ Frank Levering and Wanda Urbanska, *Simple Living: One Couple's Search For a Better Life*, (Winston-Salem, NC: John F. Blair, Publisher, 2003), 256.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 193.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 56.

treasure,' Millard said. 'Not in a big bank account, but in a wonderful relationship and a meaningful life. We finally started making some investments in the right places.'"¹¹⁴ Linda Fuller, who wrote the foreword to *Simple Living*, argues that by serving humanity, they are serving God. Start within the local community, and the rest of the world will follow, Fuller concludes.

The key to simple living is that because nature and culture are interconnected, people try to make use of both consciously. People should still live comfortably while making use of less natural resources. Levering and Urbanska suggest that this can be done through diminishing the dependence on the dollar, by recycling, by growing one's own food, by trying to repair things that are broken instead of buying new things, and by volunteering, to name a few.¹¹⁵ In daily life, this means that people try to spend time outdoors, hence disconnect from all the luxury items in the house, and socialize with other people. Urbanska states that people should try to consider the environment by recycling, not using throw-away cups and water bottles, but also buying second hand items. These, and other tips Urbanska provided through her own television series and more books.¹¹⁶

Abandon 'Consumer Christianity'

Comparable to Frank Levering and Wanda Urbanska, most groups who oppose consumer capitalism with religious arguments are founded and managed by a couple. For instance, Jason and Pam Fowler who have founded Sustainable Traditions. Beside transforming their own life, they have started a website where people can find inspiration to practice "whole-

¹¹⁴ Frank Levering and Wanda Urbanska, *Simple Living: One Couple's Search For a Better Life*, 56.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Wendy Koch, "Wanda Urbanska touts simpler, greener living," *USA Today on the web*, June 1, 2010, <http://content.usatoday.com/communities/greenhouse/post/2010/06/wanda-urbansks-simplicity-green-living/1> (accessed July 11, 2011).

life Christian faith.”¹¹⁷ The Fowlers repeatedly refer to the “wholeness” of God’s kingdom. This means that they believe that everything in the world is interconnected, which means that one decision will influence the whole, i.e. the rest of the world. The website features articles by multiple contributors, book and movie reviews, and other tips on how to transform one’s life. Congruent with the Fullers and Levering and Urbanska, they felt they would no longer conform to society’s expectations. Rather, the Fowlers wanted to devote themselves to God’s kingdom on earth. What this meant for them was “hospitality, caring for the poor and marginalized, establishing prayer and work as a rhythm of life,” among others.¹¹⁸ They actively try to use the internet and other media to explain the “sustainable traditions” they preach. With sustainability the Fowlers want to make people aware to live in the present, and hence realize that present decisions will influence the future; socially, economically, and for the environment. In this respect, the Fowlers are also campaigning for churches to “abandon ‘consumer Christianity,’” because they should be the counsellor for people and teach them that together they are responsible for God’s creation and each other.¹¹⁹

Not only people’s consumer patterns ought to be changed if it were up to these anti-consumerist groups, as they also argue that work, money and work ethics that are in place in today’s society should be transformed. In an article published on the Sustainable Traditions website, titled “Work For Free,” Ragan Sutterfield argues that there is no shortage of jobs in the United States, rather it is the money that is needed to pay people to do the work. Therefore, Sutterfield argues that people should do the work for free – especially farm work which is in place to feed people – as a gift to the community. Eventually this system could replace the current capitalist economy, Sutterfield hopes; “as

¹¹⁷ “Vision and Mission,” *Sustainable Traditions*, <http://sustainabletraditions.com/vision-and-mission/> (accessed July 13, 2011).

¹¹⁸ Jason and Pam Fowler, “About,” *Sustainable Traditions*, <http://sustainabletraditions.com/about/> (accessed July 13, 2011).

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

we offer our gifts others will offer us theirs and the need for the economy of false value will subside from our lives.”¹²⁰ Levering and Urbanska also mention a different kind of work ethic that should be a part of anybody transforming to simple living; work has to be fulfilling and meaningful. Doing all the farm work and working outside made both of them aware of the seasons, they became connected to natural cycles, “Frank began to feel like a creature among creatures, part of the larger scheme of things.” After a hard day’s work, “Frank felt a nameless joy merely being alive in creation.”¹²¹ It is about efficiency and simplicity, which can be achieved by working less hours and consequently making less money, according to Levering and Urbanska. Because in truth, they argue, people do not really need all the money, it is alright to do with less.

Congruent with Vincent J. Miller his argument in the previous chapter, Sustainable Traditions founder and author Jason Fowler feels that Christianity itself has been transformed due to consumerism. Fowler argues that people go to church to relieve themselves of the guilt they would experience if they would not go, and Christianity has been divided in small parts which can be quickly consumed. For instance, Fowler mentions all the religious memorabilia, such as books, music, t-shirts, bumper stickers and “action figure Bible characters.” Consumerism has become a religion in itself, and the only way people can be “saved” is by buying many items, Fowler states.¹²²

Christian Communities and Housing for the Poor

All the groups discussed in this chapter agree that it is difficult to completely transform one’s lifestyle from what is “normal” in America’s consumer capitalist society. Therefore, stronger alliances can be formed if people would start living together in communities. The

¹²⁰ Ragan Sutterfield, “Work for Free,” *Sustainable Traditions*, December 9, 2009, <http://sustainabletraditions.com/2009/12/work-for-free/> (accessed July 14, 2011).

¹²¹ Frank Levering and Wanda Urbanska, *Simple Living: One Couple’s Search For a Better Life*, 83.

¹²² Jason Fowler, “The Spiritual Crisis of Consumerism,” *Sustainable Traditions*, March 1, 2010, <http://sustainabletraditions.com/2010/03/the-spiritual-crisis-of-consumerism/> (accessed July 16, 2011).

Fowlers were also active in trying to create “intentional Christian communities,” or otherwise termed “villages of God.”¹²³ In these villages people shared the mission and “discipleship” to live according to God’s word. The Fowlers have already realized one such community near Lynchburg in Virginia. It had been a long-time dream for the Fowlers to live in a Christian community where they could live off of their organic garden.

The Fullers also live in a “tightly knit, racially integrated Christian community,” at Koinonia Farm in Georgia. At Koinonia they challenge “racism, militarism and materialism.”¹²⁴ Within this community the focus is also on self-reliance and helping out other people who suffer and live in poverty. The Fullers argue that they live their lives to serve others, “based on the life and teaching of Jesus.”¹²⁵ Koinonia farm today is the headquarters of the organization Habitat for Humanity, founded by the Fullers. Habitat for Humanity predominantly builds houses for the poor. This “non-profit, ecumenical Christian organization,” is “dedicated to eliminating substandard housing and homelessness worldwide.”¹²⁶ Housing, then, is also an important basic right that people deserve, according to many of these anti-consumerist groups, however which is not always available in a consumer capitalist society. When people can no longer afford a house then they are evicted. In this light, Jason Fowler promotes another initiative in Phoenix, Arizona. The organization Phoenix Commotion and its members help build houses that are made from recycled and salvaged materials. The organization tries to get the homeowner to help out as well, and in the process teaching him or her building skills. The organization also helps to finance the build, and this money is returned after the new homeowner has secured a mortgage on the new house.¹²⁷

¹²³ “Vision and Mission,” *Sustainable Traditions*, <http://sustainabletraditions.com/vision-and-mission/> (accessed July 13, 2011).

¹²⁴ “Koinonia,” *Koinonia Farm*, May 10, 2010, <http://www.koinoniapartners.org/> (accessed July 16, 2011).

¹²⁵ Frank Levering and Wanda Urbanska, *Simple Living: One Couple’s Search For a Better Life*, 56.

¹²⁶ “Links,” *Sustainable Traditions*, <http://sustainabletraditions.com/links/> (accessed July 13, 2011).

¹²⁷ Dan Phillips, “Mission,” *Phoenix Commotion*, <http://www.phoenixcommotion.com/index.php?option=>

Another organization that is calling out for more communal living is New Monasticism. There are several different groups in the US who experiment with this kind of communities. Close to fifty of them have connected through the website.¹²⁸ In such a community, everybody is welcome and the community offers a lot of time for theological contemplation. The rules in the community are established and reinforced by the community members themselves. Moreover, these rules are inspired by the Bible. Within the community everybody helps each other out, and new people or strangers are always welcome.¹²⁹ The movement is new in the sense that there are some differences with old Christian monastic communities. The communities do not necessarily have to be in the same geographic location, they do not wear the traditional clothing, and married couples are allowed, to name a few.¹³⁰ There are more similar initiatives like New Monasticism out there, such as The Simple Way and Mustard Seed Associates.

Melody Adele Connally suggests a more, what some would say is a, drastic idea of a community; she proposes that several different family members join in to live together as one household. She finds in the book of Ephesians many examples of God's idea of what she terms householding. Connally does assert that it is not easy to live with family, however there is a way: "[w]e have to submit, lay down our supposed rights as individuals for the benefit of the family. Whether or not you live with your family, submitting to one another is imperative for a healthy identity in Christ."¹³¹ One considerable advantage of these larger households, Connally asserts is that it lessens the burden on the environment.

com_k2&view=item&layout=item&id=1&Itemid=2&lang=en (accessed July 14, 2011).

¹²⁸ "New Monasticism," <http://www.newmonasticism.org/index.php> (accessed July 16, 2011).

¹²⁹ Rob Moll, "The New Monasticism," *Christianity Today*, (September 2005), <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/september/16.38.html> (accessed July 16, 2011).

¹³⁰ Patrick O'Neill, "The New Monasticism in Durham's Walltown, a Covenant Community," *Divinity Online*, 5, no 2 (Fall 2005), <http://www.divinity.duke.edu/publications/2005.09/features/monasticism/01.htm> (accessed July 16, 2011).

¹³¹ Melody Adele Connally, "Householding: Families As Christian Communities," *Sustainable Traditions*, June 6, 2011, "<http://sustainabletraditions.com/2011/06/householding-families-as-christian-communities/> (accessed July 13, 2011).

Large families can make better and more efficient consumption choices. Moreover, families mature personally and spiritually when they live together, Connally concludes.¹³²

A Shorter List for Santa

One aspect of consumer society that many of the religious anti-consumerist groups try to transform is Christmas. The website of Sustainable Traditions, which the Fowlers term as a “blogazine,” has also featured an article on this subject. Tom Fuerst argues in the article “To Redeem Christmas We must Redeem Advent,” that preachers and other religious leaders often remark that the true meaning of Christmas has been lost because of consumerism and materialism. Currently, the holiday solely revolves around the giving of many expensive presents, as well as the returning of the gifts the next day. However, as Fuerst comments, nothing has been undertaken to counter this. He believes that the tradition of Advent can offer resistance. “Advent is about waiting, mourning, repenting, longing for God,” Fuerst continues. All of that is better than waiting for Christmas morning and Black Friday, he concludes. Jason Fowler himself also posted an article because he felt anger that Christmas was no longer about Jesus’ birth. Instead at Christmas time, people become greedy, wasteful and “mindless” consumers, Fowler states. He even posts a short clip of Reverend Billy, a man who is preaching the message of “stop shopping and start giving” through a preacher persona. Fowler does not approve of the combination of theology with entertainment, yet he does believe that reverend Billy has a valid message.¹³³

The religiously motivated anti-consumerist group Alternatives for Simple Living, which no longer exists, also opposed the Christmas celebrations. If people want to change their perspective, they should stop being “self-indulgent” and adopt a “more responsible lifestyle,” they argue. Otherwise, Christmas results in too much anxiety and credit deficits.

¹³² Melody Adele Connally, “Householding: Families As Christian Communities,” *Sustainable Traditions*.

¹³³ Jason Fowler, “The Holy Fools of Christmas,” *Sustainable Traditions*, December 11, 2010, <http://sustainabletraditions.com/2010/12/the-holy-fools-of-christmas/> (accessed July 14, 2011).

In short, Alternatives urges people to help the people who really need it instead of spending money for personal gain.¹³⁴

A third group which has devoted itself entirely to changing the Christmas tradition is Advent Conspiracy (AC). Their name is ambiguous because “Advent” refers to Christian period of the four weeks before Christmas which symbolizes the coming of Christ. Their dictum is: “Worship Fully, Spend Less, Give More, Love all.” Like all the other activists discussed above, AC feels that the true meaning of Christmas, “the birth of a savior,” has been lost.¹³⁵ Instead of what the holiday has become, Christmas can offer so much more, according to the group. It could also offer people, “promise, hope, and a revolutionary love.”¹³⁶ The group was founded by five pastors five years ago who wanted to encourage their own communities as well as others to change the way people celebrated Christmas. Traditionally, AC argues, Christmas was meant for people to stop thinking about their worries and devote time in celebration with God. Also, AC realizes that a sudden lifestyle change can be too much to ask; therefore they start with small steps and ask people to give one less gift this Christmas. AC argues that Christmas also offers time to spend with close family and experience the love there is in life. Following from this, AC asks its followers to not only give and receive love from family, but also being empathetic to everybody in the world. Therefore AC asks that the money that people not spend on that one gift, to donate to charity; “[b]y spending less at Christmas we have the opportunity to join Him in giving resources to those who need help the most.”¹³⁷

Advent Conspiracy also finds that people who are not religious but still believe that Christmas should be changed, are finding their way back to God. “This season, as you

¹³⁴ “About us,” *Alternatives for Simple Living.org*, <http://www.simpleliving.org/Default.aspx?tabid=589> (accessed July 13, 2011).

¹³⁵ “Christmas Can Still Change the World,” *Advent Conspiracy*, <http://www.adventconspiracy.org/> (accessed July 14, 2011).

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ “Nobody Wants a Christmas Worth Forgetting,” *Advent Conspiracy*, <http://www.adventconspiracy.org/hope/> (accessed July 14, 2011).

hang with families and friends who may not agree with your faith, sit and hear their story. Love them genuinely; don't feel like you have to ... "sell" God to them. Let God be God, and then see what happens."¹³⁸ AC especially wants to stress that people should not fear to buy gifts for Christmas, "[w]e want to encourage people to do Christmas differently by worshiping Jesus first before anything else. We want to push back on hyper-consumerism." Tony Biaggne, the spokesperson for AC and author of this article, explains that there is nothing wrong with giving a couple of gifts to loved ones, people should only not go overboard on the giving and spending solely because it is custom.¹³⁹

To sum up, the anti-consumerist message has not reached that many people yet, however the movement against Christmas does seem to appeal to increasingly more people. On the AC website people can post what they have changed at Christmas time and where they live. The map reveals then that AC has followers all over the world.¹⁴⁰

Conclusion

The religious anti-consumerist groups discussed in this chapter all believe that people's lives are, literally, being consumed by the fast lifestyle and acquisition of more items in today's capitalist consumer society. Rather, they argue that, people could and should slow down to realize what is going on in the world around them, both the beauty of God's creation as well as the suffering of other people due to capitalist consumerism. What is similar in the majority of these local based religious anti-consumerist groups is that they encourage people to only own what they really need, and to try to become self-sufficient by growing fruits and vegetables.

¹³⁸ Tony Biaggne, "Letter From An Atheist," *Advent Conspiracy*, December 17, 2009, http://www.adventconspiracy.org/blog/letter_from_an_atheist/ (accessed July 14, 2011).

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ "See what others from around the world are doing to celebrate Jesus in a whole new way," *Advent Conspiracy*, <http://www.adventconspiracy.org/story/> (accessed July 14, 2011).

Another contributor to the Sustainable Traditions website Ricci Kilmer, who has her own weblog too to inspire other Christians to start living simply, explains one more time why her family decided to transform their life. In her opinion, US society focuses too much on “individuality, . . . , personal achievement, and accumulation of wealth. More, more, more seems to be the eternal goal.”¹⁴¹ For this reason, Kilmer decided to step down from all the expectations of the consumerist society.

All of the people and groups mentioned in this chapter do not solely transform their own lives but also go to great extent to preach the word; in person, through television, the internet and the publications of books. However, all of their efforts have not flourished into a widespread national movement yet. What is more, Alternatives for Simple Living has had to stop their efforts recently. Alternatives for Simple Living was founded by Lutheran pastor Michael Mortvedt and Sandy Olsen, who was also active in the ministry of another Lutheran church. Their group was already founded in 1973 and was there to “promote an alternative biblical vision of life based on voluntary simplicity, stewardship of creation, and encouraging meaningful celebrations that reflect conscientious earth friendly ways of living.”¹⁴² Olsen started doing the work as a fulltime job, and travelled the nation with Mortvedt to speak in churches, at groups and conferences. According to the statement on their website, Olsen especially believes that people should protect God’s creation and the world’s resources. “When we learn to create the personal care items that we use, the foods we eat, the clothes we wear and find most of the ingredients are natural and accessible to the general community, we learn to question commercialism. We have options.”¹⁴³ Although the organization does not specify the reason of its discontinuation, it is suggested that its existence was no longer financially supported.

¹⁴¹ Ricci Kilmer, “Why We Choose Simple Living,” *Sustainable Traditions*, June 1, 2010, <http://sustainabletraditions.com/2010/06/why-we-choose-simple-living/> (accessed July 13, 2011).

¹⁴² “About us,” *Alternatives for Simple Living.org*, <http://www.simpleliving.org/Default.aspx?tabid=589> (accessed July 13, 2011).

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

To conclude, all the groups discussed in this chapter have not reached a wide audience yet, not even among Christians. Their efforts are still locally and shattered throughout the United States. However, recently the green movement towards preserving the environment did gain more attention, and simplifying one's lifestyle does also contribute to a better environment which resulted in a slight growth in interest in the matter. In an interview conducted last year Wanda Urbanska also addresses this as well. With the economic crisis as well as the environmental degradation the issue she is trying to raise stays current, she states. "These lessons aren't new, but they're what we need right now,"¹⁴⁴ Urbanska points out. She was raised not to waste anything by a mother who had grown up during the Great Depression. People do seem to get the message nowadays, Urbanska continues, yet she wonders if it will stay that way once the economy recovers.¹⁴⁵ Things can change in a minute.

¹⁴⁴ Wendy Koch, "Wanda Urbanska touts simpler, greener living," *USA Today on the web*, June 1, 2010, <http://content.usatoday.com/communities/greenhouse/post/2010/06/wanda-urbansks-simplicity-green-living/1> (accessed July 11, 2011).

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The following image shows an effigy with the ten commandments which can be found in a shopping mall in Odessa, Texas:



Fig. 1: The Ten Commandments at Music City Mall.

(Photograph from <http://musiccity.mallsite.us/gallery.html>)

This then is the perfect example of the intermixing of consumer society and religion. As we have seen throughout this thesis, increasingly people have a problem with what they feel are negative consequences of consumer capitalism. First of all, they argue in line with Marxist critique that consumer capitalism leads to exploitation of people, especially the poor and working classes of Third World Countries. Secondly, consumerism leads to the degradation of the environment, by the religious groups termed as “God’s creation.” A third critique is the fact that consumerism leads to a focus on materialism, and the

idolization of commodities. Which of these arguments then, is the most uttered by the religious anti-consumerist groups discussed in this thesis?

The most diverse of the movement is Sustainable Traditions as all three types of critique – i.e. exploitation, global warming, and idolization – are reflected in the articles that are published on their website. Their biggest claim is regarding the environment because people should leave a sustainable earth for future generations, but they also argue that it is people's duty to preserve "God's Kingdom on Earth." However, Sustainable Traditions is the only group which specifically mentions that consumerism also leads to exploitation whereas, they argue, humans do not really need industrial production to have food: people could produce their own food.

Simple Living argues predominantly for preserving the environment, because being out in nature leads to a close relationship with God as He has created everything. People should try to be happy with what life offers them and use those items sparingly.

Thus, the most heard criticism regarding anti-consumerism from a religious point of view is the idolization and focus on materialism. This is also the main argument brought forth by groups that want to transform Christmas, such as Advent Conspiracy. Regarding Christmas, people have become focused on their Christmas wish list instead of the birth of Jesus. Idolization of consumer goods is also what bothers the Christian communities that have sprung up across America. They argue that due to consumerism people have become unaware of the people living next to them. Moreover, according to Advent Conspiracy, it is not gratifying to focus on satisfying ourselves with the latest products. Simple Living advocates add that materialism separates people from having a close relationship with God.

From an outsider's point of view it is easy to understand that the biggest religious anti-consumerist critique is about the idolization of products. First, it fits in with the larger Post Marxist critique of consumerism. Second, it also reveals the core of every religion;

people should revere the designated Lord of that religion instead of trend-sensitive commodities.

The question that remains though, is whether there is a solution to the problem that these groups raise. Most of them offer practical resolutions to transform a lifestyle, however not everything seems viable. For example, people living in cities – which in the US is more than those living in rural areas – will often not have the possibilities to grow their own foods. However, in New York City kitchen gardens have been constructed on the rooftops of the skyscrapers recently.¹⁴⁶ This demonstrates that each day provides new initiatives and it could mean that the anti-consumerist movement would grow into a bigger movement. Perhaps this could be an idea for another research; to investigate through a survey, for example, how “ordinary” Americans feel about the anti-consumerist message. Does it appeal to them at all? Do they understand the religious objections against their (over)consumerist lifestyle? What is more, there are many more religions in the US besides Christianity who do have characteristics of anti-consumerism, which could be an idea for another study as well; could that grow into a wider movement? Meanwhile, this paper indicates that American society continuously renews itself. It evolves and in the same process it comes up with several answers to counteract the problems of society. In that very sense, this is what the Americans are known for: to transform their lives and identities, whilst adapting to a new world.

¹⁴⁶ Greenscraper, “New York City Rooftop Vegetable Garden,” *Inside Urban Green*, July 8, 2008, <http://www.insideurbangreen.org/2008/07/new-york-city-rooftop-vegetable-garden.html> (accessed July 20, 2011).

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