

# The Theology of Consumerism

*Sean J. McGrath*

## Preview

Attitudes towards daily life, towards governance and trade, work and love, are always grounded in layers of historically conditioned, ethical, metaphysical, and theological assumption. It might be the hallmark of the modern to routinely forget how much of what we regard as freely expressive of our unique perspective on things is indebted to the past. The nearest layer to the surface may be consciously appropriated or rejected, but as we descend, the degree of availability of what R.G. Collingwood called “absolute presuppositions” to ethical and philosophical reflection decreases.<sup>1</sup> Our beliefs are never entirely available for rationalization, but owe more to history than we are generally inclined to acknowledge.

*The modern world is full of the old Christian virtues gone mad. G.K.  
Chesterton*

## **The Theology of Consumerism**

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### **The Theological Origins of Modernity**

Attitudes towards daily life, towards governance and trade, work and love, are always grounded in layers of historically conditioned, ethical, metaphysical, and theological assumption. It might be the hallmark of the modern to routinely forget how much of what we regard as freely expressive of our unique perspective on things is indebted to the past. The nearest layer to the surface may be consciously appropriated or rejected, but as we descend, the degree of availability of what R.G. Collingwood called “absolute presuppositions” to ethical and philosophical reflection decreases.<sup>1</sup> Our beliefs are never entirely available for rationalization, but owe more to history than we are generally inclined to acknowledge.

In this regard, it is hard to deny that early modernity is a form of secularized Christianity. In the Eighteenth Century, Christian society is externally freed from dogma by reformation and revolution and Christianity becomes gradually reduced, from a revealed religion, enforced on both sides of the Reformation by authoritative declaration (be it that of a priest or a sacred text) to a general ethic of benevolence. The formal structure of Christian life does not disappear when the European is exempted from the imperative to believe. With its supernatural claims suspended along with its identification with creed and cult, Christianity is universalized and becomes the ‘natural’ religion of humankind.<sup>2</sup> Access to the truth of Christianity in eighteenth-century Europe is

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<sup>1</sup> R.G. Collingwood (1940), *An Essay on Metaphysics* (Oxford University Press, 1998), 34.

<sup>2</sup> Key players in this transformation in England were the Cambridge Platonists and the Deists, both spearheading an eighteenth-century Protestantism that rejected the punitive, legalistic, and fideistic Calvinism of the Puritans and replaced it with a natural religion of the heart. See Colin Campbell, *Romanticism and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (Oxford: Blackwell.Campbell, 1987), 107-123. Something similar occurred in German pietism. These movements were the proximate background for Romanticism in England and Germany respectively. The most influential and articulate exponent of the view of Christianity as the highest expression of the natural religious feelings of the human soul is Friedrich Schleiermacher, whose *Speeches on Religion* anticipates all

no longer conditional, for the true religion is no longer revealed, i.e., reserved for those gifted with the faith to understand it. Anyone and everyone are allowed access to it; in fact, they already know it by virtue of their common humanity.

With European colonialism, the liberal revision of Christianity spreads to every corner of the world. The dominance of the English economic model over all other economies, which occurs throughout the Nineteenth Century and comes to its highpoint in the mid Twentieth Century, disseminates the religious attitudes of the colonizers just as widely as their language, models of government and industry. The colonization of the world by Christian attitudes in the past two centuries has been so profound as to affect virtually every human endeavor, from science and industry, to economics and politics, to psychology and sexuality. We are not, of course, speaking of the explicit allegiance to Christianity—that may be at an all time low, at least in Western nations. We are speaking of the psychological and social attitudes which Christianity brings with it and leaves behind when the churches close down and the symbols and art of the Christian world are no longer understood. Christianity could never simply disappear from the modern world for it is too basic, in all of its intellectual, aesthetic, and political aspects, to the structure of Western thinking to disappear entirely. The question is: what remains of Christianity in the secular age and how does it manage to persist in spite of the religious indifference of official modernity?

The question is immense, too immense to be dealt with directly. We must break it down. If we shrink the question down to its psychological dimension, it becomes more manageable and the answer far less abstract. The modern Western individual for the most part no longer believes and no longer needs to believe—this we take as a given. If some aspect of religious belief suggests itself to him or her at some point, it does so in an ad hoc way, in the same way, for example, as it might occur to the individual to change his or her hair style or to go on an exotic trip. Religious belief, in all of its bewildering modern varieties, is a consumable and no longer requisite for either belonging to society (medieval belief) or for salvation (Protestant belief).<sup>3</sup> If it is not *Christian* belief that persists in modernity, it is nonetheless something historically associated with Christian belief that continues to shape modern consciousness, a psychology that was historically found only where Christian belief was found. The psychology in question was not present in Asia or Africa or Native America prior to modernity, but now it most certainly is found in these places; indeed it is the predominant psychology of the so-called developing world.

Christian subjectivity is faithful, hopeful, and loving, or expressed in secular terms, *free, anticipatory* of the future, and actively *engaged* in transforming the present. To elaborate, the Christian is an ethical *subject* in a way that no ancient ever was, and the dignity of his or her subjectivity consists in the

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subsequent works in progressive and liberal Christianity, from Tillich to Rahner. See Friedrich Schleiermacher (1799), *Speeches on Religion: To its Culture Despisers*, trans. Richard Crouter (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> See Frédérick Lenoir, *Les Métamorphoses de Dieu. La Nouvelle Spiritualité Occidentale* (Paris: Plon, 2003).

faith that illuminates it, singularizes it, and places it, as Kierkegaard puts it, into “an absolute relation with the absolute.”<sup>4</sup> The Christian anticipates the future, lives toward the eschaton, when his or her calling will be fulfilled and the promise that drew him or her out of the universal condition of mankind (sin) into a new mode of being will be made good. And thirdly, the Christian is, by virtue of the faith and hope that animates his life, actively engaged with the social and material world. Far from making subjectivity stoically indifferent, Christian faith and hope make subjectivity tirelessly engaged in transforming the present. The eschaton puts the present under erasure: the good is not here; justice does not exist. But as a citizen of the Kingdom of God to come, the Christian cannot tolerate evil and injustice but must set to work to do his or her bit to facilitate the transformation of all of creation, a task that can only be fully accomplished through the work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>5</sup>

This theological psychology, we will argue, is the historical and systematic forerunner of the psychology of consumerism.<sup>6</sup> Certainly the connection between Christianity and modernity has not gone unobserved. We have Weber’s influential work in economic history, Löwith’s critique of the modern consciousness of time, and Gauchet’s undeservedly ignored political history of religion. Each of these three authors argues on the basis of a variety of sociological, philosophical and historical facts for a causal relation between modernity and its disowned Christian heritage. For Weber the link hinges on the paradoxical asceticism of the capitalist, the self-denial that gives itself wholly over to the production of wealth, which would not be possible without a Protestant this-worldly sense of Christian vocation and duty.<sup>7</sup> For Löwith the link is eschatology, the thinking of time as goal-oriented, without which neither the modern cult of progress, nor the age of revolutions would be possible.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Soren Kierkegaard (1843), *Fear and Trembling*, trans Edna H. Hong and Howard V. Hong (Princeton University Press, 1983), 56.

<sup>5</sup> One might object that no such perfect form of Christianity ever existed. Far from faithful, hopeful, and loving, Christians are for the most part narcissistic, calculative, and indifferent to the sufferings of others. Even if this were true, it would not touch our point. The reversal of a structure does not change the formal elements of that structure. An upside down crucifix is still a crucifix. Our point is not to exaggerate or idealize Christianity but to articulate its formal elements, that which makes it distinct from, say Buddhism. On the free, anticipatory, and engaged nature of early Christian subjectivity, see Jürgen Moltmann’s 1964 classic, *Theology of Hope* (New York, NY: Fortress Press, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> Gianni Vattimo is the only major author we know of who has drawn the same conclusion: consumerism is a form of Christianity. See Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> Max Weber (1905), *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> Löwith argues that the future orientation of the modern is a secular form of Christian eschatological consciousness: a history that moves into a future that does not repeat the past dramatically breaks with the cyclical notions of time prevalent in the ancient world. Karl Löwith (1949), *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press). See also McGrath, *The Early Heidegger*, 187: “In a differentiation of consciousness that set them apart from the Greeks and Romans, the Christians understood time as a drama of unique and unrepeatable moments culminating in a definite end. Human life was a trial overshadowed by a final and irrevocable judgment, which looms over us and

Eschatological time is not an invention of Christianity—it is the intellectual heritage of the Jews and the Gnostics as well, but it comes to its most articulate and aesthetically vivid expression in medieval and early modern Christian culture.<sup>10</sup> For Gauchet, the link is the autonomy of the individual—a thought found in no non-Christian pre-modern culture, and only present in germ in medieval European culture, and which is now so basic to contemporary global consciousness as to serve as the master signifier of the symbolic system that governs the world by regulating the flow of capital.<sup>11</sup> Autonomy means the end of religion, for Gauchet, and it comes to its sharpest expression in the central dogmas of the Christian religion, creation, and above all, incarnation.

None of these authors speak specifically of consumerism. It is worth asking why. In his masterful study of the literature of consumption, Colin Campbell also reflects on the absence of solid sociological, philosophical, and political analyses of consumerism.<sup>12</sup> His conclusion is that consumerism is too often confused with generic human attitudes or perennial practices such as hedonism and the hoarding of wealth to allow for a proper analysis of its structure and historical lineage. In the course of his study, Campbell points out three essential features of consumerism which remain unaccounted for when it is generically identified with greed or with hedonism. Consumerism is characterized by the elevation of emotional fulfillment above mere sensual pleasure, that is, by an emphasis on subjective enjoyment (by distinction from, e.g., communal enjoyment), by the craving for novelty, and by insatiability.<sup>13</sup> Until these distinguishing marks of consumerism are understood (subjectivity, novelty, and insatiability), consumerism will continue to be confused with something else. Moreover, Campbell argues, these three structures must be understood in their *historical contingency*: they are not perennial features of ‘human consciousness in general’; they have a specific history, and a religious etiology.

Campbell’s genealogy goes back to Romanticism, but why stop there? For is Romanticism not in its very essence Christian, as the mature Nietzsche came to see?<sup>14</sup> Neither Christians nor secularists have an interest in supporting this thesis. Christians and Christian theologians do not want to be implicated in something as base and destructive of culture and environment as consumerism. The consumer is a ‘materialist,’ they argue. He or she believes in nothing but the absurd proposition that human happiness is found in the acquisition of goods. Campbell helps us to see that this all-too-typical assumption of consumerism as

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comes toward us from out of our collective past. Every moment of an individual life is, as Kierkegaard puts it, of decisive significance.”

<sup>10</sup> See Jacob Taubes (1947), *Occidental Eschatology*, trans. David Ratmoko (Stanford University Press, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*, trans. Oscar Burge (Princeton University Press, 1999).

<sup>12</sup> Campbell, *Consumerism*, 36-57.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 55-7, 72.

<sup>14</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche (1886), “An Attempt at Self-Criticism,” *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, eds. Raymond Geuss et al. (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 12.

rapacious acquisitiveness misses the mark. Consumers don't want to pile things up—hoarding is an aberration among consumers, and the mound of discarded consumer items is an embarrassing side-effect of the consumer lifestyle which we effectively repress.<sup>15</sup> Consumers do not want to collect old things; they want new things, and the thing that has lost its halo of novelty is soon forgotten or discarded. Among elite consumers, who set the bar for the rest of us, Zen minimalism is the ideal: like the sitting rooms of the rich, clutter-free and carefully appointed with just the right coffee table, just the right book case, just the right sofa, all in vogue and ready to be replaced the minute they become 'last year.'

The consumer craving for novelty does not make consumerism any less 'sinful' to the traditional Christian, but it does expose what we will call *the eschatological edge of consumerism* and thereby bring it within the orbit of theological analysis. Consumerism is goal-oriented: it is as hungry for the eschaton as were the first Christians, only it does not know it and therefore searches for it in novelty: new technology, new partners, new clothes, new exotic locations. The infinity of consumer longing, which is an important point in Campbell's analysis—longing is not merely desiring this or that, it is desiring infinitely, without a determinate object<sup>16</sup>—is the decisive clue to the theology of consumerism.

Consumerism is a *spirituality*; not a crass form of materialism. It is concerned with the immaterial self and its possibilities for being, and only with material goods insofar as they are the media of exploring possibilities for the self. Consumer goods are fetish objects, as Marx so accurately pointed out: their value transcends their material utility. They are the means, not the end, and their desirability or lack thereof is a function of their capacity to mediate value.<sup>17</sup> A theologian could argue that the problem with consumerism is not that it is too materialistic, but rather that it is not materialistic enough. Consumerism is so abstracted from the material conditions of existence that it continually overlooks, for example, the injustice that attends to manufacturing of consumer goods by slave labor in the developing world, or the refuse heap that is the obscene other of its continual need to upgrade and discard.

For reasons such as these, we will insist that consumerism is a product of Christian culture. We might call it a perversion of Christian culture, but it is no less a product of Christian culture for that. On the basis of this affirmation, we can draw certain other conclusions: notably that Christian culture, far from shrinking to the margins of global civilization, assuming its humiliated position alongside other relics of traditional cultures, has conquered, nay, produced and made possible, global civilization. For of this, we can be certain, it is a consumer

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<sup>15</sup> See Žižek's unforgettable plea to "love our trash" in Astray Taylor's 2008 documentary *Examined Life* (Zeitgeist Films). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iGCfiv1xt0U>.

<sup>16</sup> See Campbell, *Consumerism*, 87: "Although one must always desire something, one can long for . . . one knows not what."

<sup>17</sup> See Karl Marx, "The Fetishism of Commodities" (1872) in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford University Press, 2000), 472-80.

world that has inherited the earth. No corner of the planet is exempt from or untouched by consumerism. Everything is a consumable, from eco-tourist adventures in the Andes, to mystical experiences of union with Brahma in Indian ashrams; nothing is sacred, everything has its price, and will persist in being so to the degree that it elicits and continues to elicit the interest of consumers. And while traditional religious and cultural institutions remain as sites of experience for consumers, the populations around them are increasingly homogenous. Their parents might dress in traditional outfits and visit temples, while the kids look and act as though they grew up in Cleveland. They are consumers and do not want to be visibly distinguished from rest of the global body.<sup>18</sup>

If it is true that consumerism perpetuates Christianity in an inverted form, then there will be nothing in consumerism, no essential element of it, which is not also ingredient to Christianity. But the whole structure will no less be oriented to a non-Christian end.<sup>19</sup> That the world ought to succeed the Church as the mediator of revelation, as the late Schelling argues, may be a more or less orthodox position, but no one can deny that it is a Christian position.<sup>20</sup> The freedom, hope, and engagement of the Christian should become the common inheritance of all, and not by imposition but by instinct, Schelling argues. That we see what Schelling would call a perverse form of “the Church of St. John” (the final age of revelation when the distinction between Church and world is overcome) take hold of the world as consumerism would be no disproof of the thesis. By secularizing Christian beatitude, on the one hand, and abstracting Christian values from conversion of life, on the other, consumerism has effectively produced the most anti-Christian form of life imaginable. And because it can easily pass for Christian, because it repeats the most essential features of Christianity, consumerism serves as an effective substitute for Christianity. Like the anti-Christ in the Book of Revelation, consumerism appears to deliver what Christ promised, but does so in such a way as to turn the mind and heart from the genuine Christ.

To put flesh on the bones of this argument, we need to elaborate in detail Campbell’s three marks of consumerism—subjectivity, novelty, and

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<sup>18</sup> See Sean J. McGrath, “Secularization and the Tyranny of the Homogeneous State,” in *Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan. Journal of Indian Studies* 2 (2014): 90-106.

<sup>19</sup> Readers of Schelling will note that this analysis repeats Schelling’s analysis of disease and health, which is the example Schelling uses in his general analytic of evil. The principles of disease are also the principles of life but in disease they have been inverted such that they now serve death. See Friedrich Schelling, *Philosophical Inquiries into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006), 34.

<sup>20</sup> See Friedrich Joseph Wilhelm von Schelling, *Philosophie der Offenbarung 1841/42 (Paulus Nachschrift)*, ed. Manfred Frank (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), XXXV. The position that the final act of the Church is to render itself no longer necessary, i.e., to self-secularize, is associated with the Franciscan medieval theologian, Joachim of Fiore, and it was never exactly condemned as such. It has always played a role in millenarianist theology, and was influential for the radical Franciscan movement in the later Middle Ages, the “Reform of the Reformation” associated with the Rosicrucian movement, and in general, the liberal Protestant theology of the nineteenth-century. See also Sean J. McGrath, “The Late Schelling and the End of Christianity,” *Schelling Studien* 2 (2014): 63-77.

insatiability—and interpret them in a theological light. These three are not all equally obvious as marks of the consumer and what they have to do with Christianity is even less clear. Nonetheless, we will see that Campbell has given us the key to the mystery of the religious origin of consumerism, even if he himself did not go far enough with his own argument to open up the door. It is not Romanticism that is essential to consumerism; it is Christian psychology in general, for Campbell's three marks of consumerism are nothing other than inverse forms of the freedom, anticipation, and engagement which we have identified as the essence of Christian psychology.

### **The Romantic Spirit of Consumerism**

According to Campbell, the three prevailing theories of the origin of consumerism are (1) consumerism is an expression of human appetitive instinct; (2) consumerism is the product of manipulation of populations through advertisement; and (3) consumerism is born of the emulative desire of the lower classes to dress, act, and recreate like the aristocracy. Campbell finds each of these theories wanting for different reasons.

To be brief where Campbell is detailed and nuanced, the first argument, that consumerism is based on instinct, fails to respect the distinction between needs and wants. We may indeed have an instinct for shelter and comfort, but do we have an instinct for fashion, looking glasses, broaches, puppets and toys (the items recorded as fueling the orgy of spending in eighteenth-century England, which is largely regarded as the start of the consumer revolution)?<sup>21</sup> Consumerism, while it is no doubt addictive, does not even fit in well with the psychology of addiction, for it is not like an addiction to a single substance at all (unless we consider desire itself an addictive substance—an intriguing possibility). Addictions are typically focused on a single product or activity, such as gambling, nicotine, or alcohol; consumerism, by contrast cannot rest content with any particular substance or activity. Even shopping has its limited appeal and must be punctuated by periods of travel, adventure, etc. It is not desired things that keep the flame alive but the desired desire itself.

What emerges from Campbell's analysis is a picture of consumerism that highlights its irrationality and singularity in human history.

For the truth is that a mystery surrounds consumer behavior, or, at least, there is a mystery surrounding the behavior of consumers in modern industrial societies. It does not concern their choice of products, nor why some groups manifest patterns of consumption different from others. Neither does it involve the question of how much of a product a person is willing to purchase at a given price, nor what kind of subconscious forces might influence that decision. The mystery is more fundamental than any of these, and concerns the very essence of modern consumption itself—

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<sup>21</sup> Campbell, *Consumerism*, 25.

its character as an activity which involves an apparently endless pursuit of wants; the most characteristic feature of modern consumption being this insatiability.<sup>22</sup>

With regard to the second argument, that consumerism is a product of the manipulation of instincts by advertisement, Campbell points out that this puts the cart before the horse: the increase in production and the new significance of advertisement for capitalism associated with the consumer revolution are held to be the causes of the increased appetites for luxury goods that drives production. This is clearly a circle. One needs a theory of why the middle class's appetites for luxury goods suddenly exploded in the Eighteenth Century if one is to explain increased production and advertisement. The materialist historian will answer that consumer desire increases because it must if the diversity and surplus of goods made available by global trade are to generate profit. Hence first the increase in production, second the use of advertisement to increase demand, and third the new consumer appetites. But why did we increase production in the first place?

A survey of the history of trade from the Middle Ages through early modernity shows that it was not business as usual in the Eighteenth Century. A decisive change occurred in patterns of consumption in Europe at this time, particularly among the middle classes, with a dramatic shift from need acquisition to the consumption of luxury items. The craving of the eighteenth-century middle class for consumer goods was completely out of proportion to any previously displayed upsurge in the demand for necessities or even wealth and, according to Campbell, drove production through the roof, creating the necessary pre-conditions for the industrial revolution. "The idea that human beings somehow have a 'natural' tendency to display insatiable wanting does not derive any support from history or anthropology. On the contrary, if there is such a thing as a 'normal' pattern in these matters, it is the traditional one of a fixed, limited, and familiar set of wants."<sup>23</sup>

The argument from manipulation assumes that gratification is bound up with utility and that if left alone the consumer would choose and purchase goods according to rational and utilitarian calculation. Consumerism is a normal, utility-based form of economic life that is manipulated and distorted by modern advertisement. The normal rational pattern of consumption is generally ordered and self-limited but transformed by advertisement, the argument goes, into insatiable, bottomless desire. But consumer gratification was never utility based as the very term "luxury goods" suggests. Consumers do not shop because they *need* things; they shop because they *want* things, and their wanting, far from being based on utility (something which is relatively easily satisfied), has a curious endlessness to it, even perpetuating itself by engineering constitutive dissatisfaction. It seems that consumers are interested in desire itself as an end,

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 37.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 39-40.

and like the Lacanian neurotic, fear nothing more than the dreaded moment of the consummation of their desire. In Campbell's terms, consumers do not simply want what they previously possessed; they want novelty and their hunger for novelty creates dissatisfaction with the old. One who was driven purely by a utilitarian desire to maximize satisfaction would rather abjure novelty, with its uncertain satisfactoriness, in favor of more secure and trustworthy pleasures.

The third theory argues that consumers are driven by emulation of the upper classes. The emulation theory is widespread in the literature and generally accepted. The argument, Campbell comments, explains the phenomenon of credit, without which consumerism is impossible (we borrow from the rich so as to be able to keep up with them), but sheds no light on the craving for novelty, which is so vital an element of consumerism. Aristocracies tend to be conservative: consumerism is fanatically progressive, and produces a demand to keep up with fashion that the aristocracy themselves must obey. "There is no good reason whatever why status competition or emulation should require an institution which functions to supply continuous novelty. . . . Empirical evidence does not really support this model, for, as we have seen, fashionable innovation are not by any means always introduced by the social elite."<sup>24</sup>

Campbell's solution to the mystery of consumerism lies in his uncovering of the crucial role of the imagination, specifically of "day-dreaming," in the consumer's insatiable search after novel pleasures. "Individuals do so much seek satisfaction from products, as pleasure from the self-illusory experiences which they construct from their associated meanings."<sup>25</sup> Day-dreaming, which Campbell distinguishes from fantasy, which is involuntary, is a free act of imagining oneself in a pleasurable situation. When I day-dream I deliberately imagine myself otherwise for the sake of creating psychological pleasure. Where ancient hedonism was dedicated to actual physical stimulation, consumerism has at its disposal a new facility with the self that can produce even more intense pleasure by uploading desire unto the plane of the imagination. In support of this thesis, Campbell notes that consumerism is coincident with the rise of certain other well-studied phenomena associated with the imagination, notably the reading of novels, the elevation of Romantic love above the institution of marriage, the indulgence in emotions for their own sake in art, music, and literature, and, most importantly, shopping—not to acquire goods, but as an end in itself (the preferred activity of the *flâneur* of the Paris arcades).<sup>26</sup>

Campbell has a complex account for how this more developed capacity for imagination typical of Romanticism emerged out of Protestantism, especially the Protestant sentimentalism which compensated for the repressive rationalism of Calvinist and Puritanical religion. Much of this makes for fascinating reading in its own right, but it cannot directly concern us here, except insofar as we note the most important point: that in accordance with Weber, Campbell finds the

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 56.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 89.

<sup>26</sup> On this compare Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Harvard University Press, 2007), chapter two.

roots of modern economy in religion, specifically in forms of modern (Protestant) Christianity. With the enlarged and imaginatively emancipated self bequeathed to it by Protestantism, the Romantic consumer is free to explore the infinity of desire in a way that the ancient hedonist never could, for the threat of boredom hung like a Sword of Damocles over every secured pleasure of the hedonist. Internalizing the Platonic assumption (which was also a principle of medieval Christian mysticism), that the most satisfying desire is the unsatisfied desire, consumerism engineers dissatisfaction into its hedonistic calculus. While consumerism is thus for Campbell every bit as hedonistic as ancient hedonism (a claim we will have cause to question below), it is sufficiently distinct from the latter as to warrant a new designation: consumerism is not simply hedonism, it is “autonomous imaginative hedonism”—autonomous, because the day-dreaming consumer depends on no one other than himself for the production of his desires; and imaginative, because the field of stimulation is not physical but imaginal. The deferral of gratification is constitutive of consumerism—a pleasure which is always outdone by a future pleasure yet to be achieved is constitutively deferred. Deferral has become itself a source of pleasure, indeed, the principle source of consumer pleasure, because it creates the condition—the space between desire and gratification—for the free deployment of the imagination.

Only thus is the subjectivity, the novelty, and the insatiability of consumerism properly explained, according to Campbell. The “cycle of desire-acquisition-use-disillusionment-renewed-desire” is the distinctive feature of consumerism, and can be seen in everything from travel to shopping, from entertainment to romantic love. In each case, the pursuit that ends in disappointment does not defeat desire, but on the contrary further enflames it. For the consumer, unlike the ancient hedonist, does not return to old sources of pleasure and so does not face the problem of hedonist ennui. Rather, when an object, activity, or relationship ceases to feed the imagination of the consumer, it is discarded without a thought, on the assumption that it was not really what he or she was looking for, and the pursuit, with its pleasure producing day-dreaming of a new mode of enjoyment, begins again. The consumer does not bottom out into melancholy because consumer desire is fed by imagination, not by reality. Or in Campbell’s technical use of the terms, the consumer does not so much *desire* an object or a particular stimulus as *long* for something that cannot be named. This transcendent feature of consumerism, its being fed by infinity, is its chief advantage over ancient hedonism. “One does not repeat cycles of sensory pleasure-seeking as in traditional hedonism so much as continually strive to close the gap between imagined and experienced pleasures . . . the illusion is always better than the reality; the promise more interesting than actuality.”<sup>27</sup>

Because consumerism primarily produces and sells subjects for imagination, and only secondarily products for consumption, the representations of products become more important than the products themselves. I think of a wall the length of a city block that I recently walked passed in Athens. Ostensibly

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<sup>27</sup> Campbell, *Consumerism*, 90.

an ad for the shoe company *Crocs* (so I learned from the logo in the bottom right corner), the wall was plastered with huge high res aerial photographs of adults and children playing in the park, swimming, picnicking, and generally enjoying the summer outdoors—with not a pair of shoes, let alone *Crocs* in site. The example is recent but the strategy is as old as *Coke*, which may have been the first company to invent lifestyle advertising: when the product proves on close inspection to be as useless and even harmful to health as *Coke* (or as ugly and cheaply made as *Crocs*), the solution was to sell not the product but a lifestyle arbitrarily but nonetheless successfully associated with the product through intense branding and lavish visualization: “*Coke* is it,” “*Coke* adds life,” *Coke* is associated with youth, vitality and the intense enjoyment of existence that goes along with them. What is for sale is not an object but a subject for imaginative self-variation (to coin a phrase).

Ancient hedonism, particularly in its Epicurean form, was ascetical. The Epicureans were careful that their dedication to pleasure did not produce addiction, for that would make them vulnerable to the pain of withdrawal. They were wary of indiscriminately multiplying desires, for all desire is a form of pain. This caution and self-control made Epicurean a highly disciplined, even monkish business, not for the lazy.<sup>28</sup> Simplicity was to be preferred because complex desires increased the possibility of suffering disappointment, withdrawal, or failure to possess the desired object. One meal a day was better than two, preferably a meal of vegetables or something easily acquired. The ancient hedonist faced two enemies, each of which threatened to rob him or her of all enjoyment in life: on the one hand, ennui, which was the result of over-supply of stimuli, and on the other, pain, a result of a lack of stimuli and frustrated desire.

According to Campbell, the consumer has solved the hedonistic problem of a guaranteed supply of stimuli by retreating to the virtual, where nothing can stand in his way of getting what he wants. And because the variation of pleasures is entirely in his or her command, the consumer has also solved the problem of ennui. Campbell’s consumer is like the anti-hero at the end of Terry Gilliam’s *Brazil*; recognizing that his victim has retreated into fantasy, where, the film shows us, he gets everything he wants (the girl and the wings that can fly them both away), the torturer concludes: “We have lost him.” The camera cuts to a beatific Jonathan Price, staring vacantly into space and grinning from ear to ear.

Campbell concludes, somewhat hastily, that consumerism is a peculiarly modern form of hedonism. Pain has not entirely been overcome for no consumer pleasure is permanent, and a constant upgrading of stimuli is required. Inevitably disappointment attends the fading of the aura of novelty, the discovery that she isn’t the one, that the new iPad is not much better than the last one, or more generally, that the object imagined is not the object acquired. At any point, the consumer risks bottoming out into melancholy, which as Žižek points out, is not the suffering of not getting what you desire but the suffering of losing one’s

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<sup>28</sup> See Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2001), 137.

desire altogether.<sup>29</sup> Is this not the real enemy of consumer bliss, the risk of the fading of desire, a serious problem in today's capitalist wonderland where everything is available all the time, and nothing is forbidden, taboo or sacred? The real problem for consumerism is maintaining the allure of the desired, an allure that fades in proportion to its availability.

This raises a crucial question: whence the consumer's infinite energy for the task of consumption, his or her endless appetite for the new? What is the secret of the consumer's everlasting desire? The secret was not known to ancient hedonists and Epicureans, who were only too conscious of how limited desire really is, and who were therefore constantly placing limits on its acquisitions to keep it alive, protecting their pleasure from the crudeness of unrestricted appetite, shielding it like a candle from the wind. Does this question not threaten Campbell's conclusion? For is the answer not just this: that the consumer has infinite energy to consume precisely because the goal of his consumption is not simply pleasure? The consumer is after something greater than pleasure, and even if he or she is continually forgetting the end for the means, this does not change the fact that consumerism is goal-oriented. It merely makes the consumer a neurotic, not a hedonist, one who pursues an end unconsciously, or one who multiplies the means because he or she cannot remember the end. But a forgotten or a repressed end is still an end.

For all of his brilliant sociological analysis, Campbell has overlooked the eschatological edge of consumerism. Consumers don't live for pleasure. It is enough to note how much pleasure the average consumer sacrifices to consumption, how hard they work to earn the capital necessary for constantly upgrading. To take one example, consumers willingly sacrifice the beauty of their cities to the noise and stink of automobiles, which are deemed essential to their consumption. The Epicurean wanted a garden and a small circle of like-minded friends; the consumer apparently does not need fresh air, bird song, and green space, or human community. The consumer gives up these perennial human pleasures for something. What is it?

Here we must break with Campbell in order to remain adequate to the facts: consumers are not in fact hedonists of a modern variety. Rather, consumers are eudaemonists of a particular kind. They pursue a certain transcendent ideal of happiness, which we will call self-flourishing. And even if they do not know what that is, they know it is not simply pleasure, real or imagined. Campbell has underestimated the sophistication of consumer desire. It is not pleasure that is sought in imaginative self-variation, which Campbell correctly identifies as the principle medium of consumer desire; it is self-flourishing, in whatever way the consumer can best imagine that beatific state. For some it might be a beach (the self at rest), for some it might be a new car (the self empowered), for others it might be exotic travel (the self setting forth for new vistas), for others still it might be meaningful, even philanthropic work (the self dedicating itself to a

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<sup>29</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "On Melancholy," Lecture at the European Graduate School, 19 November 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FNXy-JY9I-M>.

cause worth living for). All of these opportunities for imaginative self-variation can easily be read off of the endless walls of lifestyle advertising that enwombs modern consumption.

By seeing the consumer as a eudaemonist rather than a hedonist, the significance of the theological roots of the movement comes sharply into view. The three marks of consumerism which set it apart from ancient hedonism according to Campbell, and which cannot be accounted for by the prevailing theories—subjectivity, novelty, insatiability—can each be traced back to Christian themes.

### **Faith, Hope, Love, and the Subjectivity of the Consumer**

*Faith and subjectivity.* Every consumer, Campbell says, is a kind of Walter Mitty, preferring the limitless narcissism of imagination to the material and social constraints of real life. Consumer pleasure in day-dreaming, Campbell argues, would not be possible without the special sense of self which he associates with Romanticism. When the interior life is valued more highly than the exterior life, which it came to be in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries in Europe, consumerism takes wings, for the consumer indulges the inner life by fixating on externals in a certain way. The consumer does not accumulate things for their own sake but uses them to create imaginative figures of the self which negate the mundane reality of day-to-day existence. The consumer is involved in a project of continually constructing the self in fantasy, projecting it into a potentially infinite variety of fantastic settings that flatter and inflate the ego. To draw upon Freud to elaborate Campbell's analysis, we could say that the consumer *cathects* the consumer product, invests it with libidinal energy, literally charges it with an excessive and bottomless desire disproportionate to the real value of the thing.

The condition of the possibility of consumerism, then, is a certain view of the self as a project of building itself. The consumer self is not given, not a substance with pre-determined attributes, not even a soul, but a task. The consumer exists only insofar as he or she is engaged in the activity of self-making. In short, the consumer self is a subject in the precise, modern sense of the term: immaterial, free, and self-related, not an object. While the Romantic tonality of consumerism is undeniable, the origins of this notion of the self are more deeply embedded in the history of the West than Romanticism. From Augustine to Descartes to German Idealism we see a notion of subjectivity elaborated as essentially active, anticipatory and free. The *distentio animae* of Augustine understands time by projecting possibilities of the self into the future; the *res cogitans* in Descartes exists only insofar as it does something, that is, think; the Kantian subject authors itself by freely determining its moral attitude; the Fichtian self is not an agent that sometimes acts; it is nothing but its activity, and its activity consists in an endless project of overcoming the otherness of nature and transforming it into itself, that is, making a world of nature. Gathering together these clues from modern philosophy, the early Heidegger concludes,

Dasein is a thrown projection (*geworfene Entwurf*), a being whose being is “to be,” that is, a being toward possibilities of existing.<sup>30</sup>

What is at play in consumerism, then, is the Western self itself: the self as subjectivity. An old argument connects this early modern notion of subjectivity, conspicuously absent in the ancient world, with a Christian understanding of time. The Christian does not participate alongside other ancient peoples in a cosmos of stably recurring structures but rather lives in anticipation of the end of history when the Kingdom of God will right every wrong and transform creation. In that radically temporal context, the Christian cannot neglect the self or assume anything about it, but must “work out” his or her “own salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12). According to Wilhelm Dilthey (one of Heidegger’s chief sources), it is in Christian anthropology that the temporality so essential to the notion of subjectivity (in Heidegger’s language, the being thrown toward a future) is identified with the human essence. With the Christian emphasis on historicity, the hidden life of the situated self becomes the foundation for a new kind of reality that will dominate Western anthropology: subjectivity. Phenomenologically and historically, then, these three are essentially related: subjectivity, interiority, and historical consciousness (not simply consciousness in time or consciousness of time, but consciousness of consciousness as essentially *in* time). Heidegger’s Dasein analytic was originally an excavation of the radical temporality at the core of the Western notion of the subject, a sense of time which had not yet been explicitly developed because of philosophy’s tendency to overlay ontic categories, that is, ontological terms applicable to objects, unto the self, which was disclosed in early Christianity as essentially “temporalizing.”<sup>31</sup> For the Christian and post-Christian West, Dilthey

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<sup>30</sup> Martin Heidegger (1927), *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 67, 225.

<sup>31</sup> Dilthey’s analysis of Christian subjectivity or “historical consciousness” served as one of the key historical clues to the *Daseinanalytik* of *Being and Time*. The modern sense of interiority, the early Heidegger noted, is a product of Christian culture, a point which becomes especially evident in Dilthey’s comparison of the psychology of early Christian writing with ancient Greek philosophy. Following the clue from Dilthey, Heidegger undertook intensive research in New Testament theology (especially the letters of Paul), Augustine’s *Confessions*, and medieval mysticism (Bonaventure, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Eckhart, in particular). Notes and transcripts of lectures from this period were published in Heidegger’s *Gesamtausgabe* 60 and translated by Matthias Fritsche and Jennifer Anna Gosetti under the title *Phenomenology of Religious Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004). See Theodore Kisiel (1993), *The Genesis of Heidegger’s Being and Time* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 100-105; Wilhelm Dilthey (1883), *Introduction to the Human Sciences*, trans. Ramon J. Betanzos (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988), 228-239; S.J. McGrath, *The Early Heidegger and Medieval Philosophy* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2006), 146-7, 187-190, especially 187: “In his *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften*, Dilthey traces historical consciousness back through the Reformation to early Christianity. The religious experience of the early Christian community precipitated a turn away from Greek metaphysics and made possible spontaneous expressions of the historical self. Heidegger’s claim, ‘Christian religiosity lives temporality as such’ sums up Dilthey’s thesis (GA60 80). In a differentiation of consciousness that set them apart from the Greeks and Romans, the Christians understood time as a drama of unique and unrepeatable moments culminating in a definite end. Human life was a trial overshadowed by a final and

writes, knowledge is inner experience, a “simple awareness of what is given in personality and in consciousness of the self.”<sup>32</sup> Eschatological time illuminates inner life and elevates it above the external. “The deep secret of this religion lies in the relation between experience of one’s own states and God’s activity in the soul and in destiny; it is here that religious life has its own proper realm, removed from knowledge of the common sort, indeed from every kind of conceptualization.”<sup>33</sup>

It is a short step from this line of argumentation to recognition of the constitutive change brought about in the Greek notion of the *anthropos* by the early Christian notion of faith (*pistis*). What is at issue in the Diltheyan thesis concerning the theological origins of subjectivity is not institutional Christianity or this or that Christian dogma; it is rather an early Christian attitude to life, which St. Paul calls “faith” (*pistis*). In Paul *pistis* is much more than simply trust, nor is it primarily cognitive; it means above all to watch over, to guard, i.e., to preserve something against the vicissitudes of time. Faith is something intimate to oneself that one shelters and “keeps” (2 Tim 4:7). No one can keep it for you, even if it is a gift of grace (Rom 12:3). The gift and its keeping illuminate the self in a specific way: it elevates the inner life over the outer. Faith singularizes the soul before God. The fact that faith cannot be done once and for all, but must be continually renewed, consolidates this transformed sense of self brought about by the Christian revolution. Early Christian faith emphasises individual existence over collective life, interiority over exteriority, and brings in particular view the temporal quality of human existence.<sup>34</sup>

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irrevocable judgment, which looms over us and comes toward us from out of our collective past. Every moment of an individual life is, as Kierkegaard puts it, of decisive significance. Dilthey traces this sense for history to Christian otherworldliness. Christianity repudiated the stability of the Greek approach to life. For the Christian, the world was not a spectacle to be enjoyed but a temporal trial through which the self comes into being or perishes. The first Christians were not aesthetes but ascetics, turned inward, where they had discovered a new order of being. Individuality and historicity were no longer regarded as accidental to the soul. The individual self, the self in its living attestation to itself, becomes the locus of truth. In historical life, the individual rises to God or falls into perdition. The minute and hidden events of the inner life, the incommunicable moment of conversion, personal experiences of fallenness and grace, constitute a concrete and temporal path to God. Socrates promoted a formal introspection, to ‘know thyself’ as the Oracle at Delphi commanded, but the data of interest to him were not historically situated feeling, personal commitment, and relationship; rather, his interest was in the timeless essence of rational life, the intellect, nous, which lifts us above the particularities of individual existence to something more ideal, certain, and lasting. Where the self in Socratic self-knowledge participates in the universality, immutability, and immateriality of ideas, Christianity takes an opposite approach: an intensification of the ambiguities of facticity and historical life.”

<sup>32</sup> Dilthey, *Human Sciences*, 229.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 232.

<sup>34</sup> “Faith is precisely the paradox that the single individual as the single individual is higher than the universal.” Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 55. Even sober-minded scholastics have recognized an inversion of natural hierarchy as the distinctive ethic of Christianity. In the natural order of things, the good of the individual qua individual must be subordinated to the common good, writes Jacques Maritain, but insofar as the individual is a person, *an imago Dei*, he possesses a value that is higher than the common good. “While the person as such is a *totality*, the individual as such is a *part*; while the person, as person or as totality, demands that the common good of temporal society

Without this interiorization of the self the consumer revolution as described by Campbell could not happen. A consumer is one for whom the inner life, however crudely experienced in wishful thinking and narcissistic desire, takes precedence over external life, be it the life of communities or the material conditions of the environment. This is the source of the oft-noted consumer indifference to politics. The whole of the material world is only of interest insofar as it is necessary to the construction of the day-dreams of the consuming subject. Consumer desire flourishes in the interiority of subjectivity, where the distinction between real and imagined is suspended.

To be sure, we are not blaming Paul for producing consumerism. With consumerism, something unexpected happens to the Christian breakthrough to subjectivity. The assumption of a direct relation to the personal God in the hidden recesses of the heart—the essence of faith and the historical presupposition of Christian subjectivity—is forgotten or trivialized into a private ‘spirituality.’ But in its absence, the subjectivity which that relation engendered does not disappear. Rather, subjectivity inflates to the compass of the universe. Without a transcendent term of subjective longing, without faith, subjectivity longs for nothing other than itself. But since it itself is nothing other than a longing for its other (as Schelling puts it, “*Person sucht Person*”<sup>36</sup>), subjectivity finds only bottomless emptiness in itself, a need that nothing can fill, and so is driven to endlessly reproduce itself by, at all costs, keeping desire alive, even when the object desired is proven time and again to be a deception, a lie, yet another piece of consumer junk.

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should flow back to him, and while through his ordination to the transcendent whole, he even surpasses the temporal society, the same person, as an individual or as part, is inferior to the social whole, and must serve the common cause as a member of the whole.” Jacques Maritain (1940), *Scholasticism and Politics*, trans. Mortimer J. Adler (London: Geoffrey Bless), 59. Cf. Friedrich Schelling (1854), *Einleitung in die Philosophie der Mythologie (Darstellung der rein rationalen Philosophie)*, Schellings Werke V, hrsg. Manfred Schröter (München: Bech, 1927), 738: “The spirit which draws itself back into itself, frees the soul and gives it space in which to move. But the soul, by its very nature, is that which God is able to touch. It is the truly *θεϊον* element in its nature which here manifests itself, though this occurs not in the species but *only in the individual* . . . for only the individual has a direct relation to God, only the individual can *seek* him and receive him when he reveals himself.” Herbert Marcuse has traced the reverence for authority, state, and class system typical of Bourgeois modernity and requisite to the rise of fascism to the Protestant internalization of freedom. According to Luther, the freedom of the Christian is an entirely interior matter, and fully compatible with external servitude. The latter may in fact be salubrious to the Christian inasmuch as it affords an opportunity to check sinful self-will. Marcuse traces this sense of interior freedom from the early Reformation to German Idealism and concludes that it is systemically related to the installation of capitalism and class divide as unalterable conditions of life. For our purposes, we note that Marcuse highlights precisely the interiorizing, singularizing, subjectivity-producing quality of Christian faith at issue in the above. See Herbert Marcuse, “A Study on Authority,” in idem, *From Luther to Popper*, trans. Joris de Bres (London: Verso, 1983), 49-156.

<sup>36</sup> Schelling, *Mythologie*, 751. On the same page, Schelling elaborates: “The self, itself a personality, requires and demands a personality, a person—one who is outside the world and above the general—who will understand him and possess a heart like his own.”

*Hope and the craving for novelty.* We need to ask the question whether Christianity is merely a necessary, not a sufficient cause of consumerism. Could we not simply say that the Christian notion of subjectivity is the material cause of the consumer revolution (along with many other factors, for example, Greek calculative thinking, etc), but the efficient and formal causes of the movement must be sought elsewhere, in transformations in technology and economy, for example, that have little to do with religion? If the subjectivity of the consumer were the only point of contact between consumerism and Christianity this objection would have more purchase. But in fact, the connection between consumerism and Christianity is more intimate than this argument assumes. The anticipatory nature of consumerism—the craving for novelty—is shown, upon closer inspection, to be bound up with Christian eschatology. It is not only the notion of the self that consumerism inherits from Christianity; it is also the goal of subjective life itself, which is common to both.

An argument might be made to the effect that the craving for novelty is not unique to consumerism but can also be seen in ancient hedonism. The classical hedonist needs to practice what Kierkegaard called “a rotation method” to keep pleasure keen and stave off boredom.<sup>37</sup> But novelty in this case is a strategy, not an end in itself. The classical hedonist needs fresh pleasures because the stimulus that he values above all else diminishes in intensity with saturation. It is not *new* things that the hedonist needs to satisfy his or her craving; it is the old things (sex, power, food) but in an ever fresh form. The modern consumer by contrast is dedicated to something more subtle than sense pleasure but far more easily obtained. The consumer wants new imaginal experiences, and needs a constant flow of new media for constructing images of the self. The aim is to sustain continuous and never-ending novelty in the material world. Because the material thing is merely a medium for acts of the imagination, of which there are no limit, the strategy works, in spite of the limitations of material pleasures. This touches upon the crucial difference between consumerism and ancient hedonism: for the consumer the pleasure sought is virtual not physical. “The modern consumer will desire a novel rather than a familiar product because this enables him to believe that its acquisition and use can supply experiences which he has not so far encountered in reality. It is therefore possible to project unto this product some of that idealized pleasure which he has already experienced in day-dreams, and which he cannot associate with those familiar products currently being consumed.”<sup>38</sup>

The consummation of consumer desire is constitutively deferred, always still to come, transferred to new, yet-to-be-acquired objects sufficiently different from previously consumed objects so as to be able to sustain the fantasy of self-fulfillment through acquisition. This does not mean that the consumer needs to have an extraordinary capacity for imagination at his disposal; it is not

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<sup>37</sup> Soren Kierkegaard (1843), *Either/Or*, trans. Edna H. Hong and Howard V. Hong (Princeton University Press, 1987), 281ff.

<sup>38</sup> Campbell, *Consumerism*, 89.

idiosyncratic tastes to which the consumer gives expression. On the contrary, the standard archetypal fantasies will do, namely, fantasies of power, love, achievement, and self-fulfillment. In order to mediate these fantasies, it is enough if the new thing *seems* to the consumer to occupy a place he or she has not yet gone, “on the borderline between the experienced and the yet-to-be-experienced.”<sup>39</sup> The key to the endlessness of consumer desire is the absolute futurity of its object: the consumer always projects the desired into the future, for only thus is it safe from the disappointment of reality. It matters little if the object or the experience is genuinely new or not; all that matters is that the imagination of the consumer renders it so. The consumer *imagines* the desired to be something new, something not yet enjoyed. And the genius of consumerism is that no amount of real-world disappointment can divest the consumer of his or her dream, for what is sought is not the thing but the way of being which the thing makes possible, i.e., an imagined experience, not an actual object. Consumer disappointment—more essential to keeping the economy moving than consumer enjoyment—is the consumer’s inevitable discovery that what he or she imagined as a fresh avenue to self-fulfillment was not in fact significantly different from previous acquisitions and conquests and does not deliver the desired transformation of the self. But far from quenching the fire of consumer desire, the disappointment only fans the flames. A rationalization for the disappointment lies ready-to-hand: the fault lies in the thing that proves inadequate to the desire, not in the desire itself. Consumerism lives out of the “not yet,” and insofar as its goal is the possible rather than the actual, it can pursue it infinitely.

Perhaps the clearest example of the infinity of the consumer craving for novelty is not the consumption of objects but the multiple partnering which has succeeded matrimony as a social institution in the consumer age. The seductive allure of a new partner consists precisely in the degree to which the new love object rekindles in our imaginations the promise of new levels of personal fulfillment which our old partner never delivered. We anticipate that the new lover will bring us states of happiness which we cannot fully articulate because we ourselves have never experienced them: he or she will open up depths of our heart hitherto unexplored by us. It does not matter that this was the same expectation that was dashed by the previous partner, who proved to be, not the longed for soul-mate, but merely another flawed and ordinary human being. It matters only that we find a sufficient trigger in the new love object to project the desire once again.

In the psychology of consumer craving we see the formal structure of Christian hope continuing to operate in the absence of its content. Christ promised his followers the fullness of life, a thriving individual existence (a new body), a just society (the Kingdom of God) and a new earth (2 Pet 3:13). We no longer believe in the promise but our subjectivity remains unconsciously structured around the hope it instilled in us. Hope in future happiness persists as

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 94.

the dominant ontological orientation of modern people, hope that has been flattened into a narcissistic journey of self-fulfillment, mechanically manipulated by advertising, and sustained in the interest of economic growth. Consumer “confidence” even borrows something of the undefeatable quality of genuine Christian hope. Are we not continually surprised at the resilience of the American economy, which, even when flat broke after 2008, surges back into life on the strength of something as ephemeral as low interest rates? The secret to the success of the seemingly invincible American economy is that America always looks forward, never back; it is the land of hope. America lives off of credit in the same way that the Western self lives for the future.

The theological virtue of hope is invincible to disappointment because it does not presume to possess the means to acquire what is desired: disappointment and failure only confirm the desired as something *hoped* for, i.e., something that is not in one’s power to acquire. “Hope that is seen is not hope; for what a man sees, he does not wait for” (Rom 8:24). The Christian hopes for “an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven” (1 Peter 1:4). Hence no worldly disappointment could disprove its existence. The reverse is, of course, also true: no worldly experience *proves* the existence of that which is hoped for either. The hope of the Christian is not a rational deduction based on past experiences; that is why it flourishes in desperate situations, at the foot of the cross, in the face of death, in the lion’s den. Hope is, according to the Scholastics, “infused” in the believer by grace. It follows therefore that hope will be generally out of sync with all external warrants for its existence or non-existence. The hope does not come from the one who hopes but from the one in whom the hope is placed. It is a gift not a possession.

So we arrive at the truly disturbing possibility that the consumer is driven to consume infinitely by theological virtues gone wrong. The consumer will not stop until the world is destroyed because consumerism is possessed by the infinite itself. The inversion of Christian hope is not explicit despair (that is its destruction) but hope in the wrong thing, hope in that which we know cannot be worthy of it. But implicitly, this hope is a form of despair, the “quiet desperation” Thoreau warned us of, which is even more lethal because it is less visible than more dramatic forms of melancholy. Precisely because we do not genuinely hope for *salvation*, we despairingly throw ourselves upon the world; we demand that the world play a role for which it is manifestly ill-suited, that it satisfy the deepest needs of our hearts. When the world fails us time and again, we only insist all the more despairingly on carrying on the charade.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> In Kierkegaard’s analysis Christian despair is every bit as future-oriented as Christian hope: it is a way of falsely orienting the self to the promised eschaton. The Christian, according to Kierkegaard, has only two options: hope or despair. The promise of the Christ, that he shall live forever, has so unsettled him, so deprived him of any simply enjoyment of this-worldly happiness, so foreclosed all avenues back into pagan immanentism, that he can only despair, in three ways— desperately willing not to be the eternal self that he is, desperately willing to be someone other than himself, or desperately willing to be himself in the wrong way—or he can will to be a self the fullness of whose existence is still to come in the next life, and so *will* in such a way as to be transparently grounded in the power that constitutes the self. Soren Kierkegaard (1849), *The*

The consumer is trapped in secularised eschatological consciousness, which now, in the absence of a belief in the possibility of the *genuinely* new (not just a new fantasy, but a new earth and a new society), becomes demonic. The age of revolution secularized Christian eschatology by positing a future utopia which annulled the present; early modern science and technology transposed this secular eschatology into a cult of progress, that however maniacal, possessed massive transformative power.<sup>42</sup> Consumers have retreated from the social and political repercussions of theological hope into a narcissistic fantasy of self-flourishing. Western eschatology has ceased to be the power for social and political transformation that it once was: now it is little more than a drug that keeps us shopping while corporate wealth swells and the material world is ruined.

*Love and insatiable desire.* But what of the third theological virtue? Where is love in the consumer age? If faith and hope re-appear in inverted forms as, respectively, subjectivism and craving for novelty, what happens to *agape*? What is its inverse?

The question permits us to qualify the subjectivism of consumerism. When consumers retreat into private fantasy in order to pleasure themselves, the others are always already there. The super-ego presence of the community of consumers hovers over the consumer imagination in all of its varieties. As I indulge in fantasies of myself flourishing, it is generally before an audience of imagined admirers and competitors. Here Heidegger's analysis of *Das Man* is applicable: the consumer desires things that others desire; the consumer fears things that others fear.<sup>43</sup> Undergirding the consumer will to self-variation is the consumer conscience, which is forever plagued by desire for the envy of others and fear of ostracization. We long to be loved by others, and yet we are tormented by the nagging fear that we are not. The psychology of advertisement, which both produces and exploits this subjectivity, is now well known: all advertisement oscillates between flattery and threat. The consumer is either flattered by being told, in no subtle terms, that he or she belongs, he or she is 'hot,' he or she is unique and 'worth it,' or threatened with the disdain of the community. May ads combine both intentions in one set of images by inscribing an ambiguity into the message: the ad leaves the consumer with a question: are you in, or are you out? To be sure this craving to belong, which is as constitutive of consumerism as the craving for novelty, is not *love* in any theological sense. We could call it consumer *eros*. But at its root, twisted by commerce and frustrated by the individualism of modern society, is a genuine desire for community.<sup>44</sup>

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*Sickness unto Death. A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, trans. Edna H. Hong and Howard V. Hong (Princeton University Press, 1983).

<sup>42</sup> Löwith, *Meaning in History*.

<sup>43</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, paragraph 27.

<sup>44</sup> The first Christians were anything but lonely existentialists. On the contrary, they never appeared alone, but founded communities wherever the Gospel was preached and accepted: this communal, micro-political thrust of early Christianity was one of the features that incurred the wrath of the Romans.

In order to carry the analysis yet deeper, beneath the consumer craving to belong and into the apparently inexhaustible energy of consumerism, we need to re-visit the distinction, well worked out by countless Church fathers and Scholastics, between *agape* and *eros*. *Eros* is basically selfish, *agape* is other-centered. *Eros* takes—even its heroic dedication to the beloved is for its own sake—*Agape* gives itself away. *Eros* is born of lack. She is the daughter of poverty and plenty, as Socrates put. *Eros* knows enough about what it does not have to want it. This medial position gives *eros* its one-pointed determinateness. It always wants something specific: only some determinate thing, body or person can satisfy it. *Agape* is not born of lack but of excess. It does not want anything determinate, but wishes rather to give itself without restriction. That is to say, *eros* is finite, *agape* is infinite. *Eros* is passive for it re-acts to the impression of the beloved. *Agape* is active; it does not respond to something desirable in the lover but constitutes the beloved as loveable in the very act of loving. Christian *agape* repeats the love of God for the world which is a free and creative love by distinction from reactive and acquisitive *eros*. *Eros* is limited to the compass of the appetite of the lover; *agape* has no limit and lays its life down for the other. Where *eros* leads to self-centered pleasure and ultimately seeks rest in the beloved, *agape* is endlessly active. It is pure activity, without origin or end.

No doubt, consumerism is ultimate narcissism and cares nothing for the well being of the other. It lives by *eros*. But if we inquire deeper, we will see something also, twistedly, agapic about consumerism, namely, its infinite and self-motivated energy for action. Consumerism is not reactive but productive. It does not respond to the genuine value in things but produces the values which it associates with those things. Without the halo of transcendent associations projected upon it by the consumer, the consumer product is after all nothing but a bit of mass-produced junk. Just as nothing can satisfy consumerism, no internal cause can stop it either. It has no finite telos. This is no hunger that can be satisfied, but a need for infinite activity. In short, the shadow of Christian *agape* has left behind a perpetual motion machine, an agent that cannot rest because it does not act on something or in reaction to something but rather exists to act, for it *is* its activity. In another age, such spontaneous productive energy was put to service in charitable missions, setting up hospitals, poor houses, and monasteries. In the secular age, the charitable goals have lost their appeal but the energy for activity remains. *Agape* inverted is activity without a goal, desire without end—a phenomenon only known among the ancients as tragic.<sup>45</sup>

Flattened, immanentized or secularized in a Godless key, Christian love becomes consumption-production without end, or what we shorthand as “economic growth.” Consumers are not primarily searching for wealth, pleasure, or power; they seek salvation.<sup>47</sup> And salvation is not some generic kind of

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<sup>45</sup> Tantalus was punished by the Gods with unsatisfiable desire: he was forced to stand for eternity in a pool of water beneath a fruit tree with low branches, with the fruit ever eluding his grasp, and the water always receding before he could take a drink.

<sup>47</sup> Thanks to Dr. Joël Madore, who made this point in response to a first version of this paper which I delivered at the University of Freiburg on the 19<sup>th</sup> of June, 2015.

enlightenment or freedom from suffering; rather consumers are searching for a specific kind of salvation, one promised them by the Jewish preacher and failed messiah whose words forever changed the ancient game of human happiness-seeking. To the crowds that thronged around him, Jesus said, “I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly” (John 10:10). When he did so, he elevated the individual, the singular, embodied, materially dependent individual, with all of his or her ineffable singularity, the individual who barely exists according to Ancient Greek categories (*individuum ineffabile est*)—subjectivity with its labyrinthine interiority—Jesus elevated this above everything else that exists. Jesus says, “You are worth hundreds of sparrows” (Luke 12:7). Here is a thought that no ancient sage ever dared indulge, that the *singular* individual is an object of love for the infinitely divine—not only more valuable than the material world, but in a truly topsy-turvy logic, higher than the good itself.

To conclude: Christian spirituality, inverted and in disavowal of its origins, produces the perfect capitalist machine, a system of infinite demand.