Encountering Other, World, and Self in Communities of Productive Practice

Abstract

In a consumer society, practices of production in popular culture represent a reclamation of the anthropological values of the person as producer. Communities of productive practice are potential loci for fostering this anthropological development in the encounter with self, others, and the material world. Religious educators ought to be looking for opportunities to support and promote these communities. I propose here that institutions of higher education ought to be one venue in which religious educators can do so in ways that encourage persons to flourish with a healthier understanding of themselves and their relationship to the material world.

Consumer Culture and Limits on Human Flourishing

The personal dissatisfaction that is rampant in consumer culture is well-documented. For the most part, here I simply posit the dissatisfaction based on commonly observed symptoms. Consumerism and the adoption of the materialism that is at its core are correlated with ill-being. Among the personal effects associated with materialistic values are depression, anxiety, narcissism, increased substance use, physical symptoms like headaches and stomachaches, and a lower frequency of the reported feeling of pleasant emotions. These negative effects appear across a broad span of ages. In theological terms, consumerism appears to inhibit the full flourishing of the human person who is created in the image and likeness of God. Religious educators must be concerned with the flourishing of the human person, and therefore ought to be seeking pedagogical tools to help learners combat the discontents of consumer culture. One potential pedagogical tool brings learners together in contact with each other and the material world while allowing them to actualize parts of their very selves often neglected in consumer


3 Having placed human flourishing at the center of the project of living, I must be frank about an inability and reluctance to define that flourishing too narrowly or to describe it too confidently. There is room for debate over what constitutes flourishing and whether or how we can recognize it when it is happening. Undoubtedly, there are many manifestations of human flourishing and no single *telos* to which every person must drive. I nonetheless assert that the collective recognition of certain experiences as fulfilling, especially when that fullness accords with the gathered wisdom of Scripture and Tradition, likely points to genuine flourishing.
culture. Religious educators should be trying to engage learners as participants in what I call communities of productive practice.

The failure of consumer culture to promote human flourishing can be traced to the inadequacy of the anthropology that is operative in that culture. A culture grounded in a poor understanding of the human person is ill-equipped to foster the flourishing of that person. Theologian Vincent Miller offers a definition of consumer culture that helps to unpack the problem: "the cultural habits of use and interpretation of commodified cultural objects." In the economic sense intended here, "commodification" is a neutral term referring to turning anything -- material goods, ideas, people -- into an object of exchange. Ethicist John Kavanaugh, though, sees in this definition the root of the failure of consumer culture. It treats everything, including the person, as commodity. It is only a culture that recognizes the human person as valuable herself that is likely to encourage human flourishing.

Kavanaugh's critique of the consumer culture is rooted in the Marxian concept of the "commodity fetish." For Marx, the commodities that we fetishized were the material goods produced by human hands (or, more so, human labor in the factory). These commodities turned from mere "things" into idols, objects of devotion, even a type of worship. The human person, then, becomes two things only -- a laborer and a consumer of the products of his labor. For Kavanaugh, this fetishization is especially problematic when the goods, experiences, and images that we consume (and, I add, display) become who we are. Hence, "we become re-created, not in the image of a living personal God, but in the image of dead things which can neither see nor feel nor listen nor speak." He goes on, then, to describe this strange mix of self-idolatry and self-imposed limitations:

Entrusting our identity to dead objects, we take on their characteristics and imagine ourselves to be things without capacity for listening, feeling, or truly communicating. Thus we become estranged from our very selves, from each other, and even from the living and true God. Human relationships, activities, qualities become thing-like relations, actions, qualities. . . . [I]n measuring ourselves by their qualities, we have created a false god which exacts from us our freedom and personhood.

In particular, consumerism is built on and reinforces an anthropology that limits the person, as a consumer, to someone who makes meaning and identity only through the signaling she does with her consumption. The rise of the brand economy is an especially egregious example of this anthropology. Although this focus on the power of brands is not entirely new, it is perhaps more important than ever. Indeed, marketers focus almost exclusively on selling the brand more than the product. Brands have value that is only partly tied to or reflected in the assets of the corporations themselves, and the brand is meant to stir feelings only partly connected to the particulars of the product. TV commercials for Nike, for instance, one of the most valuable and easily recognized brands in the world, rarely sell us athletic shoes, clothing, or

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6 Ibid., 34–35.
helmets. They sell us Nike. Practical theologian Tom Beaudoin likens this phenomenon to a dualism that wants to elevate the soul (brand) above the body (product).

Brands do not strive simply to engender loyalty among consumers; particularly when marketing to adolescents, brands seek to foster love and identity. We identify ourselves by what we wear, what we use. Even for adults, marketers speak of creating that elusive aura around a brand that converts a mere logo into a “lovemark.” The goal is for brands to shape the centers of value, to encourage us to put our faith in the values of the brand or even the brand itself.

The problem is that identifying ourselves so closely with brands inhibits us from exploring and expressing our full humanity, perhaps from building an identity around a career interest or as someone who contributes to society as a whole. Overblown though this concern might seem, there is empirical evidence supporting the claim: for instance, the dominance of a consumerist cultural narrative in lives of adolescents does indeed translate to a similar hegemony of the values and goals that support that system. They “crowd out” other values and goals, even limiting their exploration. Adapting James Marcia's work on identity development, we can say that other options, then, are “foreclosed.” In other words, the values and goals around which a person builds a sense of self, the values and commitments that define who we are and in which we place faith, in large part are dictated by consumer culture.

The Flourishing Person More Fully Considered

The inadequacy of the anthropology of consumerism cries out for a fuller and better Christian anthropology. We need to imagine differently, more robustly, what the human person is. It is not enough that we move the human person back to the center of the culture, including the culture of consumption, if that culture is to be redeemed. We must also have an adequate conception of who that human person is if the culture is to be truly humanized, and therefore sanctified. One aspect that is crucial, but all too often neglected, is that the person is a creative producer as well as a consumer.

The human person is not only a consumer but also a creative laborer, a producer. Human labor is not merely for the production of what is to be consumed, but is an expression of human freedom and, in the words of John Paul II, an opportunity to participate in God's ongoing work of creation, to be co-creators with God. He sees work neither as a punishment for sin nor as an unfortunate consequence of humanity's fallenness, but as an essential, creative, and potentially

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11 The language of "brands striving" for a goal is metaphorical; a brand itself is not an agent. The agents in question are the owners of brands and the marketers who seek to maximize brand value.
13 Kasser, and others, 2.
15 The language of "cultural redemption" is paradoxical when paired with a personalist anthropology. What it should convey is that because the person is of the culture, and the person's flourishing is conditioned by the culture, then the culture must be transformed so that persons can be liberated for flourishing. Because the culture is created by persons, then it can be transformed by human effort. By saying a culture can be "redeemed" I mean that a culture can be transformed so as to better create the conditions in which human persons can be liberated for their fullest flourishing.
sacred part of the human experience. He distinguishes, though, between "work," which is creative and productive, and "toil," which is exhausting and minimally productive. Toil is indeed part of a fallen condition. A culture of consumption that promotes sweatshop labor conditions -- toil par excellence -- is indeed a fallen culture, in need of redemption.  

Taking seriously our roles as both producers and consumers encourages us to engage the true materiality of the human condition, to overcome that "economic docetism" of which Beaudoin is so wary. We are producers and consumers both as individuals and as a society. Our potential to consume and the work through which we produce are intimately related. Accepting this reality in our lives as persons is also part of considering its social importance. Sociologist Juliet Schor calls this reality "true materialism." True materialism is cognizant of the value of material goods -- and the real costs of those goods. I contend that this true materialism is fostered in the person's experience of producing.

There is evidence, in the midst of contemporary consumerism, of a continued longing for greater agency in production and a new ethic of materialism. Some traditional handcrafts like knitting and homebrewing have undergone a resurgence as hobbies among young adults. Specialized markets seek to elevate handcrafts to the level of "artisanal" products -- craft brews or farm-to-table meals, for example. Similarly, handmade products that carry the exotic whiff, authentic or not, of another culture than that of the consumer, are especially desired -- like brightly painted Salvadoran crosses, or Australian didgeridoos. Many would argue, with justification, that the commodification of the aura of artisanship is part of the triumph of consumer culture. Often, in buying such products, we are signaling our knowledge, our ethics, our cultured-ness in the same way that our Adidas shoes signal that we are not taken in by the crowds who flock to Nike. My point here is not uncritically to celebrate this turn to artisanal consumption. It is to argue that the turn itself is evidence of a deeper hunger that is not yet satisfied.

18 Tom Beaudoin, Consuming Faith: Integrating Who We Are with What We Buy (Pbk. ed. (Lanham, MD: Sheed & Ward, 2007).
20 One accessible example of the commodification of artisanship and the slipperiness of the concept of authenticity comes in the Discovery network television series Moonshiners, which purports to follow Appalachian moonshiners as they tap into the demand for their handmade liquor while, supposedly, evading the law and other misfortunes. In one episode, a pair of moonshiners hire an inventor to make them a means of giving their liquor the taste of well-aged bourbon in a fraction of the time. The invention works, and the moonshiners sell their product to a well-heeled buyer thrilled to be getting the "real" article. While I cannot speak to just how much of the show is staged and how much is "reality," the mere existence of the show epitomizes the consumer culture's commodification of a fetish for the artisanal. "Moonshiners,” Moonshiners (Discovery Channel, 2011).
21 Sociologist of consumption Grant McCracken writes that the "patina," the greenish film that accrues on bronze through the process of oxidation, was much prized in eighteenth-century British and American homes as an indicator that the object must have been in the family for a considerable period of time and therefore must have been inherited from a wealthy or successful forebear. Manufacturers of new goods sought to increase their value by covering them with an artificial patina, giving the aura but not the reality of antiquity and wealth. Perhaps something of the same dynamic is at work when we buy "distressed" jeans, pre-torn to hint at the history of adventures that the wearer has not actually had. Grant David McCracken, Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).
Juliet Schor points to another manifestation of this longing to be producers -- the growth of a Do-It-Yourself (DIY) ethic that has many people building their own crafts or repairing their own goods even though it would be, in the short run, more efficient to pay a professional to do it. She notes also, though, a newer type of DIYer -- those who are willing to embrace technology as a way to allow them to produce goods efficiently on a small enough scale for personal use or for a small manufacturing business. Production need not be restricted only to the realm of expensively-equipped custom machine shops and massive factories.22

What Schor points to is also captured in the ethos of the loose "Maker Movement." It is an ethos that connects various DIY builders around such values as sharing knowledge and encouraging design, and its appeal seems to be growing. Schools and summer enrichment programs increasingly use the term "maker" in their slogans. Adult "fabbers" and tech enthusiasts see themselves as creating but also sharing ways of designing and creating functional goods that are enjoyable to use.23 It is not simply about making things yourself and for yourself. It is about creating, designing, and sharing knowledge with the idea that the use of technology and the sharing of information scale up the labor in a way that is liberating. Schor insists that the Maker Movement is not simply about a nostalgia for doing everything with painstaking hand-craft, which is not particularly conducive to human flourishing. She summarizes the insights of the philosopher Frithof Bergman in capturing the Maker spirit, "Self-provisioning is great, but it needs advanced technology to be liberating."24 from the drudgery.

**Situated Learning in Communities of Practice**

For the education needed for a change that appreciates the value of the person as producer, I turn to the potential for what Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger call "situated learning" through "legitimate peripheral participation" in a "community of practice."25 Learning in a community of practice (CoP) happens to a great extent through negotiation of identity in the context of social practice. In bringing these concepts from the fields of management studies and education into religious education, Jane Regan sheds light on how discipleship works, both for Jesus's original circle and in the Church today. Jesus's earliest disciples learned to be the Jesus-movement. They developed as a movement through their participation in the community that formed around and imitated the practice of Jesus. She sees in CoPs not simply a descriptive model for how situated learning occurs, but also a prescriptive model for renewing congregational life in religious education. Regan distills from Wenger26 a useful definition of a community of practice as a "sustained gathering of people whose practices are marked by mutual engagement around a shared enterprise with a common repertoire." She adds, though, that not all such gatherings are communities of practice; part of what makes such a gathering a community of practice is that it is also characterized by a particular type of learning, where "the collective

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learning involved in thriving as a community leads to practices that enhance the members’ identities and further the group’s goals.”

Given the origin of the concept of CoPs in the field of business management, it is easy to consider its applicability to a division of a company, or to a project team in a workplace. Often, where people are placed into a group, and management has the goal of forming them into an efficient and effective community of practice that passes on learning while incorporating new members. Regan thinks more broadly about CoPs, including those that are more voluntary, such as in religious organizations. Communities of practice, she contends, should not just be places of learning in business or schools. She brings CoPs into the realm of religious education, arguing that religious educators should intentionally create and shape CoPs as loci of faith formation.

Extending her logic, here I argue that communities of practice have the potential to be effective places of learning for the humanizing of consumer culture because they are places where identity as producers can foster greater appreciation of the self, of others, and of the material world. In particular, I turn to communities that foster identities of persons as producers in relationship. I call these CoPs "communities of productive practice."

In exploring this notion of communities of productive practice and the role they play in shaping identity and encounter, I turn for illustration to Bikes for Change (BfC). Bikes for Change is a community-based organization in a northeastern city of the United States. Their programs include working with local youth to repair bicycles and to encourage habitual safe cycling. Some graduates of the program continue their affiliation with the organization and become instructors in the program. BfC is located in an area of the city that exhibits diversity of race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. Its youth programs are especially designed to be accessible to youth of families with limited incomes; the program fees are fairly minimal, and even those are charged on a sliding scale. I had the opportunity to observe the program on multiple occasions and also to interview four young adults who had participated in the program as youth and then gone on to work for BfC in various capacities. The program is precisely what I would call a community of productive practice. Though it has no religious identity, it can offer us insights into the value of such communities for religious education.

**Communities of Productive Practice Enhancing Identity and Encounter With the World**

I argue that including practices of production as part of a CoP's shared enterprise tends to help people better flourish in alternatives to consumerism in at least two ways. First of all, it tends to foster what Schor calls "true materialism." By this term she means that we value our material world, our material items, in a way commensurate with the human and natural costs of their production. When we do so, she suggests, we are more likely to think differently and to change our consumer behaviors to become more conscious consumers as well as producers. For example, she suggests that we will prize better-made, longer-lasting goods than we currently do in our throwaway society.

Philosopher Matthew Crawford, reflecting on trading in his academic for the opportunity to open a motorcycle repair shop, contrasts consumerist materialism with the materialism fostered by practices of production and repair. The experience of repair, he says, "chastens the

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28 Regan, *Where Two or Three Are Gathered*.
29 Both the name of the organization and the names of any participants mentioned here have been altered.
easy fantasy of mastery" that permeates a culture of consumption. The repairer has to "notice things" for what they are, get into the reality of the material world.\textsuperscript{30}

The second way in which the inclusion of practices of production in CoPs tends to foster alternatives to consumerism is tied to the development of identity. The more of our identities in a CoP evolve around ourselves as producers and makers, the less we depend on displays of what we consume to give ourselves souls. Granted, we are all complex persons, with multiple aspects to our identities, aspects that are not always perfectly integrated. There is less room for the narrow aspects of the consumer self, however, if the producing self is prominent. Moreover, I contend here that part of the goal of educating for encounter and identity is to lay bare for the learner any dis-integration of the producing and consuming self, to provoke in the learner a subjective sense of disequilibrium that brings this mismatch into consciousness and forces change and integration.

My experience with the producers at Bikes for Change suggests that Schor is right about this tendency towards true materialism. At the time I interviewed nineteen-year-old Daniel, even though he was a BfC bike shop employee, his personal bike was not currently in functional condition, and was going to require some significant work to get it running well. His intention to rebuild it was a matter of aesthetics, a sense of ownership, and an appreciation for the material reality of the bike. He said, "I mean, I would modify it, to improve it, but, I don't know, it's just like that bike, it's just like, I've had it for so long and I love the way it is and how it rides and stuff. . . . But it's just, I love the bike so much, I don't want to just let it go to waste and let it break down. I just want to keep it for as long as possible. And I built it." Repair and restoration are symptoms of his "true materialism."

My experience at BfC also points towards the developing sense of identity as a producer leaving less space for, or at least changing one's sense of, an identity as a consumer. For instance, when I asked interview subjects about their purchasing behaviors, they very rarely mentioned specific brands. The exception that stood out was in conversation with Daniel, who claimed not to spend much on sneakers, but whom I had observed on an earlier occasion tying plastic bags around his shoes before bringing students outside to play a game. Reminded of the incident, he smiled. "Yeah, those were my Ewings."\textsuperscript{31} When he mentioned other specific brands, however, he did not seem to be tying his identity to the "soul" of the brand. An aspiring car mechanic, he lauded Hondas for their reliability.

By and large, when the BfC subjects got specific about preferences, it was about styles, not brands. Deron, nineteen, mentioned that he likes to travel outside of the city, to the area near his mother's workplace, because he could find there styles different from what he perceives that every store close to him sells. He wanted something different from what everyone else was wearing. Daniel similarly emphasized a desire to distinguish himself a little bit, not through brands, but with the pastiche of styles that allowed him to carve out an individual space. There is a certain level of independence from the consumer culture here in that these young adults seem not to be tightly tied to the hegemony of brands that so much of the literature emphasizes.\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{31} The Nike-branded signature model of former basketball star Patrick Ewing.
A particularly notable aspect of the limited influence of brands on consumer preferences and identity came when I spoke to subjects about their bicycles. (Most had multiple bicycles that they had earned from the shop with volunteer credit hours and had repaired themselves.) Expecting them to talk about the brands and models of the bike frames and perhaps components, it was I who brought up the subject. Daniel spent several minutes trying to remember the brand of his bicycle. Sheila, twenty-four years old and a long-time participant in BfC as a community of productive practice, rolled her eyes when, as she described the Campagnolo components she had installed on her commuting bike, I "oohed" in approval. "Listen to you, you're, like, ooh, Campy and whatever." Deron was able to identify the brands when pressed, but was much more interested in describing the styles, and Malik, also nineteen, more or less dismissed the subject entirely. The brand preferences, and the assumption that they were meaningful, either in terms of quality or signaling as a consumer, were mostly my own projections.

The Church Offering a Place for Practice

Given the potential for communities of productive practice to enhance members' identity as producers and to foster a healthy "true" materialism, these communities can be tools for promoting human flourishing in defiance of, or as an escape from, a culture of consumption. Given that the Church's mission includes cultural transformation in support of human flourishing, then the Church ought to be finding venues in which to promote such communities. Here I propose considering one in particular: institutions of higher education.

I offer just one quick example here, with the hope that student life professionals look to their own contexts and knowledge for ways to utilize communities of productive practice creatively and effectively. Many universities have outdoors clubs that sponsor outings and that have sports equipment that members can borrow or rent. When the gear wears out, club dues and university funding are used to replace it. Some universities even have employees in charge of the gear and of organizing trips. Consider, however, how powerful might be the experience of members of such outdoors clubs also involving themselves in the practices of caring for, repairing, or even of making some of their equipment. In addition to learning practical skills, such students develop their identities as producers, appreciate the materiality of the equipment they use, and are further in touch with the way in which the sharing of such resources makes those resources more abundantly available than if each participant needed to purchase his or her own.

Granted, not all equipment is equally amenable to this sort of treatment, and, because safety matters, any repairs must be taught and supervised by qualified and experienced leaders. Participants can be taught to care for climbing ropes, but certainly not to repair them. Participants can patch a hole in an air-filled foam camping mattress or re-seal the seams of the rain fly of a tent used for a weekend backpack trip, but probably should not be re-sewing seams on a four-season tent destined for a winter trip up Mt. Washington. Still, from re-stringing tennis rackets to fixing chains on bicycles, there are plenty of ways in which such clubs and become CoPs that promote practices of true materialism. While students in engineering programs may be more attuned to their productive selves, such an identity, and the true materialism it tends to foster, ought to be part of the broader mission of education in the Church and throughout her institutions of higher learning.

MA: Media Education Foundation, 2008) focus on the brand affiliation as central to marketing strategies to children with an aim of creating lifelong brand loyalists.
The university can play the role of providing the logistics to let these communities of productive practice function -- space to meet and work, relationships with community agencies engaged in production, and transportation for students who might otherwise be stranded on campus, for example. The other crucial resource that universities must provide, though, is the psychic space, the time, and the prompts to reflect imaginatively on these experiences. When students must reflect on the way in which experiences confront their "basic assumptions about the world," then their complacency about their assumptions is shaken. Otherwise, the unreflective encounter with new experiences merely reinforces old ways of knowing and seeing the world. Scholars of higher education Adrianna Kezar and Robert Rhoads emphasize that experiential learning is most effective when it is not siloed as one part of the university. It should involve a shared commitment among academic, administrative, and student life professionals. Of course, communities of productive practice ought to be used well beyond the walls of higher education. In parishes and in partnership with others in the broader community, the Church can creatively and fruitfully foster such CoPs. In finding ways to bring people into encounter with each other that allows them to develop their own identities as producers and to engage afresh with the material world. In so doing, and in helping people to reflect on themselves as producers in the material world, the Church operationalizes an anthropology that encourages human flourishing in a culture of consumption that too often curtails it.

34 I think here of Upton Sinclair's "Travel is So Broadening." His Babbitt character repeats the maxim of the title, but his own recounting of his travels display an ignorance and lack of reflection that render his travels merely the occasion of reinforcing his own old biases. Sinclair Lewis, *The Man Who Knew Coolidge: Being the Soul of Lowell Schmaltz, Constructive and Nordic Citizen* (Harcourt, Brace, 1928).
Bibliography


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