

IDENTITIES BOUGHT AND SOLD, IDENTITY RECEIVED AS GRACE:
A THEOLOGICAL CRITICISM OF AND ALTERNATIVE TO
CONSUMERIST UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE SELF

By

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CHAPTER I

The subject of this dissertation will be the effect of consumerism on identity. It will show that consumerism stunts identity development and will propose Christian compassion or love of the neighbor as an alternative to and a remedy for consumerism. Though it will include psychological, sociological, and philosophical arguments, it will be driven by a theological agenda, focusing on the ways in which consumerism generally and advertising and status symbols in particular result in a confused sense of identity. In the course of this argument, it will also be developing a theological anthropology, making claims not only about consumers but also about human beings as such.

Because desire is mimetic as Girard claims, the desires of individuals are not spontaneously their own (indeed contrary to consumer society's focus on the individual as a choosing monad, Girard speaks of the "interindividual"). Moreover, in a consumer society these desires do not even belong to anyone the consumer knows nor indeed initially to anyone at all. The consumer is imitating a desire that is feigned by a professional model. The idolization of these models and of those who possess the status symbols that one lacks lead to self-condemnation in the name of these idols. The system is structured so that one can in fact never achieve a satisfactory identity through consumption or status for one must always buy or possess the next thing in order to rise to the level of the next model; the system uses growth as the criteria for judging the performance of the economy, and continuous growth depends on these escalating desires that can never be satisfied. Kierkegaard's entire authorship is concerned with the problem of avoiding these kinds of debilitating comparisons. Certainly such comparisons

are criticized in his discussion of the crowd, but a criticism of comparison is also present in the stylistic strategies employed by Kierkegaard. He seeks to leave the reader alone with the ideas presented in his books—free from comparison with their author. He points to the lilies of the field and the birds of air because they do not invite comparisons as human teachers do. For Kierkegaard, these comparisons prevent one from being alone before God, and it is only before God that one can truly be oneself. Thus a society that constantly fosters comparisons must have the effect of preventing its people from being themselves. This conclusion takes in a new direction but is in agreement with Augustine's understanding of sin and love. For Augustine, sin leads to the sinner's loss of being as the sinner is dispersed—torn between countless desires.

Salvation, according to Augustine, comes through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, which gives one a delight in the good and reunites one's shattered self in the love of God. This love is expressed in love of the neighbor. For Kierkegaard too, it is love of God and love of neighbor that allow one truly to become oneself. Here one is turned toward the other, not in competition or comparison, but in compassion. Girard argues that people cannot choose whether to desire mimetically or not, but they can choose their models, and real freedom consists in choosing a divine over a human model. Those who do so admit that their desires are not their own. They do not hate or judge people, but neither do they envy or idolize them. Instead, they recognize that others are just people like themselves. They love their neighbors as themselves. They no longer strive to defeat others or become objects of envy through their status symbols. Instead they seek only to follow and glorify God, and in so doing they finally find their own identity, which they failed to do through competition and consumption.

Consumerism

I have used two words that are central to this dissertation as if they were unproblematic even though one, consumerism, is extraordinarily vague and the other, identity, is surely one of the more contested words in the English language. Consumerism is a strange “ism.” *Webster’s New World Dictionary* lists seven meanings of this suffix. The first would make of the word in question the act, practice, or result of consumers. The second yields the condition of being a consumer. Other meanings include: action, conduct, or qualities characteristic of consumers; the doctrine, school, theory, or principle of consumers; or an instance, example, or peculiarity of consumers. All of these have something to recommend themselves, but none seem quite satisfactory. Consumerism seems to refer to something more than the practices, condition, conduct, or peculiarities of consumers, and consumers do not seem to have any explicit allegiance to a common doctrine or theory that unifies them. Some of these definitions might be improved if the noun “consumers” was replaced by “consumption.” Perhaps the seventh meaning of the suffix produces the best definition with this new formulation: an abnormal condition caused by consumption, but this is closer to the conclusion the dissertation seeks to reach than a neutral term with which it must begin. The same dictionary offers no help with the word itself, offering three inadequate definitions. Two of these refer to areas that are too limited: political goals (the protection of consumers) and economic theory (that the endless expansion of consumption is sound economically); the other is too broad: the consumption of goods and services.¹

For the purposes of this dissertation, “consumerism” refers to an ethos supporting the notion that consumption of greater quantities and more expensive goods leads to

¹ *Webster’s New World Dictionary* (1988), s.v. “-ism” and “consumerism.”

greater happiness, that freedom is found in the choices between products available to consumers, that making purchases is a means of exercising and developing that freedom, and that acquiring goods or obtaining the means to acquire them gives one greater worth.² In his book, *Consumerism in World History*, Peter Stearns defines the term this way: “Consumerism describes a society in which many people formulate their goals in life partly through acquiring goods that they clearly do not need for subsistence or for traditional display. They become enmeshed in the process of acquisition—shopping—and take some of their identity from a procession of new items that they buy and exhibit.”³ This dissertation will also use the phrase “consumer society” to refer to a society with this consumerist ethos, and it assumes that the United States in the first part of the 21st century is such a society. In particular the dissertation will focus on two aspects of consumerism: advertising and status symbols. Advertising is the most overt means by which the consumerist ethos is spread, often quite unabashedly equating the purchasing of a product with greater happiness, sex appeal, and status. Status symbols can refer to nearly anything,⁴ but the concept itself refers to a possession that is regarded by others (and oneself) as a mark of high social status. Obviously these two ideas are interrelated and are integrally related to the ethos described above. Consumerism, as this dissertation will employ the term, does not have anything to do with the quantity of products consumed in a society but with the way consumers are persuaded to consume more. If a society were composed of a race of people with gargantuan appetites requiring

² This definition may seem too critical or to assume what should be proved, but much research will be offered in support of this idea in the next chapter.

³ Peter N. Stearns, *Consumerism in World History: The Global Transformation of Desire* (London: Routledge, 2001), ix.

⁴ Indeed, in late 19th century America, the family Bible served admirably as a status symbol. See Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 92.

millions of daily calories per person for survival, then this society might well out-consume our own. If a society produced great quantities of a substance so addictive as to make hopeless addicts of all who came in contact with it, then perhaps this society, filled with those who were under the substance's sway, would consume more than our own. But the first society consumes because of its people's inherent desire. The second consumes because of one of its product's inherent desirability. The one is related to the subject; the other, to the object. The consumption involved in consumerism on the other hand is not the result of some inherent desire or desirability. It is primarily related neither to the subject nor the object but to a third: the other.

Perhaps it seems that in presenting consumerism in this way, I am setting up a circular argument in which "proving" the connection between consumerism and mimetic desire will be effortless. On the contrary, this connection is an assumption that will nonetheless be supported by a lengthy discussion of consumerism that engages numerous sociologists, economists, philosophers, and psychologists. Furthermore, this assumption is hardly the conclusion of the argument but is rather a premise upon which is built an argument concerning identity in a consumerist society. Much evidence will be offered that consumerism as it is manifest in the United States today promotes the purchasing of goods not by appealing to any desire inherent to the consumer or any desirability inherent to the product but rather by appealing to the desirability and desire of a model. In addition, the dissertation need not prove that all consumerism is based on mimetic triangles to make its argument about consumerism and identity. First, if necessary, the conclusion's scope can be limited from consumerism at large to those elements within

consumerism that appeal to and foster mimetic contagion.⁵ Secondly, if Girard is correct, humans desire mimetically not in any one type of society but always and everywhere. Thus there is no need to prove that mimetic desire is prevalent in consumer society; instead the focus should be on exploring and describing the particular manifestations and qualities of mimetic desire within consumerism. This investigation will have to wait to the next chapter. Throughout the dissertation, however, consumerism will be examined, not in general terms or even as it relates to mimetic desire but always with an eye toward its relation to questions of identity.

Identity

“Identity” as it is being used here is a nearly impossible word to define. Erik Erikson suggests: “‘Identity’ and ‘identity crisis’ have in popular and scientific usage become terms which alternatively circumscribe something so large and so seemingly self-evident that to demand a definition would almost seem petty, while at other times they designate something made so narrow for purposes of measurement that the over-all meaning is lost, and it could just as well be called something else.”⁶ Ruthellen Josselson adds: “[B]ecause identity is an integrative concept that describes both process and product of the marriage between individual and society, it cannot be precisely demarcated.”⁷ Zygmunt Bauman warns: “Identity . . . is a ‘hotly contested concept’.

⁵ Similarly, Jean Baudrillard suggests that use of the word “consumption” should be limited to cases in which status is involved: “Thus the washing machine *serves* as an appliance and *acts* as an element of prestige, comfort, etc. It is strictly this latter field which is the field of consumption.” See *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (London: Sage, 1998), 76-77.

⁶ Erik H. Erikson, *Identity, Youth, and Crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968), 15.

⁷ Ruthellen Josselson, “The Theory of Identity Development and the Question of Intervention,” in *Interventions for Adolescent Identity Development*, ed. Sally L. Archer (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994), 17.

Whenever you hear that word, you can be sure that there is a battle going on.”⁸ One common use does not retreat from this battle but does manage to avoid some of the difficulties of scope by defining identity in terms of who belongs to a given group or set of groups and who does not. In these terms, an individual is demarcated in reference to the numerous groups of which she is a member. But individual identity is not exhausted by such an enumeration. One may change one’s religion, one’s sexual orientation, or even one’s gender. One may even pass between races or, due to a change in location or culture, may come to be identified with a race with which one has not been identified previously. Yet through all these changes, something, it seems, remains the same for there is after all something or someone undergoing all these changes.

This dissertation will seek to explore this abiding something that undergoes changes while somehow remaining “identical” to itself. The remainder of this chapter will explore several ways of thinking about identity, not in order to propose a solution or even possible avenues of exploration for future chapters, but rather to clarify the nature of the problem that the dissertation will address and to rule out quickly several options that may at first glance look appealing. Throughout this chapter, the discussion of identity will draw on an extended analogy between dramatic actors and actors in everyday life—between personas and persons. The first subsection will present this analogy and explore some of the basic problems with the concept of identity. For example, what is to be made of the person who claims to have only been “acting” a certain way? Are some decisions or emotions somehow more authentic than others? Is the role an actor plays on stage really so different from the roles people play in their professional and personal lives?

⁸ Zygmunt Bauman, *Identity: Conversations with Benedetto Vecchi* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2004), 77.

The second subsection will draw upon philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre and Søren Kierkegaard to delve more deeply into these questions. Sartre's concept of bad faith provides a useful way of diagnosing a person's conflation of roles with self, while Kierkegaard demonstrates the importance of the motives and thoughts behind one's actions. The final subsection on identity will introduce René Girard's theory of mimetic desire in order to call into question the "authenticity" or privacy of one's desires. If everyday actors are directed by the desires of others, are they really different from dramatic actors who follow a script? This subsection will also examine and ultimately dismiss as inadequate other possible explanations of identity such as memory, identification across time, and personal responsibility. Ultimately, this dissertation will argue that identity cannot be so easily named and defined because it is something that paradoxically does not abide continuously but is instead given anew continually; it is not the subsistent essence of the individual but rather the absence of such an essence and a self's complete dependence on an external source for its foundation. This argument will be made throughout the dissertation. The rest of this section seeks only to expose problems with possible solutions to the question of identity and to pose in a more detailed way the question that will occupy the following chapters.

Persons and Personae: Playing with Identity

Though seemingly antithetical in terms of their stability, permanence, and authenticity, the concept of the individual and that of the theatrical role share a common past. Raymond Williams explains: "**Person** came into English in C13 [the Thirteenth Century] . . . *Persona* [Latin] had already gone through a remarkable development, from

its earliest meaning of a mask used by a player, through a character in a play and a part that a man acts, to a general word for human being The implicit metaphor can still haunt us. But in English, though there were early uses of **person** for a character played or assumed, the sense of an individual was equally early (C13), and between C14 and C16 this gathered, especially in **personal**, the senses we would now recognize as INDIVIDUAL and PRIVATE.”⁹ In current use, it seems self-evident that an actress is distinguishable from the role she is playing. That distinction is what makes her an actress. Erving Goffman writes: “The claim that all the world’s a stage is sufficiently commonplace for readers to be familiar with its limitations and tolerant of its presentation, knowing that at any time they will easily be able to demonstrate to themselves that it is not to be taken too seriously. An action staged in a theater is a relatively contrived illusion and an admitted one; unlike ordinary life, nothing real or actual can happen to the performed characters—although at another level of course something real and actual can happen to the reputation of performers *qua* professionals whose everyday job is to put on theatrical performances.”¹⁰ Even in this rather obvious situation, however, actors say that many times the audience confuses the one for the other. Fans may assault television actors with questions about their TV families or offer their condolences for loved ones lost in their shows. Clearly though, these reactions can be dismissed as misunderstandings. But actors do in fact draw from their own experiences to bring their characters to life. Konstantin Stanislavsky, the father of method acting, insists that “an actor always remains himself whatever his real or imaginary experiences may be. He must, therefore, never lose sight of himself on the

⁹ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 195.

¹⁰ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959), 254.

stage.”¹¹ Nonetheless, it should be perfectly obvious that the actress is not precisely speaking the same as the role.

A famous actress appearing as herself on a sit-com or in a movie is still easily distinguished from her role even though she and it share the same name and perhaps a common history. The actress is told what to say and so is not reacting to a situation as she might in reality. Even if the actress and role are in one sense identical, the absence of reality surrounding the role makes it and the actress distinct. If for example the character is shot in the episode, no one should be surprised to see the actress walk off the set under her own powers. Or if the character performs some noble gesture in the course of the episode, one would not praise the actress for her benevolence any more than if she had done the good deed in a role that did not bear her name.

If in “real life” a man claims to be acting, he is at once understood. If he says, for example, “I was only acting mad,” he means that his anger was feigned and not genuine, but here there is a problem for it is not so easy to say what is meant by “genuine.” In this case, its absence means that he did not “feel” angry when he exhibited the gestures commonly associated (at least by him) with anger. Also, the gestures are not genuine in that they are the product of effort and thought—he is *trying* to seem angry (but surely authentic actions are not exclusively those that are effortless and thoughtless). David Lyon suggests that these inauthentic moments have become commonplace, however, as he calls into question the distinction between the stage and “real life” as it is lived today: “One might object, of course, that wearing masks, exchanging guises is a process as old as humanity, and this is quite right. But whereas once this was reserved for theatrical

¹¹ Konstantin Stanislavsky, *Stanislavsky on the Art of the Stage*, trans. David Magarshack (London: Faber and Faber, 1950), 54.

productions—‘the play’s the thing!’—now everyone is drawn in, and self-consciously so.”¹² Christopher Lasch seems to have a similar phenomenon in mind: “Since he will be judged, both by his colleagues and superiors at work and by the strangers he encounters on the street, according to his possessions, his clothes, and his ‘personality’—not, as in the nineteenth century, by his ‘character’—he adopts a theatrical view of his own ‘performance’ on and off the job.” As a result, the self in consumer society “becomes almost indistinguishable from its surface. Selfhood and personal identity become problematic in such societies. . . . When people complain of feeling inauthentic or rebel against ‘role-playing,’ they testify to the prevailing pressure to see themselves with the eyes of strangers and to shape the self as another commodity offered up for consumption on the open market.”¹³ Anthony Giddens describes a person in whom such a feeling is pervasive: “All human beings, in all cultures, preserve a division between their self-identities and the ‘performances’ they put on in specific social contexts. But in some circumstances the individual might come to feel that the whole flow of his activities is put on or false. An established routine, for one reason or another, becomes invalid.”¹⁴ Perhaps then the person in “real life” is no different from the actor on the stage after all.

A person is said not to be acting when she exhibits her “real” or “true” feelings. If someone laughs at her anger, she may even insist, “I am not kidding!” which means that she is not *acting* angry like the man depicted in the previous paragraph but is *in fact* angry. If the ruse of the acting man is well performed, there may be no detectable

¹² David Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2000), 92.

¹³ Christopher Lasch, *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984), 30.

¹⁴ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 58.

difference between his action and that of the earnest woman. In fact, the woman who *is* mad may decide that she does not want to be perceived as angry and so say, just like the acting man, “I was only acting mad.” The difference is only in what is felt, but perhaps the good actor can convince even himself so that he does in fact feel what he acts. His performance is however at least initially not effortless or thoughtless but contrived.

While it may seem that effortful emotions are somehow suspect, Sartre challenges the notion that true emotions simply rise to the surface involuntarily and carry with them a certain momentum. It would seem that according to Sartre’s analysis the man’s feigned anger is no different from the woman’s anger though she believes hers to be sincere. Sartre uses sadness as an example and describes it as a series of gestures and attitudes adopted with the knowledge that they cannot last. If a stranger interrupts this private show, Sartre says that these gestures and attitudes will vanish. And so he asks, “What will remain of my sadness except that I obligingly promise it an appointment for later after the departure of the visitor?” It seems that by “acting” happy, he actually becomes happy because in fact he was sad in the first place only to the extent that he acted sad. If he tells a confidant later that while the stranger was present, he had merely been acting happy despite his sadness, the lingering sadness he insists upon would in fact amount to nothing more than a vague intention to resume sad gestures once the stranger left. Emotions require effort to be initiated and maintained: “If I make myself sad, I must continue to make myself sad from beginning to end. I can not treat my sadness as an impulse finally achieved and put it on file without recreating it, nor can I carry it in the manner of an inert body which continues its movement after the initial shock. There is

no inertia in consciousness.”¹⁵ The actor in daily life is then, in this sense, no different from the actress on a movie set.

Even if one maintains that emotions are more authentic when unpremeditated (and that such emotions are possible), surely deliberation is called for in certain circumstances without thereby making the consequent action “inauthentic.” Thoughtfulness need not result in disingenuous acting. In some situations, no one choice presents itself as the natural or authentic choice. Perhaps the experience of this ambiguity is one of the defining characteristics of the human being. In an extended discussion of the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, Kierkegaard claims that “the bird is never indecisive. It is the very opposite, although it might seem to be out of indecisiveness that the bird flies to and fro—it is altogether certain that this is out of joy.”¹⁶ In this religious interpretation, the bird and the lily are never indecisive because they serve only one master, always doing God’s will.

Human beings are evidently different. A person must make a decision, and so she decides. But if later she is asked whether her choice was authentic or not, how can she answer? If she answers that the decision was not authentic, on what grounds can she base such a judgment? The answer must be: her view of herself. The questioned self is, however, faced with a problem that does not confront the actress. Even if she is playing herself, the actress may say afterwards, “I would never do that in real life.” That is not an answer available to the “real” person for it is in real life that her action has taken place. She can only say that the action is one she would not usually perform and explain the

¹⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 61.

¹⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Kierkegaard’s Writings 17 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 82.

exceptional nature of the situation, or she may simply say, “I was not myself.” But in order to make such a statement, she must believe that she has a concrete identity and that she knows what that identity is. Otherwise, she would have nothing against which to judge her actions in this way. Furthermore, this identity must be so stable that it, not only can be used as a standard of measurement, but also can withstand examples to the contrary. The identity does not break or even bend before the conflicting evidence; it estops the contradictory testimony from being admitted. Identity must be found, therefore, not simply in the actions of the individual, though the next section will present Sartre’s argument to the contrary. This section will also make use of Sartre’s concept of bad faith and Kierkegaard’s discussion of inwardness to better explain the distinctions between actions, roles, and identity.

Bad Faith, the Knight of Faith and the Actor’s Motivation

In opposition to the conclusion of the previous section, Sartre claims that a person is the sum of her actions—she cannot pick and choose which actions will count and which will not; that choice is made through the acting. This interpretation may seem not to correspond with experience, but perhaps the source of this failure is not to be found in Sartre’s description but in the way most human beings live their lives. Perhaps they are “in bad faith.” Bad faith can be either the failure to understand oneself as transcendence or as facticity. One fails to understand oneself as transcendence when one refuses to acknowledge that one is not simply oneself in the same way that an object is itself. To use Sartre’s example, an inkwell is an inkwell in a way that a person is not simply herself. She is more than herself; she escapes herself. Contrarily, one fails to understand

oneself as facticity when one does not accept that one's body is real and one's past is unchangeable.¹⁷ A person is not simply her body or her past, but she is her body and her past. The man who claims that he was not himself when he performed some action is guilty of bad faith in the second sense: he denies his facticity. Of course Sartre would acknowledge that the man is not merely his facticity. He is not just the sum of his actions, and it is for this reason that there can be bad faith of the first kind. Sartre says that a person can never be anything—a waiter, for example—in the same way that an object like an inkwell is itself: “I can not be he, I can only play at *being* him; that is imagine to myself that I am he. And thereby I affect him with nothingness. In vain do I fulfill the functions of a café waiter. I can be he only in the neutralized mode, as the actor is Hamlet, by mechanically making the *typical gestures* of my state and by aiming at myself as an imaginary café waiter through those gestures taken as an ‘analogue.’”¹⁸ Here the distinction between the actress and the person in “real life” is no longer clear. The actor in real life must play at his roles just like the stage actor. A person is not really a waiter; he plays at being a waiter; he acts like he thinks a waiter should act. According to Sartre, the person who believes that he truly knows himself by labeling himself a waiter is in bad faith because he has confused himself with his role.

Sartre's analysis of bad faith is a necessary complexification of the issue of identity, but it seems to divide actions and thoughts too decisively. While there is obviously some truth to the fact that actions, and not thoughts, exist in the world as objects (like the inkwell), that distinction may not be helpful in understanding identity. Mikhail Bakhtin argues that decisions are actions, suggesting that thoughts too have

¹⁷ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 56-57.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 60.

consequences and should be considered together with the act and consequences that follow the decision.¹⁹ The action that the world sees is only part of a broader action that includes the decision that lies behind it. Kierkegaard's pseudonym, Johannes Climacus, defines the word "action" in such a way as to blur the distinction between thought and action: "The real action is not the external act, but an internal decision in which the individual puts an end to the mere possibility and identifies himself with the content of his thought in order to exist in it. This is the action."²⁰ For Kierkegaard, moral responsibility lies with these inward actions rather than only, or even primarily, with the acts that have a concrete reality in the physical world. He believes in a reality distinguishable from and prior to the external reality of deeds: "Each one who is not more ashamed before himself than before all others, if he is placed in difficulty and much tried in life, will in one way or another end by becoming the slave of men. For to be more ashamed in the presence of others than when alone, what else is this than to be more ashamed of seeming than of being?"²¹ For Kierkegaard, transcendence trumps facticity. Others have access only to a person's facticity, and according to Kierkegaard that allows them only to judge appearances. What one *really* is remains available only to oneself and to God.

Two embodiments of this distinction between appearance and reality are prevalent in Kierkegaard's writings. The first is the ironist whose actions and words may be indistinguishable from another person's but whose attitude towards those words and

¹⁹ Alexander Mihailovic, *Corporeal Words: Mikhail Bakhtin's Theology of Discourse* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 53.

²⁰ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 302-303.

²¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing*, trans. Douglas V. Steere (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1948), 89-90.

those actions is completely different. The ironist is an actor whose stage is reality: “For him, life is a drama, and what absorbs him is the ingenious complication of this drama. He himself is a spectator, even when he himself is the one acting.”²² In some sense, the ironist is outside the reach of ethics. The ironist lacks earnestness and is detached from his own actions. The knight of faith, represented by Abraham, is also beyond the ethical because like the ironist the knight of faith’s “true” self is hidden from view: “Abraham cannot speak, because he cannot say that which would explain everything (that is, so it is understandable): that it is an ordeal such that, please note, the ethical is the temptation.”²³ For the knight of faith the temptation is not to violate the ethical but rather the ethical itself for faith lifts the individual above the universal.

Ultimately, Kierkegaard (or Johannes de Silentio) must confess that the “bourgeois philistinism” that he criticizes so relentlessly throughout his authorship may itself conceal such faith.²⁴ It is not just the ironist or the knight of faith who is hidden; the individual is always hidden: “The ethical as such is the universal; as the universal it is in turn the disclosed. The single individual, qualified as immediate, sensate, and psychical, is the hidden. Thus his ethical task is to work himself out of his hiddenness and to become disclosed in the universal.”²⁵ But this unconcealment is the task of the ethical, which presupposes the initial hiddenness of all people. As Louis Mackey explains, the individual cannot simply turn to ethical laws because for Kierkegaard, “the Good cannot be known nor its possibility apprehended except by *individuals*, each in the

²² Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Kierkegaard’s Writings 2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 283.

²³ Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Kierkegaard’s Writings 6 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 115.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 51.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 82.

context of his personal exigence.”²⁶ The Good itself, therefore, is hidden in the individual and not necessarily available to external acts or expressions. Actions, therefore, should not be given priority over thoughts.

Self-image seems to be formed no more by actions than by thoughts. Either can be dismissed, and either can be fundamental in determining that image. A person may, on the one hand, decide that an action was very uncharacteristic and should not “count” and, on the other hand, decide that the debate that preceded that action exemplifies her essence. Carl Rogers says that in therapy, the patient may describe problem situations, bizarre behavior, and frightening feelings, but below all of this lies the central question: “Who am I, *really*? How can I get in touch with this real self, underlying all my surface behavior? How can I become myself?”²⁷ Here the presenting problem, behavior, or feeling may merely suggest an identity problem but not the identity itself. Thus some evidence may be dismissed, while some evidence seems to count especially. In attempting to define the elusive term, identity, Erikson writes: “As a *subjective sense* of an *invigorating sameness* and *continuity*, what I would call a sense of identity seems to me best described by William James in a letter to his wife: ‘A man’s character is discernible in the mental or moral attitude in which, when it came upon him, he felt himself most deeply and intensely active and alive. At such moments there is a voice inside which speaks and says: “*This is the real me!*”’”²⁸ But what is this voice, and is it always trustworthy? One may easily imagine a person with an elevated sense of self who tends to say, “This is the real me!” only when she does something generous or intelligent,

²⁶ Louis Mackey, *Points of View: Readings of Kierkegaard* (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1986), 24.

²⁷ Carl R. Rogers, *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist’s View of Psychotherapy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), 108.

²⁸ Erikson, *Identity, Youth, and Crisis*, 19.

and a person with a low self-opinion, who only feels truly herself when she does something stupid or selfish. It would seem helpful to have a way of acknowledging more than these biased judgments in evaluating identities. Besides, it is still unclear how the idea of self, which must precede such judgments, is fashioned in the first place. Before she can ever say that an action is or is not characteristic, she must already have in place some idea of what is characteristic. Perhaps this is based partly on what comes naturally. An action performed often without great deliberation is likely to be considered characteristic. An action performed rarely and then with difficulty and reluctance only because of a strange situation or an extraordinary excess of emotion is likely to count for less in one's assessment of oneself (though it may count equally in others' assessment of the person).

It seems at first glance that actions performed without deliberation are a more fundamental component of self-identity than those that are thought about at great lengths, but surely these deliberations themselves contribute to identity (as Kierkegaard seems to indicate). Furthermore, the very fact that for certain people certain decisions require more deliberation than others would also seem to be relevant. For example, to say of someone, "she is very spontaneous" speaks to her identity without revealing the content of any of her choices. So too would the phrase, "he has had a hard time choosing a career." But regardless of the deliberation preceding an action, the more fundamental questions are why any action is chosen and how such choices reflect identity. While it is perfectly obvious that these choices do not spring purely from a unique, personal identity but are rather at least partially socially determined, Girard provides analysis that calls into

question whether an individual's identity actively makes these choices at all, or perhaps whether it is correct even to speak of an individual identity at all.

Borrowed Desires and the Interdividual

Girard argues that desire is learned. He claims that humankind “lost part of its animal instinct in order to gain access to ‘desire’ as it is called.” Unlike the always-decisive birds discussed by Kierkegaard, human beings are filled with an ill-defined desire: “Once their natural needs are satisfied, humans desire intensely, but they don’t know exactly what they desire, for no instinct guides them. We do not each have our own desire, one really our own. The essence of desire is to have no essential goal. Truly to desire, we must have recourse to people about us; we have to borrow their desires.”²⁹ The key to desire is not to be found in the subject as if a human being’s desires were innate and self-initiating. The key to desire is not to be found in the object as if the object itself held some inherent worth or desirability. Girard finds the key to desire elsewhere: “[T]he mimetic model directs the disciple’s desire to a particular object by desiring it himself. That is why we can say that mimetic desire is rooted neither in the subject nor in the object, but in a third party whose desire is imitated by the subject.”³⁰ In Freud’s Oedipal complex, the boy’s desire for the mother is primary.³¹ For Girard, on the other hand, “identification with the father is presented as fundamental to the boy’s development, *anterior to any choice of object.*”³²

²⁹ René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, trans. James G. Williams (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001), 15.

³⁰ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 170.

³¹ Though as Girard points out (see *ibid.*), Freud seems to place identification with the father as primary in some of his early writings. See, for example, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*.

³² *Ibid.*, 171.

If something as seemingly personal and private as desire is in fact borrowed, the distinction drawn between the actress and the person in “real” life is again blurred. Both seem to follow scripts written by others. One difference that can be pointed to is that the actress is at least aware of the script she follows. If she lacks agency in determining her lines, she has more agency than the real-life person who fails not only to write her own lines but also to *choose* to learn them. She carries them out unconsciously; she cannot read her script for she has no notion of there being such a script. Indeed there is little left to indicate that this person has an identity at all. Her emotions and her role are acted out; her script is written by a model from whom she must borrow her desires. It would be tempting then to turn to the first meaning of identity as equality and define a person’s identity in terms of her equivalence across time. Even if the actions and desires of her life are externally determined, her memories for example are still her own. But as Rom Harré points out, “[M]emory cannot be the basis of a sense of identity since the very notion of memory presupposes that identity.”³³ In other words, a person may question the accuracy of her memory but not that the memories are hers, not that it is she who is doing the remembering.

Giddens argues that equivalence across time may not be irrelevant to the discussion but that it cannot sufficiently explain identity. He asks: “But what exactly is self identity? Since the self is a somewhat amorphous phenomenon, self-identity cannot refer merely to its persistence over time in the way philosophers might speak of the ‘identity’ of objects of things. The ‘identity’ of the self, in contrast to the self as a generic phenomenon, presumes reflexive awareness. It is what the individual is conscious ‘of’ in the term ‘self-consciousness.’” He continues: “Self-identity is not a

³³ Rom Harré, *Personal Being* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 210.

distinctive trait, or even a collection of traits, possessed by the individual. It is *the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography*. Identity here still presumes continuity across time and space: but self-identity is such continuity as interpreted reflexively by the agent. . . . The capacity to use ‘I’ in shifting contexts, characteristic of every known culture, is the most elemental feature of reflexive conceptions of personhood.”³⁴ One understands oneself as an agent in past actions and circumstances, and it is this understanding that begins to point to what identity must mean. Erikson helpfully distinguishes between two types of identity—personal identity and ego identity. Personal identity is based on “the perception of the selfsameness and continuity of one’s existence in time and space and the perception of the fact that others recognize one’s sameness and continuity.” Ego identity, on the other hand, “concerns more than the mere *fact* of existence; it is, as it were, the ego *quality* of this existence. Ego identity then, in its subjective aspect, is the awareness of the fact that there is a self-sameness and continuity to the ego’s synthesizing methods, the *style of one’s individuality*, and that this style coincides with the sameness and continuity of one’s *meaning for significant others* in the immediate community.”³⁵

But even as a person agonizingly questions the validity of her memory, of her style, of her meaning for others, or, generally, of her own identity, her identity is presupposed. To ask: “Who am I?” is not to ask *if* the “I” exists, but rather *what* that “I” represents. Harré says, “[A] person experiences the world from a particular here and now, that is, has a point of view, which is coordinated in the spatiotemporal system with their point of action.” This coordination is necessary for simple language use because in

³⁴ Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, 52-53.

³⁵ Erikson, *Identity, Youth, and Crisis*, 50.

order to refer to something a person must know not only where the referenced item is but also where she is as well. “That is, I must anchor my frame of reference to the corporeal here and now. Ordinarily, this is done through the indexical presuppositions of the uses of the word ‘I’, presuppositions which embody the very idea that I am here and speaking now.”³⁶ This argument is perhaps not unrelated to the hypothesis that the word “I” is derived from an Indo-European base word meaning “(my) presence here,”³⁷ a seemingly dispossessed identity. The notion of a presence from which speech is emanating seems much weaker than the modern conception of identity, however.

Harré has not limited the role of the “I” to a point of view but acknowledges that it is also a point of action. Here again could be a distinction between the actor in real life and the actress on the stage—the former is responsible for her actions, and the latter is not. If Girard is correct, however, the “real life” action might be more accurately said to initiate from the model rather than from the performer. Yet it seems safe to speculate that most legal courts in the United States would not accept such a defense. Harré notes that the “idea that a person has a distinct point of action is embedded in such practices as moral praise and blame.”³⁸ If the individual’s desires and actions could not help but go wherever the model’s desires led, these notions of praise and blame, as well as that of legal responsibility, would be annulled. Guilt would have to be traced from the performer to the model, but the trail could not stop there for each model has a model as well.

Girard, however, does not claim that the desiring subject is left with no freedom, determined completely by the desires of the model. While it may be the case that the

³⁶ Harré, 211.

³⁷ *Webster’s New World Dictionary* (1988), s.v. “I.”

³⁸ Harré, 211.

subject will always be influenced by a model, the subject may at least choose the model. Here one could arrive at an Aristotelian ethics in which one becomes good by observing a good person and doing as she does. The concern in this discussion, however, is not so much how to become a good person but rather how one is a person in the first place or how one remains oneself while emulating another, whether good or bad. When one tries to behave like another, is not one's identity jeopardized? Does one not risk becoming lost in the other who serves as model? These questions are only valid if there is a discrete identity to be compromised in the first place. All that has come before calls this premise into question. Raymond Williams writes: "**Individual** originally meant indivisible. That now sounds like paradox. 'Individual' stresses a distinction from others; 'indivisible' a necessary connection."³⁹ Girard avoids this paradox by using the word "interindividual." Making use of this term, Jean-Michel Oughourlian challenges the notion of a discrete or distinct self: "The state of consciousness is therefore a product of the interindividual relation. Consciousness, like the self, is a function of the relation to otherness. The self as such is a mythic notion. To the extent that there is such an entity, it is in a permanent process of becoming, modified at every moment by its relation to the other, that is, by the pull of the other's desire."⁴⁰ There is no self that must be compromised for the sake of a more accurate imitation of the other; the self develops and emerges only in relation to and negotiation with the model. Thus the self does not dissipate as the imitation is carried out; rather, the self comes into its own through the imitation. This is not to say, however, that the self becomes itself only to the degree that it succeeds in following its model. There must already be a self that engages in this imitation, or else there would be but one

³⁹ Williams, *Keywords*, 133.

⁴⁰ Jean-Michel Oughourlian, *The Puppet of Desire: The Psychology of Hysteria, Possession, and Hypnosis*, trans. Eugene Webb (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 198-99.

self with embodiments wherever there were imitators. Indeed, failure in imitation, far from disqualifying the individual as a self, must in some way be what defines the individual as a unique self for were the self to succeed completely in duplicating its model's performance, it would be indistinguishable from both model and all other equally successful imitators. Then "identity" could no longer be a term applied to a person across stages of life but rather one that works to group actors who share exceptional talent and the same model. Surely the difference between following a script and following a model is not to be dismissed, but it sheds little light on the issue of identity. Whether the actress follows the lines of a playwright or an improvisationist can matter only incidentally to the faithful mimic.

Conclusion

This lengthy discussion of identity is meant not to define or even clarify the concept. Basically it has just pointed toward some of the problems in attempting to define or clarify this concept. This dissertation will argue that there is no clear way of thinking through this issue. Rosalind Coward explains the problem: "[I]f psychoanalytic theory has taught us anything, it is that such a proposition [that of a coherent individual] cannot bear scrutiny. It has shown how the idea of a coherent subject is a fantasy. For in bringing to light unconscious processes, it has demonstrated that conscious or public identity is only a tip of an iceberg."⁴¹ Each attempt to make sense of identity assumes that identity is to be found in one's actions, past, memory, thoughts, desires, etc., when in fact it is given gratuitously prior to and independently of one's actions, memories,

⁴¹ Rosalind Coward, *Patriarchal Precedents: Sexuality and Social Relations* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), 265-66.

desires, etc.; this is the one solution modernity and especially consumerism has forgotten to consider, or rather, the one solution it forbids people to consider for if one realized that identity is given, one would no longer be an empty self constantly hungry for new goods to fill one up, and such a person is a bad, perhaps even a subversive and seditious, citizen of consumer society.

Consumerism, this dissertation will argue, does not help develop “authentic” identities but instead simply fosters roles and promotes all the trappings of roles—costumes, settings, etc. Jim Blythe writes: “Essentially, people project a role and this is confirmed (or denied) by the people around. In order for the role to be confirmed, the person will try to develop all the exterior accoutrements appropriate to the role. In this sense, the person becomes a work of art; a sensory stimulus to other people which is intended to generate affective responses.”⁴² The coveted roles change constantly, and with them, the exterior accoutrements. Thus there can be no resting in one’s purchases or in oneself. One can never have arrived at an identity, and appearances to the contrary may serve as yet another role—a role meant to convey confidence and stability. Jeremy Iggers suggests that the very notion of true self behind the roles is obsolete: “Is there a lonely and isolated soul behind the mask, silently crying out, But that’s not who I really am!?” Unlikely. An earlier, more romantic generation might have had a sense of alienation, a sense that the true self was being smothered, but the younger generation senses that all we are is the roles that we play, and it’s really rather nice to be given a role that’s scripted and easy to follow, and where the uniforms are provided by the

⁴² Jim Blythe, *The Essence of Consumer Behaviour* (London: Prentice Hall, 1997), 47.

company.”⁴³

Identity then must be seen as something that stands in constant need of revision and reinvention. Bauman says: “[I]dentity’ is revealed to us only as something to be invented rather than discovered; as a target of an effort, ‘an objective’; as something one still needs to build from scratch or to choose from alternative offers and then to struggle for and then to protect through yet more struggle—though for the struggle to be victorious, the truth of the precarious and forever incomplete status of identity needs to be, and tends to be, suppressed and laboriously covered up.” He argues that one can never ask who one is unless one already has a sense of being able to become other than what one is, to be able to choose a new self. Indeed, it is best to “wear identities . . . like a light cloak ready to be taken off at any time.”⁴⁴ He explains: “In our fluid world, committing oneself to a single identity for life, or even for less than a whole life but for a very long time to come, is a risky business. Identities are for wearing and showing, not for storing and keeping.”⁴⁵ To hold to a single identity that fits too tightly closes off options.⁴⁶ Bauman also points out how this understanding of identity results in an important distinction between classes: “At one pole of the emergent global hierarchy are those who can compose and decompose their identities more or less at will, drawing from the uncommonly large, planet-wide pool of offers. At the other pole are crowded those whose access to identity choice has been barred, people who are given no say in deciding their preferences and who in the end are burdened with identities enforced and imposed *by others*; identities which they themselves resent but are not allowed to shed and cannot

⁴³ Jeremy Iggers, *The Garden of Eating: Food, Sex, and the Hunger for Meaning* (New York: BasicBooks, 1996), 90.

⁴⁴ Bauman, *Identity*, 15-16, 19, 30.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 89-90.

⁴⁶ Zygmunt Bauman, *The Individualized Society* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2001), 148.

manage to get rid of.”⁴⁷ The rich then have the flexibility to change their identities at will, while the identities of the poor are imposed upon them.

While Christian theology must challenge the economic inequalities that in many ways enslave the poor to the rich, it should not accept an understanding of identity in which anyone’s identity is thought to be enforced by another person or in which the constant renegotiation of identity is taken to be an ideal. No matter how abject a person’s poverty, one’s identity is not imposed upon one by the rich but given by God as Chapters 3 through 8 will seek to show. No matter how rich, one does not choose one’s identity as one chooses between products; rather, such choosing undermines identity. In its tireless espousal of the individual, of choice, and of freedom from traditional constraints, consumerism actually yields a shallow understanding of identity that produces empty selves without real freedom. The following chapter seeks to demonstrate just this point.

⁴⁷ Bauman, *Identity*, 38.

CHAPTER II

Consumerism is the most pervasive source of values in the West today, and advertising is the industry responsible for promoting this way of life. This chapter will explore this ethos—its history, its pervasiveness, its implications, and its effects. It will analyze some of the common criticisms and defenses of consumerism and begin to lay the foundation for the criticism that this dissertation will pursue. The purpose of this chapter in relation to the dissertation is to present a foil for the understanding of identity presented in the dissertation and for the role that the dissertation suggests for the church in Chapter 8. It is not arbitrarily selected as a foil, however, but is chosen as the primary voice on the subject of identity in this culture. Consumerism makes many explicit and implicit claims about identity. These claims and the kind of identity this understanding fosters are antithetical to the understanding of identity presented in later chapters. Though it seems that the notion of identity crisis is more prevalent now than ever before and though there will be arguments presented indicating that consumerism is indeed responsible for this prevalence, such a claim is not necessary for the larger argument of the dissertation, which acknowledges that consumerism is just the most successful and universal example of a more general misunderstanding of identity. The main point of this chapter is to present the view of identity upheld by consumerism and to begin showing the problems with this view, though these will come into sharper focus over the next three chapters.

This chapter is composed of three large sections, the first of which discusses consumerism generally and it itself divided into an introduction and two subsections.

The intro to this section explores the contested meaning of the term “consumerism.” Here I am hoping to zero in on a definition that will function in the remainder of this dissertation but also to show the range of definitions available for this important word. The first subsection is devoted to the history of consumerism—its origins and its spread across nations, classes, generations, and areas of life. This subsection seeks to show the significance of consumerism in the lives of people today. If consumerism were merely an isolated phenomenon limited in scope and reach, then I would have chosen my foil poorly. The first subsection shows that this is not the case, and by tracing the history and origins of consumerism it demonstrates that consumerism represents a choice—that reality can be and has been perceived differently. The second subsection focuses on the growth of two important features of consumerism—advertising and status symbols. Advertising is presented as the mouthpiece of the consumerist ideology, and the concept of status symbols is shown to be foundational to this ethos. The second and third large sections of this chapter focus on how freedom and identity respectively are portrayed by and understood in consumer society. Many commentators claim that consumerism promotes freedom by giving average people numerous choices, but this dissertation will show that this kind of freedom is actually destructive of true freedom, which is not defined by choice. Similarly, though many authors argue that consumerism helps people develop their own unique identities with tools provided by the marketplace, this dissertation will show that this strategy of identity development is doomed to fail and even interferes with proper self-development and self-understanding. Again, the root of this problem is a lack of comprehension of the concept in question. In the conclusion to

this chapter, I will look at some of the pitfalls for a project such as this one, which seeks to criticize consumer culture and briefly explain how I hope to avoid these problems.

Background on Consumerism

The subject of this chapter is consumerism, but the term itself is contested. Indeed the debate over the meaning of the word reflects the larger debate about the concept. The next couple of pages will examine the evolution of the term and the dispute over its meaning to demonstrate the centrality of concepts examined in this dissertation, such as identity and desire, to the very definition of consumerism and to present the trajectory of ideas leading to the criticism explored throughout this dissertation. It seems unreasonable simply to give one definition of this term when to do so would amount to offering a circular argument as many of the proposed denotations of consumerism express the very ideas this chapter will seek to prove. Nearly all the early denotations of the word “consume” were negative, and from the sixteenth century, consumer had the “sense of destruction or waste.”¹ In contrast, consumption is now often “seen as an active process and often celebrated as pleasure,” as the principal means of participating “in the polity. In postmodern accounts, cultural consumption is seen as being the very material out of which we construct our identities: we become what we consume.”²

In 1929, Paul Nystrom defined consumption as the “use of goods in the satisfaction of human wants,” but then added a note about destruction of values, which

¹ Williams, *Keywords*, 68-69.

² Hugh Mackay, introduction to *Consumption and Everyday Life*, ed. Hugh Mackay (London: SAGE Publications, 1997), 2. See also David Orr, who notes the contrast between the original meaning of “consume” and the contemporary understanding in which people define themselves as consumers. He says that an economy and society has been built “around what was once recognized as a form of mental derangement.” See “The Ecology of Giving and Consuming,” in *Consuming Desires: Consumption, Culture, and the Pursuit of Happiness*, ed. Roger Rosenblatt (Washington: Island Press, 1999), 140-41.

seems to resonate with the original meaning of the term.³ Michael Schudson says that a consumer culture is, most basically, “a society with a lot of consumer goods,” but more often, it “is taken to be a society in which human values have been grotesquely distorted so that commodities become more important than people or, in an alternative formulation, commodities become not ends in themselves but overvalued means for acquiring acceptable ends like love and friendship.”⁴ Consumerism is not a matter of quantity but motivation and significance. The United States consumes a great deal, but what makes it a consumer society on this model is the importance placed on purchases for the sake of identity and relationship development.

In defining consumerism, many authors focus primarily on needs—for example, seeing in consumerism the satisfaction of needs through mass production and distribution,⁵ the redefinition of needs,⁶ or the noteworthy character of a shift toward a kind of consumption that is not intended to satisfy needs at all.⁷ While it may be quite obvious that many of the products made and sold in this society do not satisfy basic life necessities, it is not so easy to say precisely what is and is not a “need.” Herbert Marcuse points out that once established as the norm of social behavior, a morality begins to function “as a norm of ‘organic’ behavior.” Thus, consumerism has created a second human nature, tying people “libidinally and aggressively to the commodity form. The need for possessing, consuming, handling, and constantly renewing the gadgets, devices,

³ Paul H. Nystrom, *Economic Principles of Consumption* (New York: Ronald Press, 1929), 34.

⁴ Michael Schudson, *Advertising, the Uneasy Persuasion: Its Dubious Impact on American Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 7. In his book *The Anxieties of Affluence: Critiques of American Consumer Culture, 1939-1979* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), Daniel Horowitz uses the term “consumer culture” and “a society suffused with affluence” interchangeably (2).

⁵ Stuart Ewen and Elizabeth Ewen, *Channels of Desire: Mass Images and the Shaping of American Consciousness* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982), 51.

⁶ Stearns, 23.

⁷ Conrad Lodziak, *The Myth of Consumerism* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 2.

instruments, engines, offered to and imposed upon the people, for using these wares even at the danger of one's own destruction, has become a 'biological' need."⁸

Also central to many definitions of consumerism is the emphasis on desire and its insatiability. It is defined as a drive and mandate to consume without limits.⁹ Colin Campbell defines consumerism in terms of learning attitudes of limitless desire and discontent, the treating of consumption as an end-in-itself, and being obligated "to engage in the continuous pursuit of this end."¹⁰ Consumerism is defined, not by the products or their qualities, but by "the good feelings that go with the product,"¹¹ by the "promise of individual salvation,"¹² and by "the active ideology that the meaning of life is to be found in buying things and pre-packaged experiences."¹³ Consumerism is the belief that consumption is the means to every end.

The Expansion of Consumerism

Like the word itself, the beginnings of consumer society are widely debated. David Orr tells the story of how consumerism arose in five steps. The first is the most pertinent to this dissertation: convincing people that *they are what they own*. The rest serve to reinforce the first: depriving people of alternative and cooperative means of fulfilling basic needs, making people into consumer addicts by means of advertising,

⁸ Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 11.

⁹ Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland*, 144.

¹⁰ Colin Campbell, "Romanticism and the Consumer Ethic: Intimations of a Weber-style Thesis" *Sociological Analysis* 44 (Winter 1983), 293. Craig G. Bartholomew seconds this notion of consumption being an end-in-itself, defining consumerism as "a culture in which *the core values of the culture derive from consumption rather than the other way around*." See "Christ and Consumerism: An Introduction," in *Christ and Consumerism: Critical Reflections on the Spirit of Our Age*, ed. Craig G. Bartholomew and Thorsten Moritz (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000), 6.

¹¹ Jeremy Iggers, *The Garden of Eating: Food, Sex, and the Hunger for Meaning* (New York: BasicBooks, 1996), 74.

¹² Philip Cushman, *Constructing the Self, Constructing America: A Cultural History of Psychotherapy* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1995), 210-11.

¹³ Robert Bocoock, *Consumption, Key Ideas* (London: Routledge, 1993), 50.

giving the system “legal standing through the purchase of several generations of politicians and lawyers,” and justifying the system by getting economists to insist that greed is rational.¹⁴ Daniel Horowitz suggests that mass consumption began for the middle class and sometimes lower classes long before the nineteenth century, but he goes on to say that the question is too complicated to yield a clear answer.¹⁵ Peter Stearns is more definitive in claiming that “full-blown consumerism” is more than 300 years old.¹⁶

The development of consumerism required the reeducation of people as consumers. Part of this education involved a changing understanding of the self. While the idea of social masks is an old one, most Americans had always assumed that there was a simple, true self beneath them all. But by 1900, that assumption had become difficult to maintain, as more and more Americans began to see the self as fragmented rather than simple and socially constructed rather than genuine.¹⁷ The idea that people can create their own identities is a relatively new one, emerging on the scene hand-in-hand with urban shopping.¹⁸ Modern consumption itself had to be learned; people are socialized to desire consuming.¹⁹ They must be taught not to provide for themselves through home production. A reeducation effort starting in the 1920s was undertaken to help Americans accept “consumption as a way of life.”²⁰ As late as World War II, frugality and the ordinary citizen’s willingness to sacrifice for the national cause were

¹⁴ Orr, 142.

¹⁵ Daniel Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending: Attitudes toward the Consumer Society in America, 1875-1940* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), xxiv, xxviii.

¹⁶ Stearns, 44.

¹⁷ T. J. Jackson Lears, “From Salvation to Self-Realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of the Consumer Culture, 1880-1930,” in *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880-1980*, ed. Richard Wightman Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 8.

¹⁸ Thomas Hine, *I Want That!: How We All Became Shoppers* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 66.

¹⁹ Bocoock, 54.

²⁰ Lasch, *The Minimal Self*, 29.

praised. Extravagant consumption, in contrast, was seen as selfish and unpatriotic.²¹

These ideals, however, soon disappeared in favor of those associated with consumerism.

Consumerist behavior is no longer abnormal or selfish, but “actually discloses modernity’s highest ideals.”²²

The main goal of the new consumer curriculum is to increase desire (a goal further explained in Chapter 5’s discussion of Augustine). Mark C. Taylor writes: “The trick upon which the success of market economies turns is the creation of desire where there is no need.”²³ The corporate world of the early twentieth century helped to redefine the human being as an insatiable machine or animal “governed by an infinity of desires.”²⁴ In order to replace the economic necessity of earlier societies with the necessity of endless economic growth, it was necessary to replace the satisfaction of basic human needs with “a ceaseless manufacture of pseudo-needs.”²⁵ The society could easily satisfy basic needs, so psychological desires were fostered but never satisfied; new ones were continually created as old products were made obsolete. America was now a consumer culture promoting “the sale of goods and services which were far from necessities in the traditional sense, but which helped to ensure increasing levels of production.”²⁶ With increased production, desire, and spending, came increased

²¹ Iggers, 46.

²² Craig M. Gay, “Sensualists without Heart: Contemporary Consumerism in the Light of the Modern Project,” in *The Consuming Passion: Christianity & the Consumer Culture*, ed. Rodney Clapp (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 19.

²³ Mark C. Taylor, *Confidence Games: Money and Markets in a World without Redemption* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 64.

²⁴ William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 385.

²⁵ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1994), 33-34.

²⁶ Roger S. Mason, *The Economics of Conspicuous Consumption: Theory and Thought since 1700* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 1998), 108.

consumer emulative desire (a desire analyzed more closely in the next chapter).²⁷ Classes and groups of people that had never been able to afford to spend conspicuously were by the beginning of the 20th century beginning to indulge in status symbols.²⁸ A shift had taken place, moving the country from a “producer” society to a “consumer” society. Of course, it had been and remained a mix of both, but the shift of emphasis radically changed “virtually every aspect of society, culture and individual life. The differences are so deep and ubiquitous that they fully justify speaking of our society as a society of a separate and distinct kind—a consumer society.”²⁹ One source of self-identity had long been found in one’s work,³⁰ but workers began to focus less on securing better working conditions (for it was taken for granted that work was and would remain unpleasant) and

²⁷ This is one of the reasons that increased GNP has not led to greater happiness in the United States. A century ago, Thorstein Veblen suggested that the poor had grown more discontented, not because of material interests, which had improved, but because their relative poverty had increased, “and, curious as it may seem at first sight, that is what seems to count.” See *Veblen on Marx, Race, Science and Economics*, (New York: Capricorn Books, 1969), 391-92. Because the poverty line is a measurement of minimum level of personal comfort, Tibor Scitovsky argues that it is “determined in relation to and so moves with the community’s median level of personal comfort.” Rises in everybody’s income may increase personal comfort for the poor but do not make them any less poor. See *Human Desire and Economic Satisfaction: Essays on the Frontiers of Economics* (New York: New York University Press, 1986), 137. Juliet Schor observes that when people are concerned about relative position, “general increases in income and consumption do not yield gains in well-being.” See “Towards a New Politics of Consumption,” in *The Consumer Society Reader*, ed. Juliet B. Schor and Douglas B. Holt (New York: The New Press, 2000), 457. Similarly, Peter Svensson says that more money will lead to greater happiness only if “those around you don’t also earn more.” See “Does Money Buy Happiness? Economists Say Spending Doesn’t Equal Satisfaction,” *Journal-Gazette* (Ft. Wayne, IN), 9 November 2004, 8B. Betsy Taylor claims that the American preoccupation with “keeping up with commercial consumerist norms often wreaks havoc on those in low-income communities and exacerbates the growing gap between the rich and poor.” See “The Personal Level,” in *Do Americans Shop Too Much?*, ed. Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 59. Joan Robinson points to what she calls “a weakness of the traditional theory of demand.” This theory is far too individualistic. It assumes that if a cut in consumption were required, sacrifice would be minimized by a requisite decrease in general purchasing power, leaving each consumer free to economize on what she chooses. “In reality, it is obvious that less sacrifice is caused by a total disappearance from the market of certain commodities, such as silk stockings, which are bought by each consumer mainly because other people have them. (Hats are an obvious example of this principle, though, at the time of writing, their production, for some reason, has not yet been prohibited).” See Robinson’s “Review of *The Theory of Consumer Demand* by Ruby Turner Norris,” *Economic Journal* 53 (April 1943): 116.

²⁸ Mason, *The Economics of Conspicuous Consumption*, 89.

²⁹ Zygmunt Bauman, *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor* (Maidenhead, Berkshire, England ; New York, NY: Open University Press, 2005), 24.

³⁰ Bocock, 49.

more on obtaining a better life away from work, which thus became a means to an end. This better life off the job became defined in terms of what higher pay and shorter hours could provide—new things and leisure experiences.³¹ Consumption became the primary goal of work, the primary object of desire, and thus the primary source of identity.

Now consumerism is well-established and is increasingly pervasive in all areas of life, all classes, and all regions of the world. Missionaries from Europe and America find consumerism so natural, they have taken it with them into the mission field.³² As more of the world is exposed to advertising and consumerism, “so the number of people who form their sense of purpose and identity through ‘consumption’ expands.”³³

Consumerism spread to the middle class by the late nineteenth century, as many professionals could no longer hope to run their own businesses and so sought other ways of seeking satisfaction and demonstrating success. Consumerism also spreads through generations. Members of “Generation X” [those born in the 1960s, 1970s, or early 1980s] were once considered cynical, apathetic, and anti-commercial, but this generation, which for a long time had no real shared identity, is now united by shopping—the generation’s “defining occupation.”³⁴

Consumerism has spread, not just to other areas of the world and to new classes, but also to other areas of life. Consuming has become “the great American pastime.”³⁵ John Kavanaugh says that consumerism is both a formation system, forming people and behavior, and an information system, informing people about their identity and the status

³¹ Stearns, 56.

³² Ibid., 59.

³³ Bocoek, 111.

³⁴ Nina Munk, “My Generation: Hope I Shop before I Get Old,” *New York Times* 14 August 2005, 3.

³⁵ Charles Derber, *The Pursuit of Attention: Power and Ego in Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), xxi.

of their world. “Its influence is felt in every dimension of our lives.”³⁶ It functions as a system of reality and a religion, a complete worldview. Consumer skills, now necessary for survival, are used in different areas of life as well.³⁷ Consumerism has changed the way democracy is understood. Even James Twitchell, a defender of consumerism, says: “Ask any group of teenagers what democracy means to them and you will hear an extraordinary response. Democracy is the right to buy anything you want. Freedom’s just another word for lots of things to buy.”³⁸ While work once defined a person, consumerism now even defines a person at work: “workers are encouraged to view work as *consumers*.”³⁹ Zygmunt Bauman claims that features of consumerism “spill over all other aspects of contemporary life—if there are any other aspects, unaffected by market mechanisms left.”⁴⁰ Thus, all kinds of activities become redescribed as economic activities, and so, for example, there are now “church-shoppers,” “educational consumers,” and “health care consumers.”⁴¹ With labels on the outside of clothing, the mere act of being out among other people has become a form of advertisement, blurring the line between consumer and non-consumer activities.⁴²

Consumerism has taken over the most personal areas of life as well. By the early twentieth century, consumerism was affecting courtship through the emergence of a new practice—dating. Unlike traditional courting, “dating involved mixing some level of

³⁶ John F. Kavanaugh, *Following Christ in a Consumer Society: The Spirituality of Cultural Resistance* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 4.

³⁷ David Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland*, 79.

³⁸ James B. Twitchell, *Lead Us into Temptation: The Triumph of American Materialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 23.

³⁹ Paul du Gay, *Consumption and Identity at Work* (London: SAGE Publications, 1996), 78.

⁴⁰ Zygmunt Bauman, *Legislators and Interpreters: On Modernity, Post-Modernity and Intellectuals* (Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press, 2005), 166.

⁴¹ Rodney Clapp, *Border Crossings: Christian Trespasses on Popular Culture and Public Affairs* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2000), 94. See also Rodney Clapp, “Introduction: Consumption & the Modern Ethos,” in *The Consuming Passion: Christianity & the Consumer Culture*, ed. Rodney Clapp (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 8.

⁴² Stearns, 128.

romance with attendance at a consumerist leisure event, like a movie.” Consumerism also began to affect the way people grieved, as mourning clothes and long grieving periods became impractical and incompatible with consumerist ideology. Child-rearing also changed. Comforting a young child with consumer purchases became an accepted practice: if a child is afraid of a dark room, parents should place a desired consumer object in the room to lure the child in; if a child resents a sibling, parents should buy the child something to show their love. Developing in the 1890s, the practice of giving children allowances helped to create a new consumer market.⁴³ Today, many parents feel guilty about time spent away from their children, working long hours; often, they seek to compensate by buying gifts: “such purchases have the added effects of allowing material goods to infiltrate the relationships with children and of reinforcing the consumer message that love is truest when money is spent.”⁴⁴ And family purchasing habits and communication about products has a strong and long-lasting effect on the socialization of children as consumers from an early age.⁴⁵ Children are thus raised as consumers and quickly come to connect their identities to consumption and consumer choices.

Psychology, which itself has played an ever-increasing role in the lives of Americans and in their understanding of identity, is a kind of support system for consumers. Indeed, psychology is “*a political apparatus of modern society to develop and sustain consumers.*” It is a part of a larger ideology of individuation that has created a new “*form of subjectivity built on ideals of consumer freedom.*”⁴⁶ Psychology treats what Philip Cushman calls “the empty self,” but it also helps to construct empty selves

⁴³ Ibid., 551-57.

⁴⁴ Tim Kasser, *The High Price of Materialism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 89.

⁴⁵ William F. Arens, *Contemporary Advertising* (Boston: McGraw-Hill/Irwin, 2004), 158.

⁴⁶ Jeremy R. Carrette and Richard King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2005), 56-57.

and profits from them while doing nothing “to challenge the society that creates them.”⁴⁷ The empty self lacks community, tradition, and shared meaning” and feels the consequences of these absences interiorly “as a lack of personal conviction and worth.” It embodies all of this as a “chronic, undifferentiated emotional hunger” and consumes “as an unconscious way of compensating for what has been lost.”⁴⁸ Psychology does not challenge the ideas of consumerism but helps empty selves cope with their situation—a situation in which they must rely on consumption to meet their needs for connection and self-understanding.

Consumerism has by now become the air people breathe, the god they worship, and the story in which their lives unfold. “To ignore the place of consumerism in people’s lives would be tantamount to ignoring that humans are begotten through parents who raise them.”⁴⁹ Jean Baudrillard explains that the centrality of functional objects in the lives of people is changing human beings. By living among wolves, the wolf-child became like a wolf; likewise, consumers are slowly becoming functional objects.⁵⁰ Consumerism has also taken over the role of religion. Christmas has become the holiest day on the consumer capitalist calendar. It is the only major religious festival in America and plays a “dominant role in the functions of religion—in determining the values, identity, community, and meaning of members of this society.”⁵¹ Consumption has

⁴⁷ Philip Cushman, “Why the Self Is Empty: Toward a Historically Situated Psychology,” *American Psychologist* 45 (May 1990): 609.

⁴⁸ Cushman, *Constructing the Self, Constructing America*, 79.

⁴⁹ Tim Kasser and Allen D. Kanner, “Where Is the Psychology of Consumer Culture?” in *Psychology and Consumer Culture: The Struggle for a Good Life in a Materialistic World*, ed. Tim Kasser and Allen D. Kanner (Washington: American Psychological Association, 2004), 4.

⁵⁰ Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society*, 25.

⁵¹ Richard Horsley, “Christmas: The Religion of Consumer Capitalism,” in *Christmas Unwrapped: Consumerism, Christ, and Culture*, ed. Richard Horsley and James Tracy (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001), 174. Max A. Myers observes that Christmas is no longer directly related to Christianity, but has “become the holiday of a rival religion, the religion of global consumer capitalism.”

become “the chief rival to God in our culture,”⁵² as it “competes to become the story within which we live our lives.”⁵³ Thus when Chapter 8 proposes a Christian practice in opposition to consumerism, it is really only encouraging the Church to defend a territory already attacked and occupied.

According to Baudrillard, consumerism is a myth “endlessly repeated in everyday speech and intellectual discourse, which has acquired the force of *common sense*.”⁵⁴ Consumption defines the modern world and has become the way of life for modern people.⁵⁵ It is the “framework through which people find their identity” and “a worldview which demands attention.”⁵⁶ But despite, or perhaps because of its omnipresence, consumerism is not a frequent subject of attention: “Like air, it’s everywhere, we’re dependent on it, and perhaps most important, until it’s really dirty, it cannot be seen. We experience consumer society as something natural. But it’s not. As a growing number of historians have shown, the culture we live in today was *created*. Consumer capitalism did not triumph without opposition, but triumph it did.”⁵⁷ Pope John Paul II compares consumerism to Marxism, Nazism and Fascism: “No less pernicious, though not always as obvious, are the effects of materialistic consumerism, in which the exaltation of the individual and the selfish satisfaction of personal aspirations

While Christ was executed as a teacher who threatened the powerful, Santa Claus serves to legitimate the “institutions of political, economic, and social power.” See “Santa Claus as an Icon of Grace,” in *Christmas Unwrapped: Consumerism, Christ, and Culture*, 188.

⁵² Alan Storkey, “Post-Modernism Is Consumption,” in *Christ and Consumerism: Critical Reflections on the Spirit of Our Age*, ed. Craig G. Bartholomew and Thorsten Moritz (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000), 100.

⁵³ Craig G. Bartholomew, “Consuming God’s Word: Biblical Interpretation and Consumerism,” in *Christ and Consumerism: Critical Reflections on the Spirit of Our Age*, ed. Craig G. Bartholomew and Thorsten Moritz (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000), 81.

⁵⁴ Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society*, 193.

⁵⁵ Ewen and Ewen, 42.

⁵⁶ Graham Cray, “The Toronto Experience in a Consumer Society,” in *Christ and Consumerism: Critical Reflections on the Spirit of Our Age*, ed. Craig G. Bartholomew and Thorsten Moritz (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000), 160-61.

⁵⁷ Juliet Schor, *The Overspent American: Upscaling, Downshifting, and the New Consumer* (New York: Basic Books, 1998), 24.

become the ultimate goal of life.”⁵⁸ Indeed consumerism may be more dangerous because while Marxism and Nazism seem to demand a radical choice and commitment, consumerism seems to require nothing and to keep all options open. Thus the Christian consumer can hardly detect the tension, and too often the Church fails to point it out.

The Growth of Advertising and Status Symbols

The development of modern consumerism runs parallel with the development of advertising; the importance of the former leads to greater resources for the latter, and the latter serves to promote the former. Until the mid 19th century, commodification existed without marketing; there were few large market networks, but the emergence of colonial empires and then of mass industrial production along with cheap transportation and communications gave birth to the marketing of commodities.⁵⁹ If demand were to keep pace with supply, the mass-produced goods of industrialization required mass-produced markets.⁶⁰ Advertising was a way of creating and controlling consumers.⁶¹ Modern commercial advertising begins to focus on creating needs and wants, rather than on notifying people of product availability.⁶² As late as 1900, the Sears Roebuck catalogue

⁵⁸ Pope John Paul II, “Message of His Holiness Pope John Paul II for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace,” 1 January 1999, 2. Several studies show that people who are especially materialistic are in fact less happy than people who are less materialistic. See, for example, Emily G. Solberg, Edward Diener, and Michael D. Robinson, “Why Are Materialists Less Satisfied?” in *Psychology and Consumer Culture: The Struggle for a Good Life in a Materialistic World*, ed. Tim Kasser and Allen D. Kanner (Washington: American Psychological Association, 2004), 46; Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, “Materialism and the Evolution of Consciousness,” in *Psychology and Consumer Culture: The Struggle for a Good Life in a Materialistic World*, ed. Tim Kasser and Allen D. Kanner (Washington: American Psychological Association, 2004), 102; M. Joseph Sirgy and others, “Does Television Viewership Play a Role in the Perception of Quality of Life?” *Journal of Advertising* 27 (Spring 1998): 138.

⁵⁹ James B. Twitchell, *20 Ads That Shook the World: The Century’s Most Groundbreaking Advertising and How It Changed Us All* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2000), 11.

⁶⁰ Jean Kilbourne, *Deadly Persuasion: Why Women and Girls Must Fight the Addictive Power of Advertising* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1999), 71.

⁶¹ Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), 33.

⁶² Williams, *Keywords*, 69-70.

still emphasized “the integrity of the product, rather than its aura or its effect upon the consumer.”⁶³ However, the nineteenth century also contained a “carnavalesque advertising tradition” that appealed to consumers’ “desire for a magical transfiguration of the self,”⁶⁴ and by 1900, advertising was also beginning to be thought of as a science, grounded largely in psychology. Manufacturers became increasingly aware that sales could be increased by selling products not only for their mundane purposes but also for their capacity to elevate the consumer’s social status. By 1900, this social value was an important element of advertising.⁶⁵ Since the 1920s, advertising has focused less on the product and more on the emotional lives of the consumers.⁶⁶

Advertising rose in conjunction with a new understanding of emotional and spiritual health, which made it possible and which it promoted and expanded. In the 20th century, the quest for health took place less often in communal or religious frameworks and was becoming instead a secular and individual project based on a perceived need for self-renewal. The resulting therapeutic ethos and the longings associated with it “provided fertile ground for the growth of national advertising.”⁶⁷ Here advertising was filling a role once held by religions, and indeed it developed from religious roots. Advertisers were mostly white upper-middle class Christians selling manufactured solutions to life’s problems in a way quite similar to those developed to sell future

⁶³ Alan Tomlinson, introduction to *Consumption, Identity, and Style: Marketing, Meanings, and the Packaging of Pleasure*, ed. Alan Tomlinson (London: Routledge, 1990), 9.

⁶⁴ Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 43.

⁶⁵ Mason, *The Economics of Conspicuous Consumption*, 72.

⁶⁶ Kilbourne, 70-71. Jim Aitchison names as his second common lie about advertising the idea that a good advertisement must offer a rational benefit. Often the best ads appeal to the emotions, rather than reason. A creative director at an ad agency describes his own agency’s work for Porsche in an ad that listed many irrational attributes of the product. They received many fan letters from people who said they loved the car for precisely the reasons the ad suggested—its impracticality. There is no benefit to owning the car, except that it makes people feel better about themselves. See *Cutting Edge Advertising: How to Create the World’s Best Print for Brands in the 21st Century* (Singapore: Prentice Hall, 1999), 45.

⁶⁷ Lears, “From Salvation to Self-Realization,” 4.

redemption.⁶⁸ As religion has for many cultures, advertising helped shape an American identity for the first time, in part by battling against cultural structures established by agrarian life within extended family networks.⁶⁹ Advertising is not alone in this enterprise for it controls the media, which are controlled by major corporations. These businesses sell audiences to advertisers. The media must portray the world in a way that reflects the interests of the sellers and the elite buyers they want to target.⁷⁰ This relation between advertisers and the media is so central that it serves as the basis of Twitchell's definition of advertising: "The business of advertising is essentially the business of trafficking in audiences. After an audience has been gathered, its attention is rented to an agent who inserts a message from a sponsor. The audience pays attention because it is traded something in return, namely, entertainment."⁷¹

Now advertising, like consumerism, for which it is a propaganda machine, is everywhere. Indeed it is so omnipresent as to make defining it difficult and perhaps unnecessary.⁷² More effort and money have gone into advertising than "into any other campaign to change social consciousness."⁷³ Arthur Asa Berger says that television,

⁶⁸ James B. Twitchell, *Adcult USA: The Triumph of Advertising in American Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 33.

⁶⁹ Martyn J. Lee, *Consumer Culture Reborn: The Cultural Politics of Consumption* (London: Routledge, 1993), 90.

⁷⁰ Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), 303.

⁷¹ Twitchell, *Adcult USA*, 9. Shaun Moores makes a similar point when he quotes Dallas Smythe as having defined broadcasting under market conditions as the business of "delivering audiences to advertisers." See "Broadcasting and Its Audiences," in *Consumption and Everyday Life*, ed. Hugh Mackay (London: SAGE Publications, 1997), 225.

⁷² Eric Clark, *The Want Makers: The World of Advertising: How They Make You Buy* (New York: Viking, 1989), 15.

⁷³ Kilbourne, 75. Al and Laura Ries, on the other hand, speak of the death of advertising and a new age of public relations. According to them, advertising has lost credibility, for it is seen now for what it has always been—"the self-serving voice of a company anxious to make a sale." Though it may seem strange to say something is dead that is ever-present, they compare advertising to painting, which is now dead in regard to "its function as a representation of reality," but is, nonetheless, more popular than ever. "In the same sense, advertising has lost its function as a brand-building tool and lives on as art." See *The Fall of Advertising and the Rise of PR* (New York: HarperBusiness, 2002), xi-xiii. Even if this argument is

which is itself ruled by advertising, “is the most powerful socializing and enculturating force in society.”⁷⁴ Advertising is “not just a central institution but *the* central institution” of the age.⁷⁵ Out of a 75-year lifespan, the average American will spend about 13 years watching television, three of which will be commercials (compared to about two and a half years spent in school from grade 1 to grade 12.⁷⁶ And of course the advertisers influence programming, which reflects consumerist values.⁷⁷ The United States not only is one of the few industrialized nations that allow advertisers to target children, but also allows advertising in public school materials, “such as Exxon’s documentary on the beauty of the Alaskan coastline or the McDonald’s Nutrition Chart and a kindergarten curriculum that teaches children to ‘Learn to Read through Recognizing Corporate Logos.’” Of course, it also allows Channel One in schools. In an advertisement, the channel brags that its relationship with over 8 million teenagers lasts for six years, which is remarkable since most of theirs last for “like six days.” Kilbourne comments: “Imagine the public outcry if a political or religious group offered schools an information package with ten minutes of news and two minutes of political or religious persuasion. Yet we tend to think of commercial persuasion as somehow neutral.”⁷⁸

correct, advertising may still have a powerful effect on shaping ethos, and thus this argument does not really challenge the underlying argument of this dissertation.

⁷⁴ Arthur Asa Berger, *Ads, Fads, and Consumer Culture: Advertising’s Impact on American Character and Society* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 16. Bruce Herschensohn affirms the control of advertising over TV and points to the kind of control advertising seeks to exert when he says that sponsors should pull advertisements from shows that are critical of the system that allows the sponsors to prosper. See *The Gods of Antenna* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House Publishers, 1976), 139. Sylvia Ann Hewlett and Cornel West testify to the power of television, calling it “the most powerful cultural force this world has ever seen.” See *The War against Parents: What We Can Do for America’s Beleaguered Moms and Dads* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 149.

⁷⁵ Twitchell, *Adcult USA*, 1.

⁷⁶ Michael L. Budde and Robert W. Brimlow, *Christianity Incorporated: How Big Business Is Buying the Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2002), 65.

⁷⁷ Kilbourne, 48.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 43-46. In the early part of the last century, J. George Frederick offered an interesting solution to this problem, sadly the “solution” that seems to have been chosen: “The cure for weariness of character is

Children's games are also filled with products.⁷⁹ Wherever they turn, children are bombarded with advertisements.

Not everyone agrees with this assessment of advertising's power. Malcolm Gladwell suggests that advertising actually has a limited role to play because advertising does not work on trendsetters who go against what everyone is doing, and other people are more likely to be influenced by these trendsetters than by commercials. Advertisers can only hope to "intervene in the cool cycle," and accelerate the spread of a product from one group to another.⁸⁰ This claim seems difficult to reconcile, however, with the more than 100,000 phone calls received and almost 25% increase in women's shoe sales reported in response to a series of Nike ads featuring mini-dramas portraying the challenges of daily life. Many callers said the ads changed their lives or convinced them that Nike really understood a woman's feelings.⁸¹ Despite the rather obvious fact that Nike is merely telling women what they want to hear in order to sell them shoes, and even though little girls in Asia make the shoes for pennies a day, somehow the ads are embraced as promoting a feminist ideology. Alissa Quart agrees with Gladwell that teens are not convinced by television advertising and buy instead products their popular peers promote, but for Quart, this fact does not mean that advertising has a limited role.

Rather, it highlights the importance of a new kind of advertising. Young "trendspotters"

certainly not to reduce either the making or showing or talking of merchandise, but is like the cure for inability to swim—put the subject into plenty of water and teach him intelligent self-propulsion in it. The more at home he gets to be in plenty of water, the less he is likely to drown." Advertising, he claimed, strengthened character. See Frederick's introduction to *Masters of Advertising Copy, Principles and Practice of Copy Writing According to Its Leading Practitioners*, ed. J. George Frederick (New York: Frank-Maurice, 1925), 36-37.

⁷⁹ Alissa Quart, *Branded: The Buying and Selling of Teenagers* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing, 2003), 109.

⁸⁰ Malcolm Gladwell, "The Coolhunt," in *The Consumer Society Reader*, ed. Juliet B. Schor and Douglas B. Holt (New York: The New Press, 2000), 367.

⁸¹ Gerard J. Tellis, *Effective Advertising: Understanding When, How, and Why Advertising Works* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2004), 173.

are hired by companies and often become promoters for their brands. When friends see the clothes the trendspotter is wearing, they want to buy them, even if the brand is not one in which they would have otherwise been interested. “It’s classic viral marketing.”⁸² The omnipresence of advertising in all its forms creates an unprecedented cultural environment in which mediated messages and experiences are ubiquitous backgrounds to daily life.⁸³

The effect of advertising is thus not found by looking at particular ads or even the effect of an entire medium. Advertising “permeated the entire fabric of life in the 20th century.”⁸⁴ Twitchell says its real force is “felt where we least expect it: in our nervous system, in our shared myths, in our concepts of self, and in our marking of time.”⁸⁵ He

⁸² Quart, 44, 19. Diane E. Levin and Susan Linn describe “word-of-mouth” or “viral” marketing as a recently developed practice in which marketers identify popular children and give them free products to distribute so that the product will be thought “cool.” See “The Commercialization of Childhood: Understanding the Problem and Finding Solutions,” in *Psychology and Consumer Culture: The Struggle for a Good Life in a Materialistic World*, ed. Tim Kasser and Allen D. Kanner (Washington: American Psychological Association, 2004), 217. The New York company Big Fat specializes in “real-life” product placement. It pays people to sit in bars and gets kids to go online to promote cultural products. While TV ads once “represented two-thirds of total expenditures targeted to children,” television has now “been eclipsed by direct marketing, promotions, and sponsorships, which were estimated to account for 80 percent of all marketing dollars” by the mid 1990s. See Juliet Schor, *Born to Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture* (New York: Scribner, 2004), 78-85.

⁸³ Michael L. Budde, *The (Magic) Kingdom of God: Christianity and Global Culture Industries* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), 36.

⁸⁴ William Leiss, Stephen Kline, and Sut Jhally, *Social Communication in Advertising: Persons, Products, & Images of Well Being* (Scarborough, Ontario: Nelson Canada, 1990), 388. Numerous authors have commented on the central role played by advertising in contemporary American society. Varda Langholz Leymore speaks to its performing the conservative role formerly embodied by myths of reinforcing accepted modes of behaviour. See *Hidden Myth: Structure & Symbolism in Advertising* (New York: Basic Books, 1975), ix. Richard Wightman Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears write of advertising’s taking up of the role of psychology and its goal of therapeutic self-realization. See their introduction to *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880-1980*, ed. Richard Wightman Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), xiii. A. P. Simonds points to advertising’s supplanting of religion in the “establishment of personal and group identity, the embodiment of community, and the articulation of an overall meaning of life.” See “The Holy Days and the Wholly Dazed: Christmas and the ‘Spirit of Giving,’” in *Christmas Unwrapped: Consumerism, Christ, and Culture*, ed. Richard Horsley and James Tracy (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001), 103-04. Michael Schudson observes that when a person living in 19th century rural France searched for some meaning in life, the tools available were primarily those provided by the Church. Now the tools available are those provided by advertising. See *Advertising, the Uneasy Persuasion: Its Dubious Impact on American Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 230, 233.

⁸⁵ Twitchell, *Adcult USA*, 124.

goes even further, suggesting that just as the body is the way that genes ensure their survival, so “modern culture may be advertising’s way to ensure its survival.”⁸⁶ In a book on consumerism and psychology, two psychologists speak of the “substantial negative influence on child development and adult identity” that advertising has had and lament the fact that this phenomenon “has barely been explored by the psychology profession.”⁸⁷ Erich Fromm elucidates the dangers: “The hypnoid methods used in advertising and political propaganda are a serious danger to mental health, specifically to clear and critical thinking and emotional independence. I have no doubt that thorough studies will show that the damage caused by drug addiction is only a fraction of the damage done by our methods of brainwashing, from subliminal suggestions to such semihypnotic devices as constant repetition or the deflection of rational thought by the appeal to sexual lust.” He claims that advertising has a stultifying effect, assaulting reason and the sense of reality everywhere and at all times. “The particular effect of these suggestive methods is that they create an atmosphere of being half-awake, of believing and not believing, of losing one’s sense of reality.”⁸⁸ Advertising here is seen as a war waged by consumer society against the mental and emotional health of its citizens for the sake of its own survival. Needless to say, the Christian Church should be on the side of people, not consumerism.

Status symbols, an important concept for consumerism and this dissertation, have a longer history than consumerism. A recent study uncovered evidence that cavemen

⁸⁶ Ibid., 10.

⁸⁷ Allen D. Kanner and Renée G. Soule, “Globalization, Corporate Culture, and Freedom,” in *Psychology and Consumer Culture: The Struggle for a Good Life in a Materialistic World*, ed. Tim Kasser and Allen D. Kanner (Washington: American Psychological Association, 2004), 57.

⁸⁸ Erich Fromm, *To Have or to Be?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 188.

nearly 300,000 years ago “wore fancy trinkets as a kind of status symbol.”⁸⁹ In the 4th century, Chrysostom spoke against “the ostentatious display of riches in luxurious clothing by depicting the Christian life as a mud-wrestling bout with the devil, for which the rich are hardly appropriately attired!”⁹⁰ Clothing was long one of the easiest and clearest ways of signaling class distinctions. In many times and places, laws governed how much affluence was required to wear certain luxury items.⁹¹ For example, a “law of 1683 required jail terms for those wearing gorgeous clothes inappropriate for their station.”⁹² These laws were still being passed in Europe until around 1700, but as class barriers weakened so too did the system by which the color and shape of clothes could so dependably indicate social status. Instead the evident cost of clothes began to signal high status.⁹³ As sumptuary laws disappeared, status symbols became available to more people. Still more people were able to buy them when, after 1860, the credit system began to expand significantly.⁹⁴ Urbanization also fostered the growth of status symbols as distinctive emblems helped people feel secured from being swallowed up in the sea of humanity. The new focus on status symbols was opposed to some traditional values, and ad agencies saw lingering puritanism as a target for re-education.⁹⁵

Because status symbols have become so pervasive and available to an increasingly large sector of society, a “problem” has emerged for the status of the status

⁸⁹ Peter Chianca, “Prehistoric Bling-Bling? Ugh . . . That Explains It,” *Boston Herald* 5 December 2004, 048.

⁹⁰ Margaret M. Mitchell, “Silver Chamber Pots and Other Goods Which Are Not Good: John Chrysostom’s Discourse against Wealth and Possessions,” in *Having: Property and Possession in Religious and Social Life*, ed. William Schweiker and Charles Mathewes (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 106.

⁹¹ Vance Oakley Packard, *The Status Seekers: An Exploration of Class Behavior in America and the Hidden Barriers that Affect You, Your Community, Your Future* (New York: David McKay, 1959), 131-32.

⁹² Hine, 83.

⁹³ Alison Lurie, *The Language of Clothes* (New York: Henry Holt, 2000), 115-16.

⁹⁴ Mason, *The Economics of Conspicuous Consumption*, 72.

⁹⁵ Vance Oakley Packard, *The Waste Makers* (New York: David McKay, 1960), 160.

symbol. Because most people cannot tell the difference between expensive and cheap fabrics or brands, “there was a world crisis in Conspicuous Consumption.” It seemed as if there might be no way to distinguish the very wealthy from the only somewhat wealthy. “This awful possibility was averted by a bold and ingenious move. It was realized that a high-status garment need not be recognizably of better quality or more difficult to produce than other garments; it need only be recognizably more expensive.” All that was required was to display the price of each item. The simple solution was to move the company’s name or logo from a small label inside the garment to a conspicuous place on the outside.⁹⁶ Today status symbols continue to change. Many newly rich entrepreneurs are not comfortable with “the conspicuous adornment of gems and precious metals.” They are more comfortable, evidently, buying large houses and cars. The SUV has become the status symbol of the era—as an unglamorous truck that nonetheless costs a fortune, it is “the status symbol for people who scorn status symbols.”⁹⁷ In purchasing these vehicles, consumers may well believe they are exercising both a freedom that wealth makes possible and a freedom from the constraints of the old society that demanded a particular demonstration of wealth. Indeed, the spread of advertising and status symbols and of consumerism generally has led to a new understanding of freedom—a concept central to this dissertation and to Christian theology.

⁹⁶ Lurie, 132-33. Another way of expressing status is through artistic expression and taste. Alvin Toffler discusses the fact that many people are attracted to art, not because of “any aesthetic longing but rather because of a desire to impress. See *The Culture Consumers: A Study of Art and Affluence in America* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1964), 42. Pierre Bourdieu claims that a person’s quality is measured by “the capacity to appropriate an object of quality.” The objects best able to distinguish are those that are most difficult to appropriate. Their possession requires ability and a great amount of time, like skill at drawing or playing an instrument or appreciating the arts. Artistic endeavors like these require great expenditure of resources, especially time, and do not permit shortcuts. See *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 281.

⁹⁷ Paco Underhill, *The Call of the Mall* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 121.

Consumerism and Freedom

Among the many debates that consumerism has inspired, one of the most significant is that surrounding the issue of consumer freedom. This dissertation will take issue with suggestions that the consumer is radically free among a world of limitless choices, a suggestion promoted by advertisers and supported by many scholarly commentators on consumerism. In the 1990s, a consensus portraying the consumer realm as an area of individual freedom began to emerge in the sociology of culture and cultural studies. It finds meaning in the symbolic value of consumerism and emphasizes the importance “of consumption for the formation, maintenance and expression of self-identity and lifestyle.”⁹⁸ Bauman sees in consumerist identity construction a “liberation from the inertia of traditional ways, from immutable authorities, from preordained routines and unquestionable truths.”⁹⁹ Consumer freedom is not about products, but identity construction and is “the most successful form of freedom ever for most people.”¹⁰⁰ A 1958 *Fortune* magazine article reported that thanks to consumerism, the society had “arrived at a landmark in all the history of human freedoms.”¹⁰¹ Consumer choices are people’s first choices and the most important for realizing ambitions.¹⁰² On a feminist model, shopping is defended as freedom “from the work involved in working

⁹⁸ Lodziak, 1.

⁹⁹ Bauman, *Identity*, 50. Gerald Zaltman observes: “Our current time is unique in that the majority of memes (culturally transmitted ideas) come from our peers and not our ancestors; we live in a ‘post-tradition and custom’ society.” See *How Customers Think: Essential Insights into the Mind of the Market* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2003), 227. Anthony Giddens notes that this loss changes the basis of identity from the stability of social positions in community to the active creation and recreation of identity. See *Runaway World: How Globalization Is Reshaping Our Lives* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 65.

¹⁰⁰ Alan Warde, “Consumers, Identity and Belonging: Reflections on Some Theses of Zygmunt Bauman,” in *The Authority of the Consumer*, ed. Russell Keat, Nigel Whiteley, and Nicholas Abercrombie (London: Routledge, 1994), 63.

¹⁰¹ Stuart Ewen, *All Consuming Images: The Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 69.

¹⁰² Hine, 84-85.

and loving under patriarchy.”¹⁰³ Consumerism is defended as “*the arena in which sovereign individuals express their freedom.*”¹⁰⁴

Consumers are given certain raw materials from the sphere of production, but they are free to use them however they choose.¹⁰⁵ Michel de Certeau says that the “everyday” arts, such as one’s participation in consumer society, do not “‘form’ a new product” or “have their own language. They ‘make do’ (*bricolent*).”¹⁰⁶ Twitchell writes: “The process of consumption, therefore, is creative and even emancipating. In an open market we consume the real and the imaginary meanings, fusing objects, symbols, and images together to end up with John Donne’s ‘little world made cunningly.’” He observes that the church has been surpassed in importance by the market and notes that the latter is “far more equitable and democratic.” Unlike the minister who speaks from on high, “the dominant conversation is now between consumers and their goods, from aisle to aisle.”¹⁰⁷ This analysis seems to ignore the rather obvious fact that big business

¹⁰³ John Fiske, *Reading the Popular* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 42.

¹⁰⁴ Lodziak, 21.

¹⁰⁵ Du Gay, 86.

¹⁰⁶ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 66.

¹⁰⁷ Twitchell, *Lead Us into Temptation*, 47-49. John Kenneth Galbraith remarks that economics students are taught that the consumer is in control and that business are in their service. See *The Culture of Contentment* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992), 133-34. Like Twitchell, John Fiske compares the shopper to the churchgoer, as he discusses the cliché of the shopping mall as cathedral. While churchgoers are powerless sheep forced to go wherever they are led, 90 percent of new products fail in the U.S. He concludes from this evidence: “Shopping is the crisis of consumerism: it is where the art and tricks of the weak can inflict most damage on, and exert most power over, the strategic interests of the powerful” (13-14). William Arens makes a similarly specious argument in relation to the power, or lack thereof, of advertising over consumers (64-65). Michel de Certeau, on the other hand, would take issue with the use of the word “strategic” by Fiske: “By contrast with a strategy . . . , a *tactic* is a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus. No delimitation of an exteriority, then, provides it with the condition necessary for autonomy. The space of a tactic is the space of the other. Thus it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power. It does not have the means to *keep to itself*, at a distance, in a position of withdrawal, foresight, and self-collection” (36-37). Conrad Lodziak points out another problem with the argument presented by Fiske when he says that no single consumer is able to determine the range of goods available. To equate the fact that producers take note of what sells with the claim that consumer freedom determines the range of goods “is to attribute freedom to *an aggregate* of individuals, which of course is a nonsense. Aggregates are abstractions and abstractions do not exercise freedom” (84). Erich Fromm says that the argument that consumers get precisely what they

does speak from on high, and it fails to explain what consumers and their goods have to discuss. It is interesting to note that in Twitchell's understanding consumers and goods seem to be peers—equally powerful, free, intelligent, and eloquent. The fact that the poor are shut out of these “conversations” and from the supposed freedom offered in consumerism is another difficulty with this pro-consumerism position.¹⁰⁸

Many authors have argued that the notion of freedom for sale in consumer society is weak or altogether misguided. Thus Conrad Lodziak speaks of the promotion of “the myth of consumer freedom,” arguing that consumer choice gives merely a semblance of freedom while in fact contributing to the destruction of freedom.¹⁰⁹ People are no longer capable of satisfying their own needs through home production, so people have no choice

want ignores the fact that consumer desires are also manufactured by producers. “In spite of competing brands, the overall effect of advertising is to stimulate the craving for consumption.” The Edsel may have failed, but even the advertising on its behalf was propaganda to buy cars. (178). Guy Debord points out, as opposed to Fiske's simplistic appraisal of the failure of many business ventures, that consumerism transcends these individual failures. Though each commodity fights for its own success, the epic battle of the “spectacle” outlives any of the competitors. In the blind struggle for market supremacy, all commodities realize “something higher: the becoming-world of the commodity, which is also the becoming-commodity of the world. So, by a TRICK OF COMMODITY LOGIC, what is SPECIFIC in the commodity wears itself out in the fight while the commodity-form moves towards its absolute realization.” See *Society of the Spectacle and Other Films* (London: Rebel Press, 1992), 83-84. David Morley and Kevin Robins take a middle ground, suggesting that it is best neither to romanticize consumption and celebrate the consumer “as a kind of semiotic guerrilla,” nor to make consumers out to be purely passive. See *Spaces of Identity: Global Media, Electronic Landscapes and Cultural Boundaries* (London: Routledge, 1995), 127. Vance Oakley Packard observes that paradoxically consumers' fascination with products that seem “to offer them a personal extension of power” has itself become the means of further “exploitation by merchandisers.” See *The Hidden Persuaders* (New York: David McKay, 1957), 79.

¹⁰⁸ Zygmunt Bauman explains that poverty in a culture that associates consuming with freedom is especially crippling. See *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor*, 59. Here there is not just the absence of things, but the “absence of meaning, the exclusion from participating in the essential socializing events of modern life.” See James B. Twitchell, “Two Cheers for Materialism,” in *The Consumer Society Reader*, ed. Juliet B. Schor and Douglas B. Holt (New York: The New Press, 2000), 285. When social belonging is defined through consuming, it becomes increasingly difficult for the majority of people to maintain a positive self-image. See Michèle Lamont and Virág Molnár, “Too Much Economics,” in *Do Americans Shop Too Much?*, ed. Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 75-76. For further discussions of the lack of freedom for the poor in consumer society, see Bauman, *Legislators and Interpreters*, 169 and Douglas Meeks, *God the Economist: The Doctrine of God and Political Economy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 66. Duane Elgin points out that while involuntary poverty leads to feelings of helplessness and passivity, voluntary simplicity causes feelings of empowerment and engagement. See “Voluntary Simplicity and the New Global Challenge,” in *The Consumer Society Reader*, ed. Juliet B. Schor and Douglas B. Holt (New York: The New Press, 2000), 399.

¹⁰⁹ Lodziak, 69.

but to satisfy basic needs through purchases made with income from employment. Employment in turn restricts the range of action for most people, though consumption “is one type of activity that is served by, fits in with, and reinforces these restrictions.”¹¹⁰ Marcuse argues that competition, standardized entertainment, status symbols, and commercialized beauty destroy in consumers the tendency toward or capacity for a freedom without exploitation.¹¹¹ Consumerism is “a concerted and systematic rejection of *human freedom*.”¹¹² When teenagers feel pressured to look like the images they see in the media, they are sold the freedom of self-creation, but this pressure to conform to an impossible ideal is not freedom at all.¹¹³ Economists often take for granted that consumers are motivated by personal tastes, independently of other consumers, and that the economy is capable of accommodating all these individual tastes. This consumer sovereignty is a lie, however, as production is limited almost exclusively to what can be mass-produced.¹¹⁴ Consumer culture is now a “second nature,” and thus is not a controllable environment, but rather one that confronts its human inhabitants.¹¹⁵

Many authors have written about the way consumers are controlled whether it be the nonconsensual formation of consumer culture,¹¹⁶ the manipulation of public tastes and feelings by government and industry,¹¹⁷ or the material manipulation of people to adopt the model of the “good life” advocated by consumerism by closing off all practical

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 3-4.

¹¹¹ Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, 17.

¹¹² Kavanaugh, 57.

¹¹³ Quart, 142.

¹¹⁴ Tibor Scitovsky, *The Joyless Economy: The Psychology of Human Satisfaction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 7.

¹¹⁵ Lasch, *The Minimal Self*, 195-96.

¹¹⁶ Leach, xv.

¹¹⁷ Fromm, 2.

alternatives.¹¹⁸ In 1904, Georg Simmel suggested that repugnant things were sometimes promoted as stylish so that fashion could demonstrate “its power by getting us to adopt the most atrocious things for its sake alone.”¹¹⁹ In the 1920s, Edward Bernays described how consumers who imagine themselves free agents, are in fact “ruled by dictators,” and he gives the examples of a man who believes he is buying a suit according to personal tastes, but is in fact “obeying the orders of an anonymous gentleman tailor in London” and of a man who buys a new car, not because of its technical superiority, but “because a friend whose financial acumen he respects bought one last week.”¹²⁰ A 1925 essay on the psychology of ad copy went so far as to call into question the power of the human will before advertising. It suggested that the assumption that people have the power to say “Yes” or “No” to an advertisement is only partly right, for “if the printed word can seize his attention, hold him chained, drive from his mind all other thoughts except the one ‘Buy this!’, standing at the head of an organized sentiment from which every opposing idea, perception, feeling, instinct and disposition have been driven out or smothered to death, then HE CANNOT SAY ‘NO!’ His will is dead.”¹²¹ This enslavement of the will is how Augustine views sin (as will be discussed in Chapter 5) and is clearly antithetical to true Christian freedom.

¹¹⁸ Lodziak, 134-355.

¹¹⁹ Georg Simmel, “Fashion,” *The American Journal of Sociology* 6 (May 1901): 544.

¹²⁰ Edward L. Bernays, *Propaganda* (New York: Horace Liveright, 1928), 35, 51.

¹²¹ Arthur Holmes, “The Psychology of the Printed Word” in *Masters of Advertising Copy, Principles and Practice of Copy Writing According to Its Leading Practitioners*, ed. J. George Frederick (New York: Frank-Maurice, 1925), 343-44. G. K. Chesterton seems to agree with Holmes’ assessment: “Mobs have risen in support of No Popery; no mobs are likely to rise in defence of the New Puffery. Many a poor, crazy Orangeman has died saying, ‘To Hell with the Pope’; it is doubtful whether any man will ever, with his last breath, frame the ecstatic words, ‘Try Hugby’s Chewing Gum.’ These modern and mercantile legends are imposed upon us by a mercantile minority, and we are merely passive to the suggestion. The hypnotist of high finance or big business merely writes his commands in heaven with a finger of fire.” See *Collected Works*, vol. 21, *What I Saw in America* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 70.

In consumer society today people are brainwashed from an early age. Jean Kilbourne quotes the president of Kids ‘R’ Us: “If you own this child at an early age, you can own this child for years to come.”¹²² Kalle Lasn claims that the myriad choices faced by consumers are not really products of their free wills. These people are rather like Manchurian Candidates who have only a vague sense that ideas were implanted into their subconscious. They do not feel like they are in a cult, but they do speak a consumer language and wear a consumer’s uniform dictated by fashions. Consumers are free on some level to resist the mental slavery to which they are subjected, but they never consider doing so. They live in a world thoroughly saturated with media messages, in which communication flows in only one direction. They become mere spectators happy to watch whatever they are given to watch.¹²³ The idea that individuals can choose independently of determining influences is promoted in order to keep people atomized and therefore more susceptible to advertising that elicits emotions leading to the desired consumption patterns.¹²⁴ Individuals are now tied to society primarily through their activity as consumers. They need not be repressed or policed. Restrictions on what is allowed or acceptable are not necessary because the endless proliferation of needs ensures manageable and predictable behavior.¹²⁵

More central to the argument of this chapter than the question of consumer

¹²² Kilbourne, 44.

¹²³ Kalle Lasn, *Culture Jam: The Uncooling of America* (New York: Eagle Brook, 1999), 40-41, 53, 104.

¹²⁴ Richard Horsley, “Epilogue,” in *Christmas Unwrapped: Consumerism, Christ, and Culture*, ed. Richard Horsley and James Tracy (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001), 220. Judith Williamson, however, does helpfully remind: “Ownership is at present the *only* form of control legitimized in our culture.” See *Consuming Passions: The Dynamics of Popular Culture* (London: Marion Boyars, 1991), 231. Thomas Frank describes the viewpoint of New Economy economists, which goes much further than Williamson: “Markets are where we are most fully human; markets are where we show that we have a soul. To protest *against* markets is to surrender one’s very personhood, to put oneself outside the family of mankind.” See *One Market under God: Extreme Capitalism, Market Populism, and the End of Economic Democracy* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), xiii.

¹²⁵ Bauman, *Legislators and Interpreters*, 168.

manipulation is the question of how freedom is defined. This dissertation takes issue not only with consumerism's assertion that it promotes freedom but also and more fundamentally with its understanding of freedom. Christian freedom involves the understanding and capacity to live out one's own best life—paradoxically, by submitting to God's will for one's life. In consumer society freedom is individual choice.¹²⁶ When Khrushchev and Nixon looked at kitchen appliances in an American trade exhibition in Moscow, Nixon suggested that America was superior not so much for having better products but greater choice of products. The Cold War evidently was a struggle to retain the American consumer's choices. Freedom did not mean political freedom or freedom from want but the freedom of consumer choice.¹²⁷ Choosing has itself become a value and consumerism's "metavalue."¹²⁸ Important life decisions like marriage partners, careers, and even religion are seen as matters of choice.¹²⁹ Baudrillard describes the precarious freedoms created through product differentiation and the "freedom" to select randomly objects meant to distinguish individuals.¹³⁰ He writes: "[T]he consumer is sovereign in a jungle of ugliness where *the freedom of choice is imposed on him.*"¹³¹

While consumerism provides limitless products from which to choose, consumerism itself is not subject to choice. Dependency on the market is ensured when all people are consumers who must turn to market logic simply in order to carry on with the business of daily life. Consumers can "refuse their allegiance to any one of the

¹²⁶ Bartholomew, "Christ and Consumerism," 8.

¹²⁷ Cushman, *Constructing the Self, Constructing America*, 222.

¹²⁸ Bauman, *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor*, 58. D. Stephen Long writes of the way capitalist society defines morality in terms of value preference. See *Divine Economy: Theology and the Market* (London: Routledge, 2000), 224.

¹²⁹ Schudson, *Advertising, the Uneasy Persuasion*, 155.

¹³⁰ Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988) 11.

¹³¹ Jean Baudrillard, "Consuming Society," in *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader*, ed. Lawrence B. Glickman (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 42.

infinite choices on display—except the choice of choosing between them, that is. The roads to self-identity, to a place in society, to life lived in a form recognizable as that of meaningful living, all require daily visits to the market place.”¹³² Individual consumption is, therefore, obligatory; increases in the number and variety of goods do not yield increased freedom, but merely “the *pluralisation of inconsequential choice*,” which in fact forces consumers to spend more time sifting through all the nearly identical goods for sale, and thereby ultimately negates freedom. The fact that “making choices has become a *requirement* ought to be reason enough not to equate freedom of choice with freedom.”¹³³ Rodney Clapp suggests that because freedom is understood as choice, people fail to question whether their choices have any real significance.¹³⁴ He says that both the ancient Christian tradition and Pope John Paul II argue that a “negative freedom, a merely formal freedom of choice,” cannot be equated with the highest good, but, Clapp claims, consumerism “posits just such freedom of choice as its highest good.”¹³⁵

Consumer society does not define choice as the freedom to choose one action over another but to choose all simultaneously. The goal is not commitment but keeping all options available. Consumers believe they can choose and discard identities like changes of clothes. All choices—of friends, lovers, careers, etc. must remain subject to overturning at every moment. But if choices involve no commitments and carry no consequences, then free choice is really no choice at all. Unless a choice carries the weight of actually mattering and of affecting one’s future, it cannot promote real

¹³² Zygmunt Bauman, “Is There a Postmodern Sociology?” *Theory, Culture & Society* 5 (1988): 221-22; Bauman, *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor*, 26.

¹³³ Lodziak, 91, 81-82.

¹³⁴ Clapp, *Border Crossings*, 145.

¹³⁵ Clapp, “Introduction: Consumption & the Modern Ethos,” 13.

freedom. It is merely a choice between interchangeable lovers, jobs, or brands.¹³⁶ While freedom is thought higher than other goods, more choices do not lead to greater well-being.¹³⁷ Raymond Williams says that it is “monstrous that human advances in psychology, sociology and communication should be used or thought of as powerful techniques *against* people, just as it is rotten to try to reduce the faculty of human choice to ‘sales resistance.’”¹³⁸ Here Williams is at odds with those who point to failed products to prove consumer sovereignty and freedom. In fact, the belief that consumers are free when in fact their choices have been constructed for them “is a dangerous illusion of freedom.”¹³⁹ Consumerism has the effect not only of destroying freedom, but also of blinding people to this loss. The Church, Chapter 8 will argue, should present a different understanding of freedom and restore people’s sight so they can see the freedom they have lost. Without real freedom, identity too is an illusion, and consumers cannot truly choose themselves.

Consumerism and Identity

In consumer society, people attempt to construct their identities out of their purchases. Marx speaks of the autonomy of manufactured products as commodity fetishism. These human products take on a life of their own, seemingly independent of their makers.¹⁴⁰ Workers are, therefore, related to the products of their labor as to alien objects. Workers spend themselves on these objects, thereby bestowing their lives,

¹³⁶ Lasch, *The Minimal Self*, 38.

¹³⁷ Robert E. Lane, *The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 269.

¹³⁸ Raymond Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture: Selected Essays* (London: NLB, 1980), 190.

¹³⁹ Tomlinson, 13.

¹⁴⁰ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Classics, 1990), 165.

energy, and creativity on an alien world of objects over against themselves.¹⁴¹ While I agree with Marx's contention that the worker is alienated, I believe that common ownership of the means of production, while perhaps greatly increasing equality, rights, and justice, would in regard to alienation merely change its source. Seeking to construct one's identity out of one's work is, from the Christian standpoint, equally as invalid as constructing it from products consumed. Still, the shift from work to consumption "as the basis of individual identities"¹⁴² is an important one in the development of consumer culture. Consumer society philosophy is one in which people acquire identities through consumption rather than production, and in which status replaces class division.¹⁴³ Work has become of secondary concern; it provides the money to be used in purchasing goods that are "required to construct and maintain identity."¹⁴⁴

Thus, a new epoch is established in which self-identity is sought through consumption. Consumer society is defined, not simply by high levels of consumption, but by maintaining that consumption is the primary means for people to become and display who they are.¹⁴⁵ People find their place in society and their means of integration through consuming.¹⁴⁶ Consumption shapes people's sense of who they are and who they

¹⁴¹ Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. Martin Milligan (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1988), 71-72.

¹⁴² Lodziak, 23.

¹⁴³ John Scott, *Stratification and Power: Structures of Class, Status and Command* (Cambridge UK: Polity Press, 1996), 236.

¹⁴⁴ Bocock, 105.

¹⁴⁵ Russell Keat, Nigel Whiteley, and Nicholas Abercrombie, introduction to *The Authority of the Consumer*, ed. Russell Keat, Nigel Whiteley, and Nicholas Abercrombie (London: Routledge, 1994), 5; Iggers, 98; Daniel Miller, "Consumption and Its Consequences," in *Consumption and Everyday Life*, ed. Hugh Mackay (London: SAGE Publications, 1997), 19; Lodziak, 48. Carol Moog writes: "Advertising sells exciting new definitions of who we are, and all people need to do to buy an identity is to buy the product. The language speaks for itself." See *"Are They Selling Her Lips?": Advertising and Identity* (New York: William Morrow, 1990), 89.

¹⁴⁶ Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland*, 79.

want to be.¹⁴⁷ It is not about buying goods, so much as the fundamental means of identity creation.¹⁴⁸ Shopping defines people through their relationships to things and to the meanings that society attaches to them. By trying on things or window-shopping, they are trying on identities or wandering from one potential self to another.¹⁴⁹ Thus, the humorously intended phrase, “I shop, therefore I am,” is not without its serious meaning, or Erich Fromm suggests the formula, “*I am = what I have and what I consume.*”¹⁵⁰ In particular, luxury goods become a source of identity. Consumers belong to their luxury brands and make the brands part of themselves. “The passionate way consumers interact with their favorite brands is almost spiritual in nature. It goes beyond logic and reason to the depths of one’s personal identity.”¹⁵¹ Herbert Marcuse claims that people recognize “themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment.”¹⁵²

Consuming and wearing products as signs of personal identity has now been common practice for nearly a century. Consumers create and express identities by selecting and assembling stylized goods with symbolic meanings.¹⁵³ Identity is composed of investments in “relationship economies.” A consumer may make

¹⁴⁷ Bocock, x.

¹⁴⁸ Daniel Miller, “Consumption and Its Consequences,” in *Consumption and Everyday Life*, ed. Hugh Mackay (London: SAGE Publications, 1997), 19.

¹⁴⁹ Hine, ix; Fiske, 38.

¹⁵⁰ Schor, *The Overspent American*, 57; Fromm, 27. See also Judith Williamson, *Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising* (London: Marion Boyars, 1978), 179.

¹⁵¹ Pamela N. Danziger, *Why People Buy Things They Don’t Need* (Ithaca: Paramount Market Publishing, 2002), 54.

¹⁵² Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 9.

¹⁵³ Robert Goldman and Stephen Papson, “Advertising in the Age of Accelerated Meaning,” in *The Consumer Society Reader*, ed. Juliet B. Schor and Douglas B. Holt (New York: The New Press, 2000), 91; Ewen, *All Consuming Images*, 79. A marketing book that analyzes consumers using McGuire’s psychological motives finds the outlet for the need for self-expression in purchasing products. See Del I. Hawkins, Roger J. Best, and Kenneth A. Coney, *Consumer Behavior: Implications for Marketing Strategy* (Chicago: Irwin, 1995), 303.

conservative investments (buying the most popular items) or risky, but potentially high-yielding investments (buying a less well-known product).¹⁵⁴ Twitchell says that King Lear is well aware “that possessions are definitions—superficial meanings, perhaps, but meanings nonetheless. And unlike Veblen, he knows those meanings are worth having. Without soldiers he is no king. Without a BMW there can be no yuppie, without tattoos no adolescent rebel.”¹⁵⁵ This process of identity development through consumption begins at an early age. Two writers on marketing encourage businesses to make their brands part of the process by which children begin to develop a sense of identity.¹⁵⁶ By the teenage years, children make strong and explicit connections between identity and what they wear.¹⁵⁷ They use possessions to define themselves, saying for example, “I am Sony, not Panasonic.” They confuse brands with personal identity.¹⁵⁸

Identity in consumer culture becomes a self-project, in which each person is free to create an identity. Peter Sedgwick argues that this understanding stems from Kant for whom identity becomes a matter of moral choice, of rational decision-making.¹⁵⁹ Individuals feel a sense of autonomy closely linked to the consumer ethos in which they feel responsible, as those in traditional societies did not, for choosing goods, friends, partners, ultimate meanings, and personal identity.¹⁶⁰ Identity is no longer given through membership to class, ethnicity, or gender, nor is it bestowed by family or God. It has to

¹⁵⁴ John Seabrook, *Nobrow: The Culture of Marketing, the Marketing of Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), 170-71.

¹⁵⁵ Twitchell, “Two Cheers for Materialism,” 286.

¹⁵⁶ Selina S. Guber and Jon Berry, *Marketing to and through Kids* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993), 22.

¹⁵⁷ Daniel Miller, Peter Jackson, Nigel Thrift, Beverley Holbrook, and Michael Rowlands, *Shopping, Place, and Identity* (London: Routledge, 1998), 103.

¹⁵⁸ Quart, 43, 45.

¹⁵⁹ Peter H. Sedgwick, *The Market Economy and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 15.

¹⁶⁰ Thomas Luckmann, “The Invisible Religion,” in *Secularization and the Protestant Prospect*, ed. James F. Childress and David Baily Harned (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970), 74-75.

be constructed, and it is formed through consumption.¹⁶¹ Consumer society insists that people form their own unique identities, and seems to make this possible through the endless multiplication of consumer goods and consumer choices.¹⁶² Popular culture helps people develop identities by offering examples and ideas.¹⁶³ Self-actualization has become the god of consumerism, and it is achieved by “assembling a unique collection of commodities.”¹⁶⁴

Consumerism enables people to develop their own identities by giving them not only products as tools for identity construction, but also prepackaged models with whom they can identify. Through consumption, people are able to think of themselves as like “those symbolically constructed beings in advertising” and imagine themselves living the “mythical lives” of the models.¹⁶⁵ Baudrillard suggests that personal differences no longer serve to divide individuals. Instead, such differences are arrayed hierarchically and “converge in *models*, on the basis of which they are subtly produced and reproduced.” Thus, “to differentiate oneself is precisely to affiliate to a model, to label oneself by reference to an abstract model, to a combinatorial pattern of fashion, and therefore to relinquish any real difference, any *singularity*, since these can only arise in

¹⁶¹ Bocock, 67; Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland*, 69.

¹⁶² Jeffrey Kottler, Marilyn Montgomery, and David Shepard, “Acquisitive Desire: Assessment and Treatment,” in *Psychology and Consumer Culture: The Struggle for a Good Life in a Materialistic World*, ed. Tim Kasser and Allen D. Kanner (Washington: American Psychological Association, 2004), 155; Ulrich Beck, “Living Your Own Life in a Runaway World: Individualisation, Globalisation and Politics,” in *On the Edge: Living with Global Capitalism*, ed. Anthony Giddens and Will Hutton (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000), 165.

¹⁶³ Lodziak, 24; Herbert J. Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 57-58.

¹⁶⁴ William Leiss, *The Limits to Satisfaction: An Essay on the Problem of Needs and Commodities* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976), 57.

¹⁶⁵ William Waller and Linda Robertson, “The Politics of Consumption and Desire,” in *Thorstein Veblen in the Twenty-First Century: A Commemoration of the Theory of the Leisure Class, (1899-1999)*, ed. Doug Brown (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 1998), 46.

concrete, conflictual relations with others and the world.”¹⁶⁶ Consumers are left to choose among trivially distinct models, just as they must choose among countless products that are more or less identical. Advertisers cash in on this obsession with self-constituted identity.¹⁶⁷ They sell consumers the belief that they can substitute one identity for another.¹⁶⁸ The self has thereby been diminished as identity has become “commodified by industries in the business of producing adjuncts to the self.”¹⁶⁹

Just as consumers are able to borrow identities from models, so too do they borrow solidity from their consumer objects. If a consumer feels insecure she need only take stock of her possessions to assure herself that a “substantial being has been constructed.”¹⁷⁰ People consume in an ongoing effort to be surer of themselves.¹⁷¹ But as people become more addicted to the constant stimulation of consumption, inner identity is weakened.¹⁷² Baudrillard calls the continual need to prove one’s existence to oneself, a “strange sign of weakness.”¹⁷³ This infantile helplessness makes the perfect consumer. “If he is entirely ‘free to choose,’ to buy anything, satisfy any longing . . . if he is, in other words, that wandering and insatiable maw which commercials constantly image forth as the ideal human being—then he must finally become a mere pulsating node, something to be hooked up to sustaining appliances, like the comatose or cryogenically preserved, those fetal entities that might as well be dead.”¹⁷⁴

¹⁶⁶ Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society*, 88-89.

¹⁶⁷ Lodziak, 64.

¹⁶⁸ Cushman, *Constructing the Self, Constructing America*, 81.

¹⁶⁹ Joanne Finkelstein, *The Fashioned Self* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 171.

¹⁷⁰ Roger Rosenblatt, introduction to *Consuming Desires: Consumption, Culture, and the Pursuit of Happiness*, ed. Roger Rosenblatt (Washington: Island Press, 1999), 18.

¹⁷¹ Hine, 103.

¹⁷² Sedgwick, 149.

¹⁷³ Jean Baudrillard, *America*, trans. Christ Turner (London: Verso, 1988), 21.

¹⁷⁴ Mark Crispin Miller, *Boxed In: The Culture of TV* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 38.

Consumer products also serve to create identity in the sense of group belonging. Products have become totems, and consumption serves to integrate individuals into a “consumption tribe.”¹⁷⁵ Clothes serve to unite and divide people, marking individuals as members of one group, but not another, conferring one kind of identity, but not another.¹⁷⁶ Instead of sex, race, nationality, age, or wealth, the “cluster” now “defines and separates Americans.” The cluster, a tool for organizing people into consumer groups, reflects “the diverse patterns of how Americans live, what they buy, and where they share the same lifestyle with others around the country.”¹⁷⁷

Consumerism largely determines not only people’s personal sense of self, but also their identity within the community—how they are seen by others (which of course shapes and is shaped by their sense of self, but which need not be identical to it). Thorstein Veblen first explored the significance of consumption as a means of establishing social standing more than a century ago. He wrote then: “The basis on which good repute in any highly organized industrial community ultimately rests is pecuniary strength; and the means of showing pecuniary strength, and so of gaining or retaining a good name, are leisure and a conspicuous consumption of goods.” Leisure and conspicuous consumption are both reputable because they are both wasteful (of time and effort and of goods respectively). As communication and transportation technology improved, individuals came into contact with many more people, and these strangers had no way of judging the individual’s reputability except by the goods the individual displays: “In order to impress these transient observers, and to retain one’s self-

¹⁷⁵ Leiss, Kline, and Jhally, 281-82.

¹⁷⁶ William J. F. Keenan, “Introduction: *Sartor Resartus* Restored: Dress Studies in Carlylean Perspective,” in *Dressed to Impress: Looking the Part*, ed. William J. F. Keenan (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 32.

¹⁷⁷ Michael J. Weiss, *The Clustered World: How We Live, What We Buy, and What It All Means About Who We Are* (Boston: Little Brown, 2000), 178.

complacency under their observation, the signature of one's pecuniary strength should be written in characters which he who runs may read."¹⁷⁸ Property is the most recognizable evidence of success and so its possession becomes necessary in order to gain any standing in the community. To be esteemed, one must not only possess wealth, but also display it.¹⁷⁹

Veblen suggests that for most people, regard for one's reputation means emulation. It involves striving to be considered better than one's neighbor. While integrity and personal worth are not completely irrelevant, they are not observable in the wide social environment of modern society. In order to gain respectability, therefore, displays of economic worth are necessary.¹⁸⁰ Material wealth serves as a proxy of success. In contemporary society, one's neighbors cannot judge one's skill as a doctor or lawyer directly, but can judge one's skill indirectly through the belongings one displays.¹⁸¹ Consumer goods are given a secondary utility by providing their owners with "evidence of relative ability to pay." The honorific character of consumption and of certain goods comes from this secondary use. Luxury consumption is meritorious, and goods that cost well in excess of their practical usefulness are themselves honorific.¹⁸² Indeed, it is because of the desire to show one's ability to pay excess costs that manufacturers began producing brand name goods.¹⁸³ American consumer culture

¹⁷⁸ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (New York: Modern Library, 1934), 84-87.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 28-29, 36-37.

¹⁸⁰ Veblen, *Veblen on Marx, Race, Science and Economics*, 392-93.

¹⁸¹ Barry Schwartz, *The Costs of Living: How Market Freedom Erodes the Best Things in Life* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994), 164.

¹⁸² Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, 154-55.

¹⁸³ Schudson, *Advertising, the Uneasy Persuasion*, 157. At times brands can serve as shortcuts to fitting into a group. That is, one need not relate to members of a given group through consuming what they consume. One may simply relate oneself directly to the brand identity, which has been constructed by the manufacturer. See Seabrook, 162-63.

promises consumers: “You will be seen. You will be noticed. The symbols you display, your most valuable possessions, will permit you to stand apart from the crowd. You will be noteworthy and honored. You will be someone. You will have ‘joined the select group.’”¹⁸⁴

Rising up the social ladder has become an obsolete metaphor; instead one now simply adopts a specific lifestyle that “marks one as a member of a consumption community.”¹⁸⁵ Indeed, because people identify themselves with their consumption, they assume that workers with certain goods are not part of the working class. They believe that anyone can rise or fall in society through the ability to buy, thus obscuring the continuing reality of class division.¹⁸⁶ However, because workers are reminded daily as they enter the factory that they are not, according to occupation, part of the upper middle class, they feel greater pressure to show their status through consumption. Thus, they become more susceptible to advertising and are more faithful to the consumer ethos.

¹⁸⁴ Ewen, *All Consuming Images*, 58. See also Jean-Pierre Terrail, “Commodity Fetishism and the Ideal of Needs,” in *Capitalism, Consumption and Needs*, trans. Maurice Décaillot (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), 21.

¹⁸⁵ Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 68. Douglas B. Holt warns, however, that as manufacturers grow more concerned with the appearances of popular goods, and as versions of elite goods become available to a wider public through mass production, it becomes increasingly difficult to demonstrate unique goods as evidence of one’s success. Highly cultured consumers are thus forced to “produce individual subjectivity through authenticity and connoisseurship,” and this elite consumption is less conspicuous than that described by Veblen. See “Does Cultural Capital Structure American Consumption?” in *The Consumer Society Reader*, ed. Juliet B. Schor and Douglas B. Holt (New York: The New Press, 2000), 220, 238. Likewise, Baudrillard argues that the pursuit of status is based on signs and thus is ultimately based, not on “goods as such, but on *differences*. Only in this way can we understand the paradox of ‘underconsumption’ or ‘inconspicuous consumption’, i.e. the paradox of prestigious super-differentiation, which is no longer displayed in *ostentation* (Veblen’s ‘conspicuous consumption’), but in discretion, sobriety and self-effacement.” See *The Consumer Society*, 193. On the other hand, there may be a kind of waste in the society as the requirements to meet a certain group’s criteria increase to stay ahead of changes in production and consumption that make membership on the old standard too easy. Robert H. Frank and Philip J. Cook discuss people who want to be part of the avant-garde. While in the 1950s they might have simply pierced their ears, as more people did so this ceased to convey edginess. While what is required to be part of the avant-garde continues to escalate, there is no increase in the value of the desired status, and thus “the current situation is basically wasteful compared to the earlier one, which required fewer steps. In this sense, the erosion of social norms against tattoos and body piercings has given rise to a social loss.” See *The Winner-Take-All Society* (New York: Free Press, 1995).

¹⁸⁶ Williamson, *Decoding Advertisements*, 13.

Blue-collar families “clung fiercely to the paradigm of family relations projected by the mass media in the 1950s and looked warily on the cultural convulsions of the 1960s. The counterculture’s rejection of materialism was an insult to families who had only recently escaped the clutches of poverty.”¹⁸⁷ The American Dream claims that the privileged existence of celebrities is open to everyone who desires it. “Those who do not believe in the dream, do not deserve it. Those who do believe, but have not yet achieved it, must try harder.”¹⁸⁸ Alex Kotlowitz describes the trading of fashions between rich, white suburbanites and poor, black intercity children. He says that the rich, white suburbanites wearing urban styles think they are hip and understand living on the edge. The poor, intercity blacks, on the other hand, think they have in their preppy styles the key to becoming full citizens of this prosperous country. Instead of building real connections, they have settled for “common ground as purchasers of each other’s trademarks.”¹⁸⁹ Recently, children have shown an increasing willingness to pay more in order to “fit in.”¹⁹⁰ Display of goods yields respect because it is widely accepted that wealth results from merit. Those who have much deserve what they have; their wealth is a result of their personal virtue, intelligence, and hard work.¹⁹¹

According to Veblen, just as people with expensive things are thought good and successful, so too are these expensive things thought good and beautiful. He writes: “The marks of expensiveness come to be accepted as beautiful features of the expensive

¹⁸⁷ Andrew Hurley, *Diners, Bowling Alleys and Trailer Parks: Chasing the American Dream in the Postwar Consumer Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 288, 303.

¹⁸⁸ Ewen, *All Consuming Images*, 58-59.

¹⁸⁹ Alex Kotlowitz, “False Connections,” in *The Consumer Society Reader*, ed. Juliet B. Schor and Douglas B. Holt (New York: The New Press, 2000), 255, 258.

¹⁹⁰ Naomi Klein, *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* (New York: Picador USA, 1999), 68.

¹⁹¹ Galbraith, *The Culture of Contentment*, 18-19.

articles.”¹⁹² People thus come to demand some wasteful expensiveness in all consumer products, even those consumed in privacy that do not have the honorific qualities associated with items that are displayed. Candles were less popular when they were the cheapest form of domestic lighting, but as the price of electric, oil, and gas light dropped relative to that of candles, the light given by candles came to be seen as more soothing and softer than these others. Similarly, as machine-made goods became more widespread and cheaper, hand-wrought goods became more sought after, and their superiority was, in fact, found in “a certain margin of crudeness.”¹⁹³ The perfection of the machine-made goods thus came to be seen as less beautiful than the roughness of the handmade. Veblen finds in shifting fashions further evidence of this strange aesthetics. What is thought beautiful today will be thought grotesque a few years later. Indeed, Veblen argues, attachment to the latest fashion lasts only until people’s “abiding aesthetic sense has had time to assert itself and reject this latest indigestible contrivance.”¹⁹⁴ Changes occur not only in the perception of what clothes are beautiful, but also in the perception of which bodies are thought beautiful beneath those clothes. When conspicuous leisure is considered honorific, the ideal body includes delicate and diminutive limbs and a thin

¹⁹² Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, 130.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 155-59. Colin Campbell claims that Veblen’s model “does not account for the dynamism that is so typical of modern consumption.” He argues that fashion “involves an aesthetic ideal, and those who dedicate themselves to keeping up with fashion—or even more interestingly, perhaps, to ‘taking the lead in fashion’—can be said quite justifiably, to be striving to bring their lives into line with the ideal of beauty.” See “Consuming Goods and the Good of Consuming,” in *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader*, ed. Lawrence B. Glickman (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 21, 29. But if there is some aesthetic ideal to which fashion is aiming, I wonder how Campbell accounts for the cycles in fashion. Veblen, on the other hand, argues that far from seeking an aesthetic ideal, fashion and conspicuous consumption more generally at times endorse purposeful flaws for the sake of distinction.

¹⁹⁴ Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, 178. Thomas Hine argues that fashion is not pure conspiracy against shoppers to make them buy more, but is “a measure and expression of the eventfulness of life.” Though people may be embarrassed by fashions once worn that now seem ugly, these artifacts also serve to prove that their owners experienced the times and allow them to feel a part of history (94). This is surely rather a paltry sense of being a part of history, however, as it seems a poor consolation for those who have no real meaning in their lives. It seems safe to speculate that Socrates, St. Peter, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr. did not feel themselves a part of history based upon the changing fashions they consumed.

waist. These features reveal an incapacity for useful work, and thus show that their owner is “supported in idleness by her owner. She is useless and expensive, and she is consequently valuable as evidence of pecuniary strength.” Women thus try to conform to these requirements, and men, seeking to adapt to the rules for exhibiting financial strength, learn to “find the resulting artificially induced pathological features attractive.”¹⁹⁵ The fashionable body size also seems to change with real or imagined scarcity of food. If much of the population is going hungry, it becomes “chic to be well-padded and to dine lavishly.” If, on the other hand, there is plenty of “starchy food to go around, it becomes chic to be thin, thus demonstrating that one is existing on an expensive protein diet rather than on proletarian bread, potatoes, franks and beans.”¹⁹⁶

The consumerist ethos thus must radically change the very meaning of the word identity or do away with it altogether for remaining in any sense the same becomes something to be avoided at all cost. Fashions become obsolete overnight, and so it is “better to keep each current identity temporary, to embrace it lightly, to make sure that it will fall away once the arms are open to embrace its new, brighter, or just untested replacement.” It may then be more appropriate to use the plural when speaking of self-identity for most individual histories will be littered with numerous discarded identities. The challenge becomes not gaining a sense of continuity or identity across time but on the contrary how to prevent each successive identity from becoming hardened in place. In this way of thinking, the term “identity” seems to have lost its usefulness,¹⁹⁷ or the term has undergone a near reversal in meaning so that strong identity entails the ability to

¹⁹⁵ Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, 148-49.

¹⁹⁶ Lurie, 120.

¹⁹⁷ Bauman, *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor*, 28.

recast one's life-story at any moment, while clinging to a rigid self-image is an indication of a weak identity.¹⁹⁸

This consumer understanding of identity is highly problematic, as many authors attest. By replacing self-identity with self-image, consumerism trivializes the very concept of self-identity.¹⁹⁹ Consumers may feel reassured if they do all that is required of them; they can trust that by appearing as they are supposed to, they have also constructed an appropriate social identity, but this self-made identity is constructed out of the received symbols of the society. Yet consumers experience their assembled identities as unique because the “ideas have been idiosyncratically arranged by circumstances. Such a self can be said to be accidental.”²⁰⁰ The demands placed on people by the images and roles of consumer society result in a self that is fabricated and will collapse under the many desires fostered but left unsatisfied by consumerism.²⁰¹ As people's needs are divided into ever-smaller parts, they become increasingly difficult to integrate into a unified assemblage of needs and a unified personality. “This fragmentation of needs is just another name for the fragmentation of personality.”²⁰²

One problem with seeking identity through consumption is that the products themselves are finite and fleeting, and thus if a person's identity is dependent on these things, it will be lost when they no longer exist or no longer serve their identifying function.²⁰³ Because the personalities of consumers are largely products of the material culture, they “are doomed to constant change.” Consumers try on different identities

¹⁹⁸ Richard Sennett, “Street and Office: Two Sources of Identity,” in *On the Edge: Living with Global Capitalism*, ed. Anthony Giddens and Will Hutton (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000), 177.

¹⁹⁹ Lodziak, 66.

²⁰⁰ Finkelstein, 9.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 191.

²⁰² Leiss, 18.

²⁰³ Gay, 37.

according to whims. “The problem is that identity suggests some kind of coherence, and a constantly changing identity is a contradiction in terms.”²⁰⁴ Here is the root problem with the notion of identity propagated by consumerism: if one can so easily construct one’s own identity, it is equally possible to reconstruct it or to construct several diverse identities. “How then do people maintain a sense of stability, of continuity across time and place? How do people negotiate their place in the reproduction of existing forms of social relationship if everything is transitory and open to reconstruction. . . . [T]he individual has too much opportunity, more than they can handle: the individual has greater freedom of choice through involvement in consumer culture but is also more vulnerable.”²⁰⁵ Choice is maximized so that one is free constantly to create and recreate oneself, but this world of endless possibility is actually one that destroys freedom and identity. While the victims of oppression may feel their identities crushed under the weight of labels and roles imposed upon them, the sovereign consumers may experience their identities as unmoored and weightless, floating aimlessly in all directions, no longer even tethered to the earth or themselves.

Conclusion

Several commentators on consumerism have warned against too quickly or glibly dismissing the evils of consumer culture. Peter Sedgwick cautions: “Theologians who seek to understand this culture of the late twentieth century (and very few have in any depth) must pause before condemning it as a degenerate preoccupation with unbridled capitalism and personal expenditure. Consumerism is the expression of a particular

²⁰⁴ Berger, *Ads, Fads, and Consumer Culture*, 51.

²⁰⁵ Peter K. Lunt and Sonia M. Livingstone, *Mass Consumption and Personal Identity: Everyday Economic Experience* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1992), 170.

search for the self.” The search for identity in consumerism must be met by a Christian anthropology that does not simply condemn the search out of hand.²⁰⁶ This dissertation certainly seeks to take that search seriously, but it will conclude that the idea that the individual can choose or construct her own identity is ultimately flawed. Another objection against would-be critics is their “inescapably patriarchal background,” born out of “a phobia of feminization and an infatuation with puritanical asceticism.”²⁰⁷ Peter Stearns observes that it is difficult to attack something “that almost everyone seems to enjoy,” and notes that “critics of consumerism can easily sound like elitist grumps.”²⁰⁸ This dissertation, however, does not offer an ascetic critique, indeed acknowledging that such a response in certain ways duplicates the problem—that is, it attempts to manufacture an identity out of one’s relation to consumer products (even if it is a rejection of them as tacky). Nor does the dissertation criticize consumerism on the grounds of the poor taste shown in many products but rather in the attempt to find one’s identity in any of them.

Other commentators have noted the relation between consumerism and religion and the particular issues this relation raises for theology. In his theological exploration of consumerism, Vincent Miller says that he does “not propose the retrieval of some overlooked element of the tradition that will address the problems of consumerism by healing desire or restoring a proper sense of relationship with others.” He avoids such a retrieval because he believes that consumer society “is best diagnosed not as a deformation of belief but as a particular way of engaging religious beliefs that divorces

²⁰⁶ Sedgwick, 88-89.

²⁰⁷ Craig J. Thompson, “A New Puritanism?” in *Do Americans Shop Too Much?*, ed. Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 72.

²⁰⁸ Stearns, 61.

them from practice.” Thus any retrieval, no matter how brilliant or timely will have to address the problem of how these ideas are received.²⁰⁹ While this dissertation will to some extent attempt such a retrieval, it does so with Miller’s warning well in mind. Indeed, it will argue that in Augustine, Kierkegaard, and Girard, Christian critics of consumerism have, not just resources that can be stretched in certain ways so that they seem to address consumer desire, but rather three thinkers who are concerned precisely with Christianity as a certain kind of reception of ideas. That is, this dissertation is focused, not on isolating particular ideas in the works of these authors, but with the way all three treat Christianity, not as a body of religious insights, but as a demand that all insights be received in a certain manner. Any effective retrieval of Augustine must acknowledge that Christian insight is not one among others but is the one through which all others must be understood and judged. Any retrieval of Kierkegaard must emphasize that the Christian message is never some abstract objective truth, but one that makes all the difference to the individual’s life. Girard involves the Christian in imitation of Christ and a healing of desire, not in theoretical speculation about indifferent choices.

Consumerism has not just altered the way religious people understand their beliefs, as Miller notes; it has become a religion all its own. Twitchell observes: “What we lack is not a politics of consumption so much as a religion of consumption. Not to sound too eerie, but the development of that religion is precisely what we are now experiencing.” Even he acknowledges that this prospect is “a little unsettling” but adds: “it’s not all bad, not by a long shot. In fact, relative to other systems, it’s really quite

²⁰⁹ Vincent Miller, 12.

fair.”²¹⁰ David Loy agrees that the market is a religion but notes that it is “not a very good one, for it can thrive only by promising a secular salvation that it never quite supplies.” He claims that economics is really just a kind of theology posing as a science and thus that any solution to the economic problems of consumer society must have a theological dimension. He does not suggest a turn from secular to sacred values but emphasizes the importance of recognizing how “secular obsessions have become symptomatic of a spiritual need that they cannot meet.”²¹¹ This dissertation will suggest that the fundamental spiritual need unmet by consumerism is the development (or reception) of identity. Consumerism not only fails to meet this need, but also conceals the problem, leading people to believe that identity is something to be found in their next purchase.

This dissertation will conclude by demanding that the Church fill the void of meaningful identity talk left by the deafening voice of consumerism and advertising. While Christian churches are not yet dying, they are often already in league with economic and political powers or are preoccupied with old debates and outdated perspectives; thus they have become increasingly irrelevant or trivialized. As a result, “they have been unable to offer what is most needed, a meaningful challenge to the aggressive proselytizing of market capitalism, which has already become the most successful religion of all time, winning more converts more quickly than any previous belief system or value-system in human history.” Because advertising promises a kind of

²¹⁰ James B. Twitchell, “The Stone Age,” in *Do Americans Shop Too Much?*, ed. Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 48.

²¹¹ David R. Loy, “The Religion of the Market,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65.2 (Summer 1997): 289. Likewise, Deborah Du Nann Winter points to psychological needs consumerism cannot meet. See “Shopping for Sustainability: Psychological Solutions to Overconsumption,” in *Psychology and Consumer Culture: The Struggle for a Good Life in a Materialistic World*, ed. Tim Kasser and Allen D. Kanner (Washington: American Psychological Association, 2004), 83.

salvation at odds with Christian salvation as well as a different explanation of the human problem, Christianity cannot ignore the religious dimension of consumer capitalism but should emphasize that advertising and consumerism are deceptive because their solutions fail.²¹² Indeed the kinds of promises made by consumerism are questioned by Jesus, but his Church has not always followed him: “The more Americans fill their lives with things, the more they tell psychiatrists, pastors, friends, and family members that they feel ‘empty’ inside. The more toys our kids have to play with, the more they complain of boredom. Two thousand years ago, Jesus Christ predicted they would feel that way. What profit would it bring a person, he asked his followers (Matthew 16:26), were that person to gain the whole world, but lose his soul? In the Age of Affluenza, that question is seldom asked, at least not publicly. It should be.”²¹³

The Church should not embrace the consumerist mentality, seek to employ advertising methods to beat consumerism at its own game, or retreat into a position of quietism as if it has no responsibility to speak out against the debasement and disintegration of human lives. In Chapter 8, this dissertation will present its proposal for the Church’s counter-practice and counter-ideology in opposition to that of consumerism. This counter-ideology will be worked out in Chapters 5 through 7 with the help of Augustine, Kierkegaard, and Girard, proposing that identity should be understood as a gift received from God. In the next few chapters, those same thinkers will help to diagnose the problem of identity in consumerism, suggesting that identity is damaged by trying to emulate unhelpful models, by comparing oneself to others, and by taking pride in oneself. Hopefully, this chapter has provided an understanding of what consumerism

²¹² Loy, 276, 278.

²¹³ John de Graaf, David Wann, and Thomas H. Naylor, *Affluenza: The All Consuming Epidemic* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2001), 70.

is, how it has developed, how it is discussed, and what notions of freedom and identity are on sale in consumer society. Beginning with Girard's assistance in the next chapter, the dissertation will now provide a deeper understanding of this notion, not as consumerism or advertising or commentators on consumerism have explained it but through the lens of mimetic rivalry and metaphysical desire.

CHAPTER III

While the last chapter presented many ways of thinking about consumerism and its relationship to identity and freedom, this chapter begins a much more focused and sustained criticism of consumerism and the approach to identity that it fosters. This chapter in particular uses the theory of mimetic desire to explicate this theme. René Girard is perhaps best known for tracing the origins of human culture to religion and the origins of religion to violence and to the scapegoat mechanism, but he also traces the origins of this foundational violence to mimetic desire, contagion, and rivalry. Though perhaps I could be accused of seeking to conceal the violence that Girard has so painstakingly uncovered, I wish to focus exclusively on his mimetic theory and its relevance to consumerism, emphasizing not the violence that results from mimesis, which Girard himself has done extensively, but instead the loss of identity that can result from mimesis in a consumer society; Girard writes only sparsely about consumerism and not at all about its effects on identity.

I will first present Girard's theory of desire, giving special attention to its implications for identity development. Human beings learn to desire by watching and emulating others. I will argue that advertising models serve as just such teachers for consumers. I will discuss both Girard's limited, explicit treatment of consumerism and the unspoken ways in which his theory can elucidate the situation of the consumer. While consumerism seems to avoid some of the problems associated with mimetic desire, I will argue that consumerism, nonetheless, damages identity development. Here I will be breaking with Girard and indeed breaking a chain of logic he builds, as I will claim

that the damage to identity occurs despite the absence of a link in the casual chain Girard imagines. According to this analysis, consumerism leads to self-hatred through comparisons with unrealistic models. Girard's voice will be predominate in the first two sections, as I will first be explicating his theory of mimetic desire and then examining the few passages in his opus that relate directly to consumerism. In the remaining two sections, Girard's voice will still be heard, but it will be placed in the midst of an argument between a close textual reading that sees consumerism as avoiding the problems of mimetic rivalry and my own reading that seeks to extrapolate from Girard's analysis in order to show the dangers of consumerism for identity. In Chapter 7, I will turn to Girard's analysis of novelistic and Christian conversions and suggest how these conversions may be seen as salvific alternatives to consumerism. By rehearsing and reconstructing Girard's theory, I hope to develop an effective tool for criticizing consumer society and for advocating Christian compassion and humility as the means of allowing identities stunted by consumerism to flourish.

Mimetic Desire

Girard is by no means the first thinker to place great emphasis on the role of imitation in human development and education. Learning is always based on imitation.¹ Without it, there could be no culture. Plato was well aware of imitation's significance,

¹ Robert Frank writes of newborns imitating their mothers' facial expressions and of the continued importance of peer behavior as a source of standards for mature adults. See *Passions within Reason: The Strategic Role of the Emotions* (New York: Norton, 1988), 155 and *Choosing the Right Pond: Human Behavior and the Quest for Status* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 17-19. Tibor Scitovsky notes the discomfort of the young in many species, including human beings, when left alone or excluded from group activities. He focuses on the importance of imitation for "gaining and maintaining acceptance and membership in the group." See *The Joyless Economy: The Psychology of Human Satisfaction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 114-15.

but he ignored its role in regard to any appropriative behavior,² thereby ignoring the kind of imitation that leads inevitably to conflict.³ Freud delves deeply into the subject of desire, but fails to appreciate the mimetic role of desire because of his emphasis on the role of the object. According to Girard, Freud imagines that the triangle of rivalry conceals an “oedipal” secret and thus does not discern the rivalry’s mimetic character, which the triangle really conceals. Freud then, like Plato, fails to grasp that the “mimetic is itself a desire and is therefore the real ‘unconscious.’”⁴ Dostoevsky, on the other hand, gives desire no primary privileged object. Rather, he portrays desire choosing its object through the mediation of another. Desire then is first of all a “desire of and for the *other*.”⁵ Dostoyevsky, reflecting the true hierarchy of desire, places the mediator in the foreground. In *The Eternal Husband*, the hero tries to convince the reader that his relationship to the object is independent of the mediator, but this is obviously not the case.⁶ Freud seems to have come close to seeing the role of mimesis in desire, but he always opted for his Oedipal theory instead. He recognized that the Oedipus complex could not account for all the phenomena that Girard claims are accounted for by “the process of mimetic rivalry, with the model first metamorphosing into an idol and then turning into an obstacle and a hateful persecutor, which reinforces his sacred status.”⁷ But he remained fixated on the mother-object.

² René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1978), 8.

³ René Girard, “*To Double Business Bound*”: *Essays on Literature, Mimesis, and Anthropology* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 201.

⁴ Girard, *Things Hidden*, 295, 359.

⁵ Girard, *To Double Business Bound*, 39.

⁶ René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 45-46.

⁷ Girard, *Things Hidden*, 411.

The key to desire for Girard does not lie in the object as it does for Freud, but neither does it lie in the desiring subject. Modernity has often glorified the innate spontaneity of desire, but according to Girard, this is “a purely mythological notion.”⁸ Indeed, he calls the conviction that desires are individual and spontaneous the “dearest of all our illusions.”⁹ The subject swears that she began desiring before the rival ever appeared, but she is lying; she is really the third party in the triangle.¹⁰ The subject must be last because, after satisfying their basic needs, humans do not know what to desire.¹¹ The subject has no instinct to guide her or any desire that is authentically her own. Thus, the subject requires a mediator from whom she may borrow desires.¹² John Kenneth Galbraith believes that the individual’s dependence on a mediator is the product, not of human nature, but of changes in the economy—in particular, the growth of advertising and salesmanship. He claims: “Few people at the beginning of the nineteenth century needed an adman to tell them what they wanted.”¹³ With Girard I maintain that dependence on mediators is more universal and fundamental, but with Galbraith, I believe that advertising and consumerism have made the dependence on mediators more problematic, not however by making the dependence greater, but by changing the mediators and by paradoxically glorifying both the mediators and the ideal of absolute

⁸ Ibid., 291.

⁹ Girard, *To Double Business Bound*, ix.

¹⁰ Girard, *Things Hidden*, 339.

¹¹ Jean Baudrillard makes the same point and questions the existence of any basic “anthropological minimum.” See “The Ideological Genesis of Needs,” in *The Consumer Society Reader*, ed. Juliet B. Schor and Douglas B. Holt (New York: The New Press, 2000), 72. Jeremy Bentham too questions the possibility of establishing what needs are basic. See *The True Alarm*, reprinted in W. Stark, ed., *Jeremy Bentham’s Economic Writings*, vol. 3 (London: George Allen, 1954), 85. Mel Zelenak argues that consumers do not have an intuitive sense enabling them to choose a good; they must learn from others. See *Consumer Economics: The Consumer in Our Society* (Scottsdale: Holcomb Hathaway, 2002), 58.

¹² René Girard, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, trans. James G. Williams (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 15.

¹³ John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), 2.

independence from all mediators, as is developed further in the section, “Mimetic Rivalry and the Loss of Self.”

Because other species lack the human capacity for mimesis, humans alone possess what Girard is calling desire.¹⁴ Girard proposes to limit uses of the word “desire” to cases in which “the misunderstood mechanism of mimetic rivalry has imbued” a simple appetite with a “metaphysical dimension.” This desire is called “metaphysical” because it transfigures the object of desire so that it seems particularly real and important though no real, physical transformation has, in fact, taken place.¹⁵ Though mimetic desire often has terrible consequences, it is basically good, for without it, humanity could not exist.¹⁶ Girard says that this desire “is rooted neither in the subject nor in the object, but in a third party whose desire is imitated by the subject.”¹⁷

The subject imitates the model’s desire in hopes of resembling—indeed of becoming fused with—the model.¹⁸ The object and model are both necessary, but their value lies in their mutual relationship. The subject desires neither the woman nor the rival “but the couple as such.”¹⁹ This dynamic unfolds in “The Curious Impertinent” story in *Don Quixote* and in Joyce’s *Ulysses*, as in *The Eternal Husband*. In all cases, the hero seems to offer his beloved wife to the mediator, even as one might offer a sacrifice to one’s god.²⁰ Similarly, I will argue that the coveted consumer object pales in

¹⁴ Girard, *Things Hidden*, 283.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 296.

¹⁶ Girard, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, 15.

¹⁷ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 170.

¹⁸ René Girard, *Resurrection from the Underground: Feodor Dostoevsky*, trans. James G. Williams (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1997), 144.

¹⁹ Girard, *Things Hidden*, 360.

²⁰ Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 49-52; *A Theater of Envy: William Shakespeare* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 262-63.

comparison to the model. The consumers' purchases may be thought of as offerings to their gods.

Triangular desire is not first thematized in *Don Quixote* or any great novel, but in the Judaic and Christian scriptures. Girard contends that the purpose of the tenth commandment, which forbids the coveting of one's neighbor's possessions, is not to speak to some rare, perverse kind of desire, but to desire as such. Individualism imagines wrongly that desire is autonomous, but the tenth commandment recognizes that human beings desire what their neighbors have or what their neighbors desire. Thus it sums up the mimetic theory of triangular desire: "Since the objects we should not desire and nevertheless do desire always belong to the neighbor, it is clearly the neighbor who renders them desirable What the tenth commandment sketches, without defining it explicitly, is a fundamental revolution in the understanding of desire. We assume that desire is objective or subjective, but in reality it rests on a third party who gives value to the objects."²¹

This idea that Girard finds in the tenth commandment is one that nonetheless seemed groundbreaking when Thorstein Veblen described it at the dawn of the 20th century. He believed that emulation is the root motive of all ownership and insisted that the proclivity toward invidious comparison is "of ancient growth and is a pervading trait of human nature." Indeed, he claimed that except for the "instinct of self-preservation, the propensity for emulation is probably the strongest and most alert and persistent of the economic motives proper."²² Juliet Schor shows how controversial this idea remains when she lists several assumptions of the liberal view on markets for consumer goods,

²¹ Girard, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, 8-9.

²² Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, 25-26; 109-110.

which derive from those of standard economic theory. One of these states: “Each consumer’s preferences are independent of other consumers’ preferences.” She explains: “We are self-contained in a social sense. If I want a sport utility vehicle, it is because I like them, not because my neighbor does. The trendiness of a product does not affect my desire to have it, either positively or negatively.” She, like Girard and Veblen, find this assumption untenable.²³ James Duesenberry warned that to understand consumer behavior one must first recognize fully the social character of consumption. Preference theory and marginal utility theory suggest that human desires are about specific goods; these theories say nothing about how these desires arise or are changed, but that is precisely the key to the consumption problem because preferences are interdependent.²⁴ Arthur Asa Berger suggests that mimetic desire is “a motivating force in our behavior as consumers. It is mimetic desire that helps explain our consumer lust: we desire what others have desired and have purchased, especially those we look up to—such as celebrities, movie stars, and sports heroes.”²⁵

Advertising and advertising models would not even exist were it not for mimetic desire. Twitchell points out that American society should not be labeled “materialistic,” for if material things were the real objects of desire, “there would be no signifying systems like advertising, packaging, fashion, and branding to get in the way. We would gather, use, toss out, or hoard based on some *inner* sense of value.”²⁶ Instead, consumers depend upon advertisers and models to mediate meaning and value through the products.

²³ Schor, “Towards a New Politics of Consumption,” 453.

²⁴ James S. Duesenberry, *Income, Saving, and the Theory of Consumer Behavior* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949), 19.

²⁵ Arthur Asa Berger, *Ads, Fads, and Consumer Culture: Advertising’s Impact on American Character and Society* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 30.

²⁶ James B. Twitchell, *Lead Us into Temptation: The Triumph of American Materialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 11.

If desire were subjective, advertising would be unnecessary. People would have innate desires and would act on them. If desire were objective, companies would only need to make the public aware of the product, and consumers would purchase the most desirable product. Perhaps there would be some kind of advertising or “infomercials” but there would be no need for models at all. The professional “model” serves precisely in Girard’s sense of the word—as a mediator for desires. Businesses advertise in hopes of loaning consumers the model’s desire. Advertising seems to promote precisely what Girard claims is forbidden by the tenth commandment. After having briefly sketched Girard’s mimetic theory in this section and gestured toward some of the ways this theory will be applied to my analysis of consumerism, I must now turn to Girard’s own limited explicit treatment of consumerism and related matters so that the reader may more easily distinguish Girard’s voice from my own in what follows.

Girard, Consumerism, and the Democratization of Desire

Girard devotes little attention to consumerism, but he does point out the role of mimetic desire in materialism and capitalism. He argues that the drive for more and more possessions is not materialistic, but rather the “triumph of the mediator, the god with the human face.”²⁷ Capitalism makes use of mimetic phenomena, giving them free rein and directing them into economic channels.²⁸ It demands a kind of mimetic free play that would be impossible in many societies.²⁹ Here, Girard is aware that capitalism and modern society avoid some of the conflicts he associates with mimetic desire and rivalry. The positive consequence of this adaptation is to be found in amazing technological

²⁷ Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 61.

²⁸ Girard, *Things Hidden*, 295.

²⁹ Girard, *To Double Business Bound*, 115.

advances. The negative consequence is the “democratization” of neuroses, which Girard links to “the reinforcement of mimetic competition and the ‘metaphysical’ aspect of the related tensions.”³⁰ Girard points out that values in the free market do not fluctuate strictly according to the law of supply and demand but rather according to investors’ evaluations of what the net of all evaluations will be. These investors are less interested in the objective facts than in the forces of public opinion.³¹ In a world ruled by mimetic rivalry, fashion is a tyrant, and as this rivalry proliferates and the pace of fashion accelerates, the tyrants and idols rise and fall more and more rapidly.³²

Girard does acknowledge the way in which mass production may avoid mimetic rivalry. He focuses particularly on the multiplication of images: “Being thoroughly unsubstantial to start with, images and signs cannot disappoint to the extent that real objects do, when they seem responsible for the mimetic entanglements in which human beings get caught. Images and signs thus acquire a paradoxical superiority over the objects for which they stand. The object most enjoyable in itself, feminine beauty, is so adversely affected by the mimetic crisscrossing of desires that, to acute cases of mimetic desire, it seems intrinsically frustrating and diabolical. Thanks to images, objects thus interdicted can be enjoyed indirectly, vicariously, sacrificially.”³³ While a woman who inspires the love of just two men may well provoke heartache or even suicide or murder, the image of a woman, even if it were to elicit the desires of a million men, may result in

³⁰ Girard, *Things Hidden*, 307.

³¹ Girard, *A Theater of Envy*, 102. André Orléan says that because price is an indicator of quality, an object becomes more desirable when its price rises, thus, perhaps, increasing the demand for this product. Here one of the most fundamental laws of economics is contradicted. See “Money and Mimetic Speculation,” in *Violence and Truth: On the Work of René Girard*, ed. Paul Dumouchel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 110. He also argues that “mimetic dynamics” help to generate “speculative bubbles” in stock prices. See “Mimetic Contagion and Speculative Bubbles,” *Theory and Decision* 27 (1989), 90-91.

³² Girard, *A Theater of Envy*, 148.

³³ *Ibid.*, 330.

no violence, for that image can be endlessly replicated. Girard claims that contemporary neo-paganism equates happiness with the unlimited satisfaction of desires, and thus demands the suppression of all prohibitions. He admits that this idea has “a semblance of credibility in the limited domain of consumer goods, whose prodigious multiplication, thanks to technological progress, weakens certain mimetic rivalries.”³⁴ However, while the multiplication of consumer goods may eliminate the source of violent rivalry, I will argue in the remainder of this chapter that it only exacerbates the loss of self-worth and identity present in all forms of metaphysical desire.

Advertising, a central theme of this dissertation, plays only a modest role in Girard’s writing. This topic moves to the fore only when Girard analyzes the character of Pandarus in *Troilus and Cressida*: “When business tries to increase the sale of a product, it resorts to advertising. In order to inflame our desire, advertisers try to convince us that the beautiful people all over the world are already in love with their product. If the industry needs a patron saint, it should select Pandarus. Shakespeare is a prophet of modern advertising. His Pandarus dangles in front of his prospective customers the prestigious desire that will arouse their own.”³⁵ Advertising plays upon mimetic desire by suggesting a model and fabricating a desire. The best advertising tries to convince the consumer, not that the product is the best, but that it is the most desired.³⁶ Girard describes a kind of “sexiness by proxy” that he claims is not new with the advent of television but which, on the contrary, dates back to “primitive religion and has never gone out of fashion.” He acknowledges that it is more important than ever today because technology so accelerates mimetic effects. Technology repeats these effects, extends

³⁴ Girard, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, 181.

³⁵ Girard, *A Theater of Envy*, 123.

³⁶ Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 104.

them, and legitimizes them under the banner of the advertising industry. Pandarus does not wait for customers to appear; he creates customers through advertising. He revives desires that are weak and provides new ones. He places before Cressida the image of Helen's desire for Troilus for there is no greater model than Helen. Even if Cressida is not convinced of this desire, that image nonetheless provides the "indispensable third party, a model for her desire. Cressida experiences all this as the perpetual miracle of spontaneously falling in love with Troilus."³⁷ Even though Girard does not make the point explicitly, the implied parallel seems to be that though consumers "know better" than to believe in the desires of the models on television, that knowledge does not prevent them from imitating these imaginary desires and then crediting those desires to themselves.

This world of endless and illusory desires is made possible by a political structure that upholds it. Democracy creates greater freedom and equality but thereby exacerbates mimetic contagion.³⁸ All might have been fascinated by Louis XIV and desired to imitate him, but the Sun King could never be a rival. The nobility could thus enjoy this mediation like children protected by their parents. The revolutionaries thought they would destroy vanity, but instead, with no king to imitate, all must imitate each other, and

³⁷ Girard, *A Theater of Envy*, 123, 152, 125.

³⁸ Paul M. Mazur suggests that while human beings are inherently imitative, the "absence in the United States of a caste system and the considerable freedom of opportunity which prevailed gave a freer play to such emulation than has ever been known elsewhere in historic times." See *American Prosperity: Its Causes and Consequences* (New York: The Viking Press, 1928), 46-47. Paisley Livingston says that the distinctions that made many relations in the past external mediation are no longer extant. Now, equality is the highest ideal, and yet personal distinction has become a perpetual quest. See *Models of Desire: René Girard and the Psychology of Mimesis* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 72. William Leiss, Stephen Kline, and Sut Jhally write: "Traditional cultures established quite firm guidelines for intersubjective comparisons, presenting a limited set of role and behavioural models to guide tastes. The consumer society abolishes all such limits and creates an 'open set' of intersubjective comparisons; advertising is one of the most important vehicles for presenting, suggesting, and reflecting an unending series of possible comparative judgments." See *Social Communication in Advertising: Persons, Products, & Images of Well Being* (Scarborough, Ontario: Nelson Canada, 1990), 295-96.

thus all become gods for each other. The modern crowd's god is envy, and its greed is no longer held in check by the king. The vanity under the king was frivolous, but in the 19th century, it is sad and suspicious with a terrible fear of ridicule.³⁹ The loss of traditional hierarchies makes the relation to the metaphysical rival all the more obsessive.⁴⁰ As barriers are lowered, mimetic antagonisms multiply.⁴¹ The actors exchange threats and then roles. Through democratization, there are chances of success for each person, but everyone wants the most conspicuous position, and not all can have that. The number called increases, but the number of the elect does not.⁴² Even where violence or rivalry is not the result, there is a multiplication and a democratization of desires. I believe there is another multiplication of desires in consumerism, as one does not just learn to desire by watching one's friends or family members; one watches advertisements, and the poor are infected with the same desires as the rich. In the next section, I will argue that consumerism is destructive of the self through the expansion of metaphysical desire.

Mimetic Rivalry and the Loss of Self

Despite the proliferation of contagious desire that it spawns, capitalist-consumer society seems to avoid two of the main problems that Girard associates with mimetic desire. Girard describes a double bind that is inevitable in his mimetic theory. Even though the model may encourage imitation, the disciple who carries the imitation too far will provoke the model's wrath. The model may feel betrayed, and the disciple will then feel rejected and humiliated—judged unworthy by the model to participate in the superior

³⁹ Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 117-21.

⁴⁰ Girard, *To Double Business Bound*, 80.

⁴¹ Girard, *Things Hidden*, 423-24.

⁴² Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 133-36.

existence of the model. Human beings cannot respond to the universal command to imitate without then being told not to imitate.⁴³ According to Girard, only Christ is a safe model because he alone has no acquisitive desire.⁴⁴

But the kind of model that invites imitation in consumer society is the professional model of advertising, and this model too is in some sense safe. Some advertisements, as for example, an Australian ad for Room Two Clothing, actually try to promote rivalry. A waif lies prostrate on a bed, naked but for a skirt, head on folded arms tilted to the side, with one eye facing the camera. The large white print covering the photograph reads: “WHAT THE BITCH WHO’S ABOUT TO STEAL YOUR MAN WEARS.”⁴⁵ Nonetheless, a real rivalry with this woman is unlikely for despite the ad’s claim, the reader’s relation to the model remains one of what Girard calls, “external mediation.” In external mediation, the distance (spiritual as well as physical) between subject and mediator is too great to create a rivalry.⁴⁶ The danger in the relationship to the advertising model, this dissertation will argue, is not in any literal rivalry, but in the consequences of what Girard calls “metaphysical desire.” If I imitate the Marlboro man’s desire for cigarettes, I have about as little a chance of coming into conflict with him as I do of coming into conflict with Christ by being a Christian. This is so in part because the model feigns desire for a product. In other words, with Christ as model, one imitates a real but nonacquisitive desire and thereby avoids conflict with the model. With the professional model, on the other hand, one imitates a feigned, acquisitive desire and thereby avoids conflict with the model. Thus the double bind may well be avoided in

⁴³ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 146-47.

⁴⁴ Girard, *Things Hidden*, 430.

⁴⁵ Warren Berger, *Advertising Today* (London: Phaidon, 2001), 405.

⁴⁶ Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 9.

consumer society. The command to imitate will never be rescinded or contradicted. I may buy and smoke all the cigarettes my lungs can take in, and the Marlboro man will never reproach me for my efforts. Thus the violence that Girard associates with the imitation of a model's acquisitive desire is avoided in imitating advertising models.

According to Girard, acquisitive mimetic desire leads inevitably to conflict and rivalry. This idea may be crystallized in an image. Girard writes, "When any gesture of appropriation is imitated, it simply means that two hands will reach for the same object simultaneously: conflict cannot fail to result."⁴⁷ This conflict is not coincidental but inevitable: the second hand reaches for the object precisely *because* the first hand is reaching for it.⁴⁸ Christ could again be seen as a solution to this problem for rather than reaching for any object, he divides and shares. After his resurrection, he encounters two disciples on the road to Emmaus; they do not recognize him until he blesses and breaks the bread,⁴⁹ an image perfect in its contrast to that of the two hands reaching for the same object. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, the authenticity of the first hand's reach in consumer society is doubtful, but what is more pertinent here is the fact that in consumer society, though there may be many hands reaching for the same object, there are also many identical objects. In other words, consumer society seems capable of producing a miracle not unlike that of the loaves and the fishes. Of course it may well be the case that even the most technologically advanced industrial society will never be able, by producing enough goods for everyone, to avoid conflict altogether, but it does seem as if the kind of immediate and inevitable conflict Girard discusses might be avoided in such a society. That is, the poor within and outside a consumer society no doubt suffer for the

⁴⁷ Girard, *To Double Business Bound*, 201.

⁴⁸ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 145-46.

⁴⁹ Luke 24.13-32, especially verses 30-31.

luxury of others, but the consumer's imitation of a model does not lead inexorably to the model's reproach or to conflict between model and disciple.

In Girard's theory, the model, after becoming a rival, becomes a god. If consumerism can in fact avoid the first link in this chain, it might seem to be immune from the second, but there is a way in which this metaphysical desire is still quite pertinent. Proust is aware of the metaphysical significance of desire, and through his metaphors he reveals this desire and the divinization of the mediator. "Marcel [the narrator] has only to let his 'fixed and agonized' gaze rest on someone and we see the abyss of transcendence emanating from the mediator."⁵⁰ While the model does not become a rival in consumer society, the model may still become the object of this hunger for the sacred. While the consumer may not fight with the model for the desired product, the consumer does perhaps still long for something that the model has and will not relinquish: "The intact narcissism of the other is the indescribable paradise where the beings that we desire appear to live—and it is because of this that we desire them."⁵¹ In this desire for *being*, a sort of divinization occurs, sometimes directed toward the object, sometimes toward the mediator. In contrast to this divinity, one makes of oneself a lowly beast, as does Helena in relation to Demetrius, the object she cannot obtain, and to Hermia, the victorious mediator.⁵² Of course, the other is not absolute in any real sense,

⁵⁰ Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 79-80.

⁵¹ Girard, *Things Hidden*, 375.

⁵² Girard, *A Theater of Envy*, 43, 50. This phenomenon has been widely commented upon in discussions of consumerism. In his description of narcissistic culture, Christopher Lasch says that for the narcissist there are only two groups—the rich and famous and the common herd. Though the narcissist identifies with the former, this is a defense against the fear of being seen as one of the latter. The narcissist's admiration is filled with envy and often turns to hatred, especially if the envied one serves as a reminder of the narcissist's own insignificance. See *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Norton, 1978), 84-85. Jean Kilbourne notes that this is precisely what advertising does constantly: it depicts real life as a monotonous and boring (225). In other words, advertising sets up the opposition that Lasch finds characteristic of the narcissist and then works to

and thus Girard calls this desire, which makes an absolute out of the other, “metaphysical.”⁵³ The desiring subject sees in the model what it lacks in itself. The subject feels itself to be without a self but sees in the model “a divine autosufficiency.”⁵⁴ Through imitating this model, the subject sees itself on the verge of attaining this same autonomy, but it is a mirage, an illusion projected by the subject’s idealization of the model.⁵⁵ Here I wish to draw a conclusion from Girard’s reasoning that he himself does not draw: though consumer society may manage at times to prevent mimetic models from turning into rivals, it does nothing to prevent this process of divinization. Indeed, Daniel Harris believes this dynamic to be the axis around which the fashion world turns: “[S]ince its inception the whole purpose of the fashion industry has been to compel the reader to imitate the model. The basic assumption of women’s magazines is that we can acquire the power of glamor, its omnipotence and invulnerability, by donning the sacred articles of the mannequin’s clothing and mimicking her hieratic gestures—a fetishism we associate with primitive religions rather than with a sophisticated secular culture like our own.”⁵⁶ The comparison to primitive religion is certainly an apt one. It is, in part, the omnipotence and fetishism described here by Harris that makes consumer desires “metaphysical.”

convince the audience that it belongs to the common herd but could belong to the groups of the admired and envied. Juliet Schor observes that because people want what the affluent have, many people believe they are failures. See “What’s Wrong with Consumer Society? Competitive Spending and the ‘New Consumerism,’” in *Consuming Desires: Consumption, Culture, and the Pursuit of Happiness*, ed. Roger Rosenblatt (Washington: Island Press, 1999), 50. Thus consumerism leads precisely to the kind of self-condemnation that Girard finds stemming from the metaphysical desire presented in Shakespeare.

⁵³ Girard, *A Theater of Envy*, 36.

⁵⁴ Girard, *To Double Business Bound*, 58. Roland Barthes claims that the woman of fashion is presented as being a more complete person, a person with greater being. See *The Fashion System*, trans. Matthew Ward and Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), 255-57. Rosalind Coward sees a higher form of existence represented by the model’s defiant, pouting face. The model is attractive without trying to be. See *Female Desires: How They Are Sought, Bought, and Packaged* (New York: Grove Press, 1985), 59.

⁵⁵ Girard, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, 15.

⁵⁶ Daniel Harris, *Cute, Quaint, Hungry and Romantic: The Aesthetics of Consumerism* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 221-22.

Against the view presented in this dissertation, Jean-Michel Oughourlian and James Alison, two important Girard scholars, seem to suggest that there is nothing inherently dangerous about this metaphysical desire for a human model. Oughourlian describes a scenario in which one becomes a teacher for another's apprenticeship and a god for that one's destiny, thereby avoiding "mimetogony" or mimetic conflict. The disciple "must accept the tutelage and modeling and acknowledge the superiority of the other, especially the anteriority of the latter's ideas over his own. He must accept the role of disciple and cultivate both reverence and gratitude toward his model, rather than resentment."⁵⁷ Alison describes a different situation in which the disciple participates in "a sort of 'unknowing,' a nonrecognition of the other's rôle in my genesis, but which does 'me' no harm for as long as the other is taken as a model and not as a rival." It is only when the other is taken to be a rival that "this 'unknowing' becomes a self-deception, something pathogenic."⁵⁸ The problem here is that the advertising model, besides being a poor teacher and an unworthy master of one's destiny, encourages an attitude the very opposite of the one described by Oughourlian for the ideal student. That is, in order to be a good disciple of these models, one cannot show reverence or gratitude, much less acknowledge the superiority of any other. In both situations described, there remains a danger in accepting the other as model: one can and will judge oneself in the name of the model (or rather in the name of one's false view of the model).

When the model becomes a rival or a god, the object often becomes irrelevant. Girard refers to "pure rivalry" and to "prestige" to describe this situation,⁵⁹ but I believe

⁵⁷ Oughourlian, 118.

⁵⁸ James Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin through Easter Eyes* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1998), 32.

⁵⁹ Girard, *Things Hidden*, 26.

that even without conflictual rivalry this kind of displacement of the object can take place. Certainly the woman who comes before Solomon claiming that another woman's baby is her own is involved in a conflict, but Girard's description of her might just as well apply to a subject and model not involved in conflict. He says that the child is irrelevant for her for the only thing that really matters to her is to possess what the other woman possesses.⁶⁰ Here it seems that the baby functions much like a status symbol. But in cases where more than one copy of the object is available, the subject could be content to have what the model possesses without taking the object from the model.

Of course when the subject is fascinated with the model, the subject wants, not to *have* what the model has, but to *be* what the model is. Paisley Livingston explains this notion in a way that seems to make the connection to the consumer model even more obvious: "[I]n all cases of mimetic desire, the tutelary belief that qualifies someone as a model to be imitated involves . . . the belief that this person is, for various reasons, 'the kind of person' that the imitator would like to be."⁶¹ Thus, the viewer sees the model as an ideal version of herself; she judges herself, not just in the name of the model-other, but in the name of her ideal self, represented by the model. Molly Haskell argues that women are being sold another version of themselves and that in their "identification with film stars, a kind of transubstantiation occurs."⁶² The problem is that this image of the

⁶⁰ Ibid., 238-39.

⁶¹ Livingston, 66.

⁶² Molly Haskell, "Movies and the Selling of Desire," in *Consuming Desires: Consumption, Culture, and the Pursuit of Happiness*, ed. Roger Rosenblatt (Washington: Island Press, 1999), 129. Likewise, Sergio Zyman and Armin A. Brott argue that consumers are like high school students who want to be "one of the 'cool' people." If they cannot be them, they could at least try to be like them by wearing what they wear, driving what they drive, etc. The idea is that the cool qualities of the cool people rub off on the products and then onto those who use the same products. See *The End of Advertising as We Know It* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2002), 101. John Berger argues that publicity is not about pleasure-in-itself but the future buyers. It offers them images of themselves made glamorous. The images then make them envious of themselves as they might be. They imagine themselves transformed by the purchase into objects of envy

ideal self is no more realistic or healthy than the desire to *be* the other one cannot be. Helena wants to *have* Demetrius, but she wants to *be* Hermia, and as Girard notes, “[b]eing is obviously more important than having.” The object cannot compare in importance to the model upon whom its worth depends.⁶³ Still, metaphysical desire can at times also transform the object. The struggle with a rival bestows value on the object of the struggle, and in consumerism, even though this struggle may at times be sidestepped, the object may still be transformed by desire. In describing the snob’s desire to enter the Faubourg Saint-Germain, Proust is interested not in the meager non-object or in the object transfigured by desire, but rather in the process of transfiguration, just as Cervantes is interested not in a barber’s basin or in Mambrino’s helmet, but in Don Quixote’s conflation of the two.⁶⁴ It would seem that this kind of transformation is the *raison d’être* of advertising.⁶⁵

The consumer awaits the verdict of another to know what should be desired. Livingston seems to offer various defenses of the model’s disciple. He proposes that the model could be considered the “agent who is thought to know the ‘true value’ of things.”⁶⁶ The question here becomes: on what basis does one draw this conclusion? If

for others, and this envy in turn justifies their love for themselves. Advertising seeks to convince the viewer that she is not enviable, but could be. See *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1972), 132-34, 149. Peter Stearns claims that the focus on and praise of envy in advertising began around 1915. He cites a soap ad from that period: “The Envied Girl—Are you one? Or are you still seeking the secret of charm?” (53).

⁶³ Girard, *A Theater of Envy*, 42-43. Oughourlian goes further, claiming that the object does not even “exist in itself; it exists only insofar as it is designated by the other’s desire. The object exists only at the point of encounter, where the two desires intersect.” (219) Alissa Quart comments that pro-anorexia girls are not interested in buying the advertised goods, but instead “buy the idea of the tiny supermodel body clad in underwear and try to become her in the only way they know how.” See *Branded: The Buying and Selling of Teenagers* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing, 2003), 137-40.

⁶⁴ Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 219.

⁶⁵ Thus, Robert Bocoock writes: “People try to become the being they desire to be by consuming the items that they imagine will help to create and sustain their idea of themselves, their image, their identity.” See *Consumption, Key Ideas* (London: Routledge, 1993), 68.

⁶⁶ Livingston, 39.

one does not know the true value of things already, how can one judge who has such knowledge. Livingston also explores the possibility that one may choose a model (M) because “M is the kind of person I would like to be, because M is q, has r, know s, and has t, where q, r, s, and t are typical characteristics of a superior social kind.”⁶⁷ But it would seem there is no reason not to reverse the cause and effect here and say instead that r is the kind of thing I want, because M has it. Indeed, if Girard is correct, this is most certainly the case rather than the scenario proposed by Livingston. He also draws a distinction between a model whose endorsement leads one to buy a particular brand of toilet article more than once and one who leads another to adopt certain political attitudes and make certain professional decisions. The first, he claims, can hardly be called a mediator. “In both cases there is an imitation of another person, but the differences between these cases may be more important than the similarities.”⁶⁸ There is certainly a difference in regard to the act being imitated, but what this dissertation is concerned with is not the importance or triviality of the imitation, but the psychology behind it. Thus, one might be influenced in major decisions by a person whom one regards as a friend or knowledgeable mentor, and this may result in minor or even healthy psychological effects, while one might be influenced in the most trivial of decisions by a model whom one regards with metaphysical desire and destructive envy. This dissertation argues that advertising and consumerism promotes the latter.

Like consumers, Proust’s snobs are slaves to what is fashionable because they do not trust their own judgments; they desire what the right people desire.⁶⁹ Girard sees this

⁶⁷ Ibid., 43.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 64.

⁶⁹ Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 23-25. As marketers are well-aware, the “right people,” means not just models, but certain consumers as well. See John Philip Jones and Jan S. Slater, *What’s in a Name?:*

same dynamic worked out repeatedly in the lives and literature of Shakespeare, Dostoyevsky, Nietzsche, and Proust. The problem does not lie in the fact that one desires mimetically for that is simply how humans learn, but that one judges oneself for doing so. One places impossible demands upon oneself, in part because of the false promise of metaphysical autonomy. One comes to see that the promise is false in regards to oneself, but assumes that it is true for all others and especially for the model. Thus, one must hide one's shame from the others. The underground man says, "I am alone, and *they* are together."⁷⁰ Once one becomes aware of the role imitation plays in one's desire, one must renounce either this desire or one's pride. One strategy, carried out by Julien in *The Red and the Black*, is to renounce (or pretend to have renounced) the object in order to possess it, but in contemporary literature, Girard thinks the more popular strategy is to renounce desire itself. Desire makes people into slaves, so pride demands its renunciation. In the final romantic pose, the hero claims to have accomplished without trying and almost without awareness what others accomplish by desire.⁷¹

Though Girard does not discuss it, contemporary advertising often expresses this strategy as well. Thus a popular motif in advertising is the rugged individual without models. Models convey ironic distance, suggesting a reluctance to commit to the

Advertising and the Concept of Brands (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2003), 237. Irma Zandl and Richard Leonard describe a group they call "Alpha" consumers, which comprises about five percent of the population but which has an inordinate influence on the desires of the population at large. See *Targeting the Trendsetting Consumer: How to Market Your Product or Service to Influential Buyers* (Homewood, IL: Business One Irwin, 1992), 12. Ed Keller and Jon Berry have been able to predict trends in society based on patterns they have found studying a group of consumers they call "Influentials." What is popular among the Influentials will soon be more widely popular. See *The Influentials* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 68. On the other hand, nearly two centuries ago, John Rae pointed out how the consumption of any product by the lower classes lessens the pleasure it might otherwise give to others. See *Statement of Some New Principles on the Subject of Political Economy, Exposing the Fallacies of the System of Free Trade, and of Some Other Doctrines Maintained in the "Wealth of Nations"* (Boston: Hillard Gray, 1834), 268.

⁷⁰ Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 55-57.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 272-75.

product.⁷² This model is, not merely without models, but even unimpressed with the very product her image is being used to hawk. To be the enviable one requires that one not envy or even appear to take notice of the enviers.⁷³ The person who buys this product is the one who marches to her own drummer, the one who rejects what society tells her she is supposed to do, the one who does not succumb to the mob that, like cattle, desires a competing brand. Of course, this is all a game for one is being cajoled into desiring (or not desiring) *like* the idealized model.

Mimetic desire possesses the subject so that she no longer controls herself. The subject abandons herself to and is possessed by the mimetic model.⁷⁴ The subject feels invaded by a supernatural creature and cannot respond. Some presence seems to be acting through the subject, as the subject has totally absorbed the desires of another.⁷⁵ It is with this dynamic in mind that Dostoevsky writes *The Demons* and *Brothers Karamazov* for in those works he explicitly interprets the fascination for models as demonic possession.⁷⁶ If there is any rivalry, it dissolves because the subject is “transformed into a harmless marionette; all opposition is abolished and the contradiction of desire dissolves.”⁷⁷ In consumerism, that rivalry may have never existed, but there is good reason to believe the possession Girard describes is at play. If so, alienation is too weak a word to describe the subject in consumer society for the possessed person has no self to suffer alienation: “there is only the other, and the other is at home and there to

⁷² Warren Berger, 258.

⁷³ John Berger, 133.

⁷⁴ René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 144.

⁷⁵ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 165.

⁷⁶ Girard, *Resurrection from the Underground*, 158.

⁷⁷ Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 144.

stay.”⁷⁸ Narcissism or coquetry is, in a sense, a form of possession in that it enables the coquette to possess the other with her love for herself. Girard believes that Freud is taken in by narcissism and so fails to describe it properly. Seeing it as generally a feminine desire that does not value objects, Freud does not guess that it might be, not an essence, but a strategy. Thus in knowing that desire attracts desire, the coquette knows more about desire than Freud does. Essentially, the coquette has no more self-sufficiency than the one who desires her, but her strategy’s success allows her to keep up the illusion for it provides her with a desire for herself that she can copy.⁷⁹ Both the narcissistic model and the transformed object lose their special value if they are attained, and thus the desires that they provoke are never satisfied. This dynamic will be discussed in the following section.

Insatiable Desire

In metaphysical desire, the acquired object never satisfies, and so the subject must pursue some new object, usually one more difficult to obtain. This description, usually applied by Girard to erotic relationships, also seems the perfect description of consumerism generally, and of status symbols particularly.⁸⁰ The metaphysical prestige

⁷⁸ Ibid., 141-42. Walter Brueggemann maintains that as people have invested more and more of their lives in consumerism, consumerism has become, not only a means of selling products, but also a “demonic spiritual force.” See “The Liturgy of Abundance, the Myth of Scarcity,” *The Christian Century*, 24-31 March 1999, 342. Likewise, John F. Kavanaugh argues that because in consumerism, people are what they possess, they are, in turn, possessed by their possessions. People are revealed as commodities and are deprived of their humanity. See *Following Christ in a Consumer Society: The Spirituality of Cultural Resistance* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 37.

⁷⁹ Girard, *Things Hidden*, 368-70.

⁸⁰ Many writers have commented upon this insatiable desire. For John Maynard Keynes the focus is on outdoing others. See *Essays in Persuasion* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1952), 365. Scitovsky focuses on one’s place in a social hierarchy. See Scitovsky, *Human Desire and Economic Satisfaction*, 137-38. Lane addresses keeping pace with others, trapped on what he calls the “hedonic treadmill.” He writes: “A rising tide may lift all boats, but if my satisfactions depend on doing better than others, the rising tide will not bring a surge of joy to my boat” (305). Schor points to the ever-increasing gap between desires and

that is sometimes assigned to the beloved is sure to disappear if the lover ever “conquered” the beloved⁸¹ because the status of the beloved is closely connected to the beloved’s coquetry or narcissism. The haughty self-love and divine self-sufficiency of the beloved is belied by an entanglement with the lowly lover. Marcel sees the “little band” as a group of cruel and utterly independent girls that would surely scorn his presence. Once he is admitted into their circle, their transcendence and self-sufficiency can no longer be maintained.⁸² For Marcel, as well as for Julien and Stavrogin (in *The Demons*), possessing the desired object strips it of all value. The hero might then be expected to realize the absurdity of such desire, but rather than renouncing all desire, he renounces only easy desires. The ambitious person’s soul is not persecuted by blind fate but is hollowed out by the abyss of nothingness.⁸³

income. See Juliet B. Schor, “Towards a New Politics of Consumption,” 450, 459. All of this was well-understood by Veblen, who argued that increases in general wealth could not lead to satisfaction, as it did not lead to reputability. See *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, 32. Thus, “increased consumption is essentially a treadmill phenomenon,” as Yngve Ramstad suggests in his commentary on Veblen. See “Veblen’s Propensity for Emulation: Is it Passé?” in *Thorstein Veblen in the Twenty-First Century: A Commemoration of the Theory of the Leisure Class, (1899-1999)*, ed. Doug Brown (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 1998), 8. According to David Myers, this is a part of broader psychological phenomenon related to the recalibration of “adaptation levels.” See “Money & Misery,” in *The Consuming Passion: Christianity & the Consumer Culture*, ed. Rodney Clapp (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 56. Likewise, Robert H. Frank argues: “Once we become accustomed to the bigger TV, the more spacious refrigerator, or the better loudspeakers, their favorable features fade into the background.” See *Luxury Fever: Why Money Fails to Satisfy in an Era of Excess* (New York: Free Press, 1999), 179-80. Schor suggests that television has become an important source of comparisons, and as people presented on television are generally wealthier than ordinary people, “they inflate the viewer’s perceptions of what others have, and by extension what is worth acquiring—what one must have in order to avoid being left behind.” See “Towards a New Politics of Consumption,” 449-50. Marsha L. Richins explains that first-hand, immediate information about lifestyles and consumption is limited to one’s acquaintances, and “people tend to know others who are similar to themselves.” Thus, “these first-hand sources of information tend to be appropriate and realistic. However, this is not necessarily the case for media images.” See “Social Comparison, Advertising, and Consumer Discontent,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 38 (February 1995): 599. “Our desires are growing principally because we have been comparing ourselves with wealthier people, not only with the Joneses down the block, but also with the Joneses in 90210 (who have benefited handsomely from two decades of growing income inequality).” See Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers, preface to *Do Americans Shop Too Much?*, ed. Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), xv.

⁸¹ Girard, *A Theater of Envy*, 117.

⁸² Girard, *Things Hidden*, 389.

⁸³ Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 164-66.

Girard says that a permanent restlessness is inherent to the mimetic principle,⁸⁴ which means first that possession of the object leads to a loss of desire, as when Dostoyevsky finally felt assured of the love of his wife-to-be,⁸⁵ and secondly that a challenge to possession may lead to a rekindling of desire, as when Troilus becomes aware that he could lose Cressida to the Greeks.⁸⁶ When desire is not rekindled in this way, the subject is disappointed for the possession of the object fails to transform the subject. The subject will then do one of two things: choose a new object or choose a new mediator.⁸⁷ In choosing models and objects in the future, a new guiding principle is in place: “Every pleasant and willing object is spurned, and every desire that spurns our own desire is passionately embraced; only disdain, hostility, and rejection appear desirable. Mimetic desire efficiently programs its victims for maximum frustration.”⁸⁸ Desire moves beyond the pleasure principle in order to preserve itself as desire.⁸⁹ Labeling this strategy masochism is merely a way for those doing the labeling to avoid facing the contradiction in desire that the “masochist” has revealed.⁹⁰ In consumer society, the objects are all for sale, but some are too dear; the models do not resist their disciples’ imitation, but they do not share their divinity so readily. All consumer models seem to be the frustrating kind.

⁸⁴ Girard, *A Theater of Envy*, 35.

⁸⁵ Girard, *Resurrection from the Underground*, 42.

⁸⁶ Girard, *A Theater of Envy*, 130. Albert O. Hirschman discusses this loss and rekindling of desire in terms of consumer goods that come to be taken for granted. See *Shifting Involvements: Private Interest and Public Action* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 32.

⁸⁷ Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 89-91. Thomas Frank claims that despite their self-professed antimaterialism and suspicion of consumerism, young people today have a “heightened appetite for the new. Unlike their parents, the hip new youth are far more receptive to obsolescence; buying goods for the moment, discarding them quickly, and moving on to the next.” See *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 122.

⁸⁸ Girard, *A Theater of Envy*, 47.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁹⁰ Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 182-83.

If the goal of acquiring things is tied to creating status rather than to any inherent value in the object itself, it is obvious that these things will yield happiness only if they do in fact provide the desired status, something they cannot do. In Hegel's master/slave dialectic, the master has a problem: he desires the recognition that the slave offers him, but in order for recognition to count, it needs to come from someone to whom he gives recognition.⁹¹ A similar dilemma faces the buyer of status symbols. As one's income rises, one is capable of buying more of the luxury goods one has desired. This increased status, however, places one among new peers who also have these status symbols. Mel Zelenak explains that the "essence of emulation is the tendency of people in each socioeconomic class to choose as their goal the plan of living established by the next higher income group."⁹² Those who might be impressed by them are now beneath one, and their jealousy is of little worth if recognized at all. For example, a person living in an affluent neighborhood may very well fail to feel that her \$30,000 automobile is an object of jealousy when everyone in her neighborhood has an automobile of at least that price. She is very far indeed from recognizing that her house's plumbing and electricity could be objects of jealousy for billions of people. She, therefore, no longer knows to value them as status symbols. She needs to inspire jealousy in her equals, but to the degree that she is successful, they are no longer her equals, and she must arouse the jealousy of a new group. This spiral is endless, and thus status symbols would seem to be inherently unsatisfying. Any satisfaction that a new promotion or a new purchase may provide, therefore, is always fleeting. The enjoyment is probably greatest, in fact, in the anticipation when one can imagine the satisfaction without also having the rising

⁹¹ G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 116-18.

⁹² Zelenak, 301.

expectations that will swallow that satisfaction. The dissatisfaction that follows is not simply the result of jealousy toward peers, but rather the result and goal of marketing.

Disappointed by the lack of transformation that results in acquiring the desired object, the subject comes to desire objects that cannot be so easily obtained. Girard writes: “By definition, metaphysical desire is never aimed at an accessible object.”

While most everyone in Proust’s novel longs to enter the Faubourg, for Charlus, it holds no fascination whatsoever because he was born into it.⁹³ A simple rule of this strange economy follows: “The value of an object grows in proportion to the resistance met with in acquiring it.”⁹⁴ From this it follows that the most valuable and desirable object of all is the one that is completely unattainable. Experience may teach that all objects possessed are ultimately unsatisfactory, but it has nothing to say about unattainable objects.⁹⁵

Desire thus decides that the unattainable object is the best and thus that the invincible model is the best guide.⁹⁶ Jean Kilbourne says that women who are powerful in advertising “are elusive and distant; ‘She is the first woman who refused to take your phone calls,’ says one ad. As if it were a good thing to be rude and inconsiderate. Why should any of us, male or female, be interested in someone who won’t take our phone calls, who either cares so little for us or is so manipulative?”⁹⁷ The answer should by now be obvious, even if unsatisfactory: the invincible model or object is the only one that has never disappointed the subject’s unrealistic expectations. Mark Crispin Miller describes this invincibility of the model: “Beyond desire, and with a perfect body, s/he

⁹³ Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 209-10.

⁹⁴ Girard, *Things Hidden*, 295.

⁹⁵ Girard, *A Theater of Envy*, 118.

⁹⁶ Girard, *Things Hidden*, 327.

⁹⁷ Kilbourne, 148.

must view us hungering viewers with irony, seeing how ludicrous it is to be mortal and a person, and therefore having something left to lose.”⁹⁸

The consumer model does not come into conflict with the consumer, but that is in part because this guide is so far above the consumer. Indeed, such a model exists on an entirely different plane, a different reality—that of mass media. In Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*, Achilles seems to exist on a different plane, but Ulysses understands that his success is not the result of any essential difference in Achilles. His pride is the result of adulation, not vice versa. When the admiration of his fellow soldiers is removed, he falls. Girard says that “in the hypermimetic world that Shakespeare is describing, or in our own media-crazy world, the value of human beings is measured primarily by something we call their ‘visibility.’”⁹⁹ Television and print models possess visibility in a most powerful way, and their visibility is their power. Jeremy Iggers comments upon the difference between everyday people and the people who populate the world of advertising. The latter live happier and more exciting lives than the former. An aura surrounds these people, and they live more intensely. Indeed, they “are gods. We want to be like them.” The consumer can be like them by buying their products. The product is, like the communion wafer, the “bridge between the temporal and spiritual worlds.” Iggers concludes: “To be somebody is to be acknowledged in the image world.”¹⁰⁰ Stuart Ewen agrees: “In a society where conditions of anonymity fertilize the desire ‘to be somebody,’ the *dream of identity*, the *dream of wholeness*, is intimately woven

⁹⁸ Mark Crispin Miller, *Boxed In: The Culture of TV* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 15-16.

⁹⁹ Girard, *A Theater of Envy*, 143-455.

¹⁰⁰ Jeremy Iggers, *The Garden of Eating: Food, Sex, and the Hunger for Meaning* (New York: BasicBooks, 1996), 75-76).

together with the desire to be known; to be visible; to be documented, for all to see.”¹⁰¹

Here, Iggers and Ewen are quite right to equate visibility with identity in consumer culture.

Because the subject chooses an invincible model, the subject’s own self-worth is diminished. In both Proust and Dostoyevsky, the subjects choose mediators that reject them. In Proust, the snob is almost always superior to the model but nonetheless longs for acceptance by the model and feels inferior to the model.¹⁰² Both Swann and Marcel are drawn to those who cannot appreciate their superiority. Marcel is attracted to Albertine because he thinks her insensitive and brutal. The less accessible, the more fascinating the other becomes, and the despiritualized, instinctive automaton is totally inaccessible. The divine becomes the inanimate, thereby radically denying one’s own existence.¹⁰³ Perhaps, no model is less accessible and more despiritualized than the model of advertising, and the callous disregard of the “little band” that fascinated Marcel until he saw that it was an illusion of his own making is likely never to be belied in the case of the professional consumer model. The underground man thinks he is quite superior to the group of young men and does not desire to be with them, but the feeling of being excluded from their celebration stirs in him a desperate need to be invited. The contempt he imagines them to feel for him gives them great importance.¹⁰⁴ Obviously, much advertising plays on just this sense of exclusion and this desire to belong. According to Girard, people “make their own destinies and become less capable of breaking away from the mimetic obstacle the more they allow themselves to be

¹⁰¹ Stuart Ewen, *All Consuming Images: The Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 94.

¹⁰² Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 68-70.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 282-87.

¹⁰⁴ Girard, *Resurrection from the Underground*, 53-54.

fascinated by it.”¹⁰⁵ One may think here of the cruel judgments anorexics hear their models pronounce for these deities seem never to be satisfied with their loyal subjects’ imitation.

Even when consumers want to be different, they thereby want the same thing. Girard says that when rivals want to become different, they end up becoming more and more alike.¹⁰⁶ The goal of leaving behind the “beaten paths forces everyone inevitably into the same ditch.”¹⁰⁷ Dostoevsky’s underground man is most like the others when he thinks he is most cut off from them.¹⁰⁸ All underground individuals think that they are most unique precisely when they are more alike, and by “insisting on what makes one different (grasping identity, holding on to a particular foundation), one is constantly reducing oneself to the same as others who are doing the same. The more one thinks oneself different, the more the same one becomes.”¹⁰⁹ Thus, they *all* say together with Dostoevsky’s character, “I’m all by myself and *they* are everyone.”¹¹⁰

The resulting unanimity can become a kind of god. Though Nietzsche opposes the herd mentality, he endorses the Dionysian spirit, which is in fact little more than mob brutality and stupidity.¹¹¹ The individual is, as it were, possessed, not by the god, but by the crowd taken to be the god. Likewise, though he struggles against the verdict of the crowd, Job finds it hard to separate the unanimous voice of the community from the voice of God.¹¹² Girard also compares Stephen Daedalus’ “possession” by Eglington and his

¹⁰⁵ Girard, *Things Hidden*, 189.

¹⁰⁶ Girard, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, 22.

¹⁰⁷ Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 100.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 261.

¹⁰⁹ Alison, 180.

¹¹⁰ Girard, *Resurrection from the Underground*, 58.

¹¹¹ Girard, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, 173.

¹¹² René Girard, *Job: The Victim of His People*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 131.

colleagues to that of the Gerasene madman by the demon named Legion, as Stephen joins the mimetic unanimity of the others even against himself.¹¹³ But of all the examples of mimetic contagion, Peter, according to Girard, is the most spectacular. He sincerely and profoundly loves Jesus, but when in the midst of a crowd that is hostile to Jesus, Peter cannot help but imitate its hostility. He becomes a mere puppet of mimetic desire.¹¹⁴ Unanimity generally occludes the truth and is nothing but a mimetic and tyrannical phenomenon.¹¹⁵ It is the crowd mentality that motivates the herd of pigs to throw itself off the cliff in the story of the Gerasene madman. All the pigs follow the extraordinary action. Girard compares this conduct to fashions in modern society. If one pig stumbles accidentally, it may start a new fashion of plunging into the abyss that all would follow. All are drawn to the fabulous gesture that cannot be undone, and thus they rush after the daring innovator that first fell off the cliff.¹¹⁶

Though everyone's desire is mimetic,¹¹⁷ Girard indicates that there is freedom in the choice of models. Yet, in consumer society, people may not even know who their models are. They borrow their desires from advertising.¹¹⁸ In other words, a corporation is feigning desire in its own product, and the consumer is "buying" the act, "buying" the desire, and buying the product. It might seem a limitation on personal freedom to think that desire is borrowed from one's father or friend, but how much more so if the desire is

¹¹³ Girard, *A Theater of Envy*, 262-63.

¹¹⁴ Girard, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, 19.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 118.

¹¹⁶ Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 183. Jean-Michel Oughourlian identifies the mimetic crowd as a new self into which all the individual selves are absorbed (228).

¹¹⁷ Though from the universality of mimetic desire, it does not follow that everyone is "possessed," the notion of widespread possession is not new to Christian theology for the early church considered everyone possessed prior to baptism. See Walter Wink, *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces That Determine Human Existence* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 51.

¹¹⁸ After observing that children learn through imitation, Carol Moog cites experiments conducted by research psychologist Albert Bandura that "showed that kids imitated the behavior of others who were shown to them on videotapes just as much as if they were 'real.'" See "*Are They Selling Her Lips?*": *Advertising and Identity* (New York: William Morrow, 1990), 48.

borrowed from strangers¹¹⁹ who, in fact, never possessed the borrowed desire in the first place. If one is blind to one's choice of models, one has abdicated one's freedom. One's desire is not so much borrowed, as it is loaned anonymously. One does not imitate; one is possessed. The myriad of consumer choices convinces the buyer that she has great personal freedom, but she fails to realize that her desire to purchase an item is not her own, is in fact no one's, but is rather a fabrication loaned from the product's producers. These desires are held in common because all are subject to the same mimesis (if there is any differentiation, it is along broad categories of advertising demographics, like white males, age 18-35). Consumers desire the product because they see models wearing, using, or eating the product. They want to be like the models. The object becomes all the more desirable because so many people want it. That is, at first people may want the product only because of the models, but soon they want it because everyone wants it. This is mimesis on a grand scale. It may even help to provide the owner of such a product with some satisfaction, though short-lived. Within the consumer society especially, there is a great illusion of freedom. Freedom of choice between countless identical products and the openness of the marketplace give consumers a feeling of freedom, even as they are manipulated by the producers and advertisers of the products they purchase. Each purchase provides the feeling of power and freedom while in fact taking power and freedom from them.

¹¹⁹ Michael Schudson states this obvious objection against advertising as an outside, corrupting influence on the community. See *Advertising, the Uneasy Persuasion: Its Dubious Impact on American Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 241.

Conclusion

This chapter has suggested that the principle of mimetic desire is the very basis of consumerism, in particular, of advertising and status symbols. While in Girard's analysis, mimetic desire leads to rivalry and violence, this link is broken in consumer society, both by mass production and by the quarantining of celebrities and models from the general population in the world of the media. These models do not become violent rivals because they are external, not internal mediators. The products do not become objects of violent dispute between model and disciple because the model does not have the exclusive right to the product for this would obviously be antithetical to the very goal of advertising. However, the model may still become the object of metaphysical desire, and this in turn, leads to self-condemnation. Advertising constantly places before consumers faces, bodies, and lives with which they are meant to compare themselves. These comparisons should be and are unfavorable. Compared to the media gods, the consumers are lowly, needy, beasts who hope against hope that, by sharing the product advertised with the model, they will also share some of the model's being and divinity. Of course, this hope is continually dashed by each product, but the pursuit is endless. The freedoms upon which this country never tires of congratulating itself serve, in fact, primarily to open this endless, desperate chase to everyone. Now, all share the same dreams and the same dissatisfactions. The individual is part of a mass being known as the crowd. The next chapter will examine the authorship of Kierkegaard in order to better understand human comparison and the problem posed by comparison for identity.

CHAPTER IV

Like Girard, Kierkegaard has a keen understanding of mimesis, but his focus is on comparison, and he seems to be more acutely aware of the dangers associated with comparison and is more determined to avoid these dangers in his own writing. Kierkegaard's authorship is marked by many forms of indirect communication. Irony is a central theme and strategy in his writing. Many of his works are signed by pseudonymous authors, and those that are not are often filled with parables. A favorite vehicle for his parabolic writing is "the birds of the air and the lilies of the field." There is certainly more than one reason for all this indirection, but the discourses on the birds and the lilies suggest perhaps the most central. Kierkegaard recommends the birds and the lilies as teachers because these teachers, unlike human ones, do not invite comparison. This is also Kierkegaard's primary reason for adopting the non-Christian pseudonyms. Only by indirect communication can the teacher leave the pupil alone before God. If Christianity were doctrine, it might be adequately expounded in direct statements, but Christianity requires a choice. In Christendom, indirection becomes even more necessary as one cannot seek directly to convert those who call themselves believers. These "Christians" are prone to comparisons and to the imitation of one another but are reluctant to imitate Christ though this is the essential Christian demand according to Kierkegaard. In consumer society, these comparisons proliferate as the idea of imitating Christ becomes more and more foreign. Indirect communication enables Kierkegaard to leave his reader—that single individual—alone, free of comparison, while at the same time allowing him to explicate the importance of this freedom.

Comparison pervades contemporary society, and while Kierkegaard finds it in his own culture and presumably in all human cultures, this chapter will show that it is particularly widespread and problematic in consumer society. First, I will sketch the general problems with comparisons as Kierkegaard understands them. Most fundamental for this dissertation is the way comparison leads one to focus on the standards and judgments of others rather than on one's own self and one's relation to God. Here any sense of identity is confused and scattered among the crowd and the endless network of comparisons. I will examine in some detail *The Sickness unto Death* in order to show how consumerism promotes despair, which is, according to Kierkegaard, a refusal to be oneself—a refusal to live in faith, resting transparently in God. Finally, this chapter will explore the ways this society leads consumers to become lost in the crowd. Kierkegaard explains how Christendom is itself a kind of Christian crowd mentality in which Christians are again lost in comparisons. A similar argument will be made in Chapter 8 when the Church's implicit condoning of consumerism is discussed. The goal of this chapter, however, will be to bring Kierkegaard's authorial strategies and discussion of the self to bear in diagnosing the problem of identity in consumer society.

The Case against Comparison

As the previous two chapters have shown, consumerism demands constant comparison, and according to Kierkegaard, comparison is the source of human worry: “All *worldly* worry has its basis in a person's unwillingness to be contented with being a human being, in his worried craving for distinction by way of comparison.”¹ If the

¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Kierkegaard's Writings 15 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 171. Nassau William Senior

worriers are concerned with being distinguished from their peers, it stands to reason that they would only find added cause for suffering in any comfort offered by these peers.² Kierkegaard writes, “[I]n order to avoid comparison the worried person will be very reluctant to have any *other* human being talk to him about it. Very well, then, let us put it this way: Should one not be able to learn from the birds about this worry.” Among the lilies and the birds, the worrier is free of comparisons. Kierkegaard tells a story about a bird, who like a human being, learns to worry by making comparisons. He describes an ordinary wood-dove that is content to let God take care of it everyday, but when it begins to listen to two tame doves who have the assurance of their owner’s fortune, the wood-dove, through comparison, comes to realize its own lack of security for surely it would be nice to know that there would be sufficient food for tomorrow.³ Thus this wood-dove, like a person, learns to worry by comparing itself to others.

Through comparisons, human beings become discontented with their status. They compare themselves to God, wanting a security of their own independent from God. In this way they learn to “worry about making a living.” This worry is also the product of comparison with others. Instead of looking to the bird of the air, the worried person looks to the diversity of human life.⁴ Of course there are people who do not have enough to eat, and their worries are not the products of comparison, but the worldly worry of

calls the desire for distinction “the most powerful of human passions” and claims that it turns people into slaves. See *An Outline of the Science of Political Economy, with Appendices* (New York: Farrar, 1939), 12. Some commentators defend this kind of comparison. Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood ask: “How else should one relate to the Joneses if not by keeping up with them?” See *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption* (London: Routledge, 1996), 90. Kierkegaard suggests compassion.

² Materialistic people are more likely to be concerned with such comparisons. They have lower self-esteem and greater narcissism, and they are “particularly concerned with social comparisons and the opinions of others, both of which can often lead them to feel badly about themselves.” See Tim Kasser, Richard M. Ryan, Charles E. Couchman, and Kennon M. Sheldon, “Materialist Values: Their Causes and Consequences,” in *Psychology and Consumer Culture: The Struggle for a Good Life in a Materialistic World*, ed. Tim Kasser and Allen D. Kanner (Washington: American Psychological Association, 2004), 20.

³ Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, 171-77.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 178-79

comparison spawns an insatiable hunger.⁵ This ravenous hunger is unknown to the birds of the air for they are satisfied with what God provides. The Christian too must be satisfied with what God provides, but the non-Christian is never satisfied: “Just as there has never lived a bird that has ever taken more than *enough*, so there has never lived a rich pagan who has obtained *enough*. No, there is no hunger as insatiable as abundance’s unnatural hunger.”⁶ The lily of the field worries not and yet is clothed more magnificently than Solomon. Likewise, the human being is clothed as human being more beautifully even than the lily, but “[w]orldly worry always seeks to lead a human being into the small-minded unrest of comparisons, away from the lofty calmness of simple thoughts. To be clothed, then, means to be a human being—and therefore to be well clothed. Worldly worry is preoccupied with clothes and the dissimilarity of clothes.”⁷ As has already been shown, consumerism spawns this insatiable hunger and preoccupation with fashion.

This insatiable desire necessitates endless pursuit and labor. Worry arises, not only when one compares oneself to others, but also when one compares today to tomorrow. The bird does not worry about making a living for it lives always in the present.⁸ Of course the bird cannot help but focus on today for the bird lacks human consciousness in which the eternal and the temporal collide. Because of this collision, human beings are aware of tomorrow.⁹ Still, the human being must resist the comparison

⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Kierkegaard’s Writings 16 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 445.

⁶ Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, 35.

⁷ Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, 188.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 179. For Douglas Meeks, this lack of concern for the future is key to God’s economy for the bread that God gives is manna that cannot be stored (178). Similarly, Walter Brueggemann observes that there is no record of Pharaoh ever taking a day off, whereas the Israelites, trusting that there is enough bread, take off every Sabbath (343).

⁹ Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, 195.

of tomorrow. Kierkegaard explains by means of a parable in which a rower turns his back to his goal. When a person is eternally absorbed in today, his back is turned on tomorrow, but if “he turns around, the eternal becomes confused before his eyes and becomes the next day.” Faith turns its back to the eternal to have it present, but when one turns to face the future, one is distanced from the eternal, and “the next day becomes a monstrous confused figure, like that in a fairytale.”¹⁰ One approaches the eternal, is helped by the eternal, and lives in the eternal by living in today. While comparison is the source of worry, living in today is the source of joy for only then can one be truly present to oneself.¹¹ Kierkegaard defines the eternal as the difference between right and wrong,¹² other differences (like those between human beings that are exploited by consumerism) are fleeting. To live in the eternal, therefore, is to live as if only the difference between right and wrong mattered, as if differences of status, style, and appearance were transitory and ultimately irrelevant. The Christian should, like the bird and the lily, speak only of today, but the non-Christian speaks always of tomorrow. In anxiety, the non-Christian contends with herself and lends the powerless next day her strength.¹³

Comparison destroys, not only joy, but also love.¹⁴ In later chapters, I will suggest Christian love as an alternative and rectification of consumerism. If Kierkegaard is correct here, the comparisons of consumerism and Christian love are mutually exclusive. Christian love does not envy because it is not based on comparisons. It does

¹⁰ Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, 73-74.

¹¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Without Authority*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Kierkegaard's Writings 18 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 39.

¹² Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, 207-08.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹⁴ Comparison even compromises the lust and desire that seem to be so omnipresent in consumer society. See Kilbourne, 133 and Marsha L. Richins, “Social Comparison and the Idealized Images of Advertising,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 18 (June 1991): 81.

not first love according to preferences but simply loves.¹⁵ Love is lost by way of comparison. It is made finite though the debt of love must always be infinite. Comparison loses the moment in which love should have expressed itself, and, according to Kierkegaard, losing the moment is the same as becoming momentary. Just as the rower must turn his back to tomorrow, so too must the lover. Neither can one compare one's love to that of other people for the debt must always remain infinite. Love cannot survive without this infinite debt, and thus comparison is disastrous for love.¹⁶

Indeed, through comparison one loses one's humanity. The numerical, Kierkegaard claims, has become the law of existence and leads people to live comparatively so that "human existence dissolves in the nonsense of comparison, the mud of numbers."¹⁷ Kierkegaard describes a lily that loses its joy because it learns of a more beautiful kind of lily. It even begins to doubt whether it is a lily at all. Similarly, the worried person is so lost in comparison that she finally even forgets that she is a human being for she thinks herself totally different from other people. The simple thought of one's being "clothed" in one's humanity just as the lily is clothed in its being a lily is forgotten in the proliferation of comparisons.¹⁸ The person caught in the web of comparisons comes to know only that world, which is in fact nothing. She knows all about comparisons, but knows nothing real and must live in this world of nothingness.¹⁹ Comparison is the crowd's law of existence. This law states that happiness is to be like the others and have what they have regardless of the kinds of lives they lead. The

¹⁵ Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 36.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 183-86.

¹⁷ Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, trans. Howard V. Hong, Edna H. Hong, and Gregor Malantschuk (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967), 3: 2999.

¹⁸ Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, 169, 189.

¹⁹ Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, 56.

numerical one is not concerned with evaluating the worthiness or shabbiness of her life but only with whether it conforms to the lives of others.²⁰ Kierkegaard claims that the crowd is the proper category for animals but not for human beings. Yet human beings “plunge into the crowd of comparisons” to make themselves into numbers, becoming thereby beasts regardless of how they fare in these comparisons, whether they are lowly or distinguished.²¹

Comparison, according to Kierkegaard is not only destructive but also forbidden. Christians must walk along the narrow path, and “the narrowness is simply that each one separately must become the single individual who must press forward through this narrow pass along the narrow way where no comparison cools, but also where no comparison kills with its insidious chill.” When comparison ceases, the illusion that there is always more time disappears, and one is left alone, “confessing before God . . . guilty beyond comparison, just as the requirement that requires purity of heart is beyond all comparison.”²² One must always stand alone as the single individual before God. In this relationship with God, there can be no comparison with others or with their God-relationships. Before God, all is required, so that there are no grounds for comparing. God has the absolute right to require everything, but one’s God-relationship is also the greatest happiness so that comparisons with anyone else are forgotten.²³ One must not compare oneself to others so as to praise oneself for one must always relate oneself to the ideal. But neither should one compare oneself with others so that one despairs over

²⁰ Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, 3:2986. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer suggest that through consumer society and its culture industry, the human being has become merely a member of a species. See “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” in *The Consumer Society Reader*, ed. Juliet B. Schor and Douglas B. Holt (New York: The New Press, 2000), 16.

²¹ Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, 190.

²² *Ibid.*, 152-53.

²³ Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, 2:1350.

oneself for one must always keep to oneself in this way. Here Kierkegaard and Girard are quite similar for this condemnation of oneself in the name of some other is precisely the danger of metaphysical desire. Emphasis on comparison “is a worldly attachment in the service of vanity.”²⁴ Kierkegaard judges: “The moment of comparison is, namely, a selfish moment, a moment that wants to be *for itself*; this is the break, is the fall.”²⁵ Paradoxically then it is through this focus on the other that one becomes selfish. This is the selfishness and preoccupation with others that pervades consumerism and advertising.

This section has examined Kierkegaard’s discussion of the dangers of comparison. Consumerism promotes an understanding of identity based on comparison. Consumers know themselves and their worth by comparing themselves to others—those who have more or less, those who wear similar or more stylish clothing, those who serve as models for products in advertising, etc. Kierkegaard’s analysis indicates that this understanding of identity will result in worry, insatiable hunger, and the loss of one’s joy, one’s love, and even one’s humanity (or one’s ability to recognize this humanity). All these maleficent symptoms share a common cause—comparison, and all are indicators of a common disease—the loss of self. The next section will seek to elucidate this disease more thoroughly and systematically with the help of a particular pseudonymous work, in which the concepts of sin and despair are given their fullest treatment.

Despair and the Denial of Self

After discussing the problem with comparisons as portrayed in Kierkegaard’s diverse writings, but before turning to his treatment of the crowd and Christendom, I will

²⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Kierkegaard’s Writings 10 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 30-31.

²⁵ Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 183.

examine *The Sickness unto Death*. Kierkegaard said that in this work, “it was granted to me to illuminate Christianity on a scale greater than I had ever dreamed possible.”²⁶ He says of the pseudonymous author Anti-Climacus that he differs “very essentially” from Johannes Climacus in that the latter “humorously denies that he himself is Christian and, in consequence, can only make indirect attacks, and, in consequence, must retract everything in humor—while Anti-Climacus is very far from denying that he himself is Christian, which is evident in the direct attack.”²⁷ In a draft of an editor’s note for the book, he suggests that the book is written by a kind of physician who does not diagnose anyone in particular but who “merely describes the sickness” while at the same time continually defining “what ‘faith’ is, which he seems to think he himself possesses to an extraordinary degree, and this presumably accounts for his name: Anti-Climacus.”²⁸ The sickness described is one that the author/physician seems to think pertains to all people, and this dissertation suggests that the sickness has become even more virulent and more difficult to treat in consumer society.

This sickness is despair. Anti-Climacus says that christianly understood even death itself, much less temporal suffering from illness, hardship, or cares, is not the sickness unto death. Despair is lack of faith. The definition of faith is equivalent to the definition of the absence of despair: “in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it.” There are three forms of despair: in despair not to be conscious of having a self, in despair not to will to be oneself, and in despair to will to be oneself. In a sense the first can be collapsed into the

²⁶ Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, 6:6361.

²⁷ Søren Kierkegaard, *Letters and Documents*, trans. Henrik Rosenmeier, Kierkegaard's Writings 25 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 299 (Letter 213).

²⁸ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Kierkegaard's Writings 19 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 160-61.

other two for the first is simply the failure to realize the problem posed in the other two forms. Of the remaining two, Anti-Climacus suggests that if the human self established itself, there could only be the form of not willing to be oneself. There could not be the form—in despair, willing to be oneself for it “is specifically the expression for the complete dependence of the relation (of the self), the expression for the inability of the self to arrive at or to be in equilibrium and rest by itself, but only, in relating itself to itself, by relating itself to that which has established the entire relation.”²⁹

Thus the atheist cannot acknowledge this final form of despair. While many avid consumers are also ardent “believers,” consumerism is itself a secular worldview that most emphatically denies a God that establishes the entire relation of the self. Consumerism does not confront the believer with a clear choice—consumerism or God, but it does generate a hidden choice with existential consequences: do you take your identity to be the product of an infinite creator or to be the creation of infinite products? Consumerism is based upon (to reapply Kierkegaard’s words regarding the third form of despair) the “inability of the self to arrive at or to be in equilibrium and rest by itself.” Rather than suggesting that the self depends upon God, consumerism, as this dissertation has argued, implicitly claims that the self depends upon consumer goods and models for its establishment. Selves must not reach equilibrium for, if they did, they would cease to be good consumers. Consumerism thus fails to acknowledge the possibility of the third form of despair, but it does seek to promote the second form by portraying its models as selves in equilibrium. These selves, if they existed, would in fact be in despair to will to be themselves, but again the consumer ethos does not recognize the possibility of such

²⁹ Ibid., 8, 47-49, 13-14.

despair, and it tells all the non-models that they should pursue the paradisiacal life of the models.

Consumerism encourages people to desire what they do not have—whether it be the products it advertises or the very being of the people who advertise the products. While it may seem that such people are in despair over what they lack or fail to achieve, Anti-Climacus suggests that they are really despairing over themselves and now want to be rid of themselves. If an ambitious man feels he must become Caesar in order to be worth anything, then it is true that he will despair over his failure, but he can now no longer “bear to be himself. Consequently he does not despair because he did not get to be Caesar but despairs over himself because he did not get to be Caesar.” So too for all those who fail to achieve the model’s supposed self-sufficiency. Anti-Climacus continues: “This self, which, if it had become Caesar, would have been in seventh heaven (a state, incidentally, that in another sense is just as despairing), this self is now utterly intolerable to him.”³⁰

This parenthetical note is enormously important for it shows that even if the impossible dream of the would-be Caesar or of the consumer comes true, the dreamer has only shifted from one form of despair to another. Even the successful consumers, even the models who believe the lies consumerism speaks on their behalf, are still in despair. The passage continues its discussion of the person who has failed to become Caesar but in so doing reveals the equality of the two positions. The ambitious man’s failure is not intolerable; rather, the self that failed to become Caesar is intolerable; or even more precisely, it is intolerable that he cannot rid himself of his self. If he had succeeded in becoming Caesar, he would despairingly have gotten rid of himself, but he failed and so

³⁰ Ibid., 19.

cannot get rid of himself. Of course, he “would not have become himself by becoming Caesar but would have been rid of himself, and by not becoming Caesar he despairs over not being able to get rid of himself.”³¹ Ambitious consumers too either fail and despair over not being able to get rid of themselves or succeed (if such a thing is possible) and despairingly lose themselves; *either they fail to become the model or succeed in replacing themselves with a model.*

Despair Defined by the Relations of the Constituents of the Self

Despair can be defined by the relationship between finitude and infinitude. Any human life that wants to be infinite is despairing for the self is a synthesis of the finite and the infinite. Without the limit of the finite, the self becomes fantastic, but this does not mean that this person without a self becomes strange in the eyes of others. “Such things do not create much of a stir in the world, for a self is the last thing the world cares about and the most dangerous thing of all for a person to show signs of having.” This loss of self goes unnoticed because the world is secular, and “the secular mentality is nothing more or less than the attribution of infinite worth to the indifferent. The secular view always clings tightly to the difference between man and man.” Here Anti-Climacus might well be defining consumerism for it places infinite worth on the indifferent “goods” it produces, and it constantly judges one person in the name of some difference from the norm or ideal. Anti-Climacus says that secularism cannot understand “the reductionism and narrowness involved in having lost oneself, not by being volatilized in the infinite, but by being completely finitized, by becoming a number instead of a self,

³¹ Ibid.

just one more man, just one more repetition of this everlasting *Einerlei* [one and the same].”³²

Thus as the one kind of despair loses the self in the infinite, the other kind “seems to permit itself to be tricked out of its self by ‘the others.’ Surrounded by hordes of men, absorbed in all sorts of secular matters, more and more shrewd about the ways of the world—such a person forgets himself, forgets his name divinely understood, does not dare to believe in himself, finds it too hazardous to be himself and far easier and safer to be like the others, to become a copy, a number, a mass man.” Like the other, this form is not noticed by the world. Indeed, such a despairing person “has gained an increasing capacity for going along superbly in business and social life, indeed, for making a great success in the world. Here there is no delay, no difficulty with his self and its infinitizing; he is as smooth as a rolling stone, as *courant* [passable] as a circulating coin. He is so far from being regarded as a person in despair that he is just what a human being is supposed to be.”³³ The Christian, who knows what is truly frightening, fears for a sin to remain secret; the world, on the other hand, counsels that it is better to remain quiet for it is dangerous to expose oneself in this way. But by remaining silent, one loses what would not have been lost so easily by all the risking in the world—one’s self. If one ventures wrongly, life punishes one, but if one never ventures, one is never corrected; one may thus gain all earthly advantages, but lose one’s self. Such people live well in temporality and can be quite esteemed, but no matter how important they become, they

³² Ibid., 30-33.

³³ Ibid., 33-34. Mark Crispin Miller points out that this smoothness is promised to consumers. See *Boxed In*, 327. Philip Goodchild notes a similar dynamic at work in the realm of thought, which is also structured as a market: “In such a market, validity is constituted by exchangeability. Those thoughts which offer themselves for general consumption, which satisfy base interests, which flatter the complacency of the consumer, which gratify desires, which devalue alternatives, are those which can circulate the most freely.” See *Capitalism and Religion: The Price of Piety* (London: Routledge, 2002), 250.

have no self before God.³⁴ Here again is the paradox that recurs in various forms throughout this dissertation—the selfish person with no self (just as it is the selfless person who is most truly a self).

Despair can also be defined by the relationship between possibility and necessity. The self is possible and necessary; it is itself but also must become itself. When the self lacks necessity, it becomes an abstract possibility and flounders in what it might be without ever becoming any of these possibilities. Without any commitment to any one path to serve as a constraint, everything seems possible: “The instant something appears to be possible, a new possibility appears, and finally these phantasmagoria follow one another in such rapid succession that it seems as if everything were possible, and this is exactly the final moment, the point at which the individual himself becomes a mirage.” Such a self lacks the “power to obey, to submit to the necessity in one’s life, to what may be called one’s limitations.” This self fails to recognize itself as a definite something, losing itself in fantasy. “Even in seeing oneself in a mirror it is necessary to recognize oneself, for if one does not, one does not see *oneself* but only a human being.”³⁵ Consumers learn to see themselves as having no necessity but only sheer possibility. With the right products they can become anything. They are more mannequins than selves, ready to try on anything without commitment and without any sense of who they are beneath their costumes.

When on the other hand the self lacks possibility, it is also in despair. To have possibility is to have hope, and true hope is not concerned with the kinds of possibilities sold in the marketplace. “What is decisive is that with God everything is possible.”

³⁴ Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, 34-35.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 35-37.

One can only realize this decisively when “humanly speaking, there is no possibility.” The modern consumer always has possibilities offered by the market and thus may never arrive at this decisive moment. Thus the consumer does not have God, and the one “who does not have a God does not have a self, either.” Without God, the person is in despair; this person lacks true possibility and suffocates in necessity.³⁶ In these despairs defined by the relations of the constituents of the self, the apparent poles are, in fact, united, so that consumerism breeds both a lacking of necessity and a lacking of possibility, both a lacking of infinity and a lacking of finitude.

Despair Defined by Consciousness

Anti-Climacus explores the idea that a human being can be unhappy without knowing it. While this may sound like some of the older anti-consumerism arguments that have been dismissed as elitist and paternalistic, the sophistication of Anti-Climacus’ argument should give glib critics pause. Just as people fail to respect truth as the criterion of both itself and the false, so too do they fail to regard their relating of themselves to the truth as the highest good for “the sensate in them usually far outweighs their intellectuality.” Anti-Climacus describes a man who imagines himself to be happy, but who is unhappy in relation to the truth; this man does not want to be torn from his illusion, and he regards anyone who tries to show him his error as a deadly enemy. He lacks the courage to face the truth and accept that he is spirit: “However vain and conceited men may be, they usually have a very meager conception of themselves nevertheless, that is, they have no conception of being spirit, the absolute that a human

³⁶ Ibid., 38-40. Craig M. Gay points to this discussion in giving Kierkegaard credit as a critic of consumerism.

being can be; but vain and conceited they are—on the basis of comparison.”³⁷

Consumers are vain or insecure on the basis of comparison with others, but they fail to recognize the individual’s existence before God that is not to be judged on the basis of comparison. A sensate person who compares favorably with others prefers to remain in the flattering crowd than to be alone before God. The person who is ignorant of being in despair is furthest from being conscious of herself as spirit, but might feel quite happy and seem happy to others.³⁸ Ignorance of despair is the most common form of despair. What Christianity calls “the world” is precisely this form of despair. Rather than resting transparently in God, it “vaguely rests in and merges in some abstract universality (state, nation, etc.)” Lacking awareness of itself as spirit, such a human existence is despair regardless of what it achieves, what it is able to explain, or how much it is able to enjoy life esthetically.³⁹

Despair may also be conscious of having a self and conscious of being despair. Here Anti-Climacus distinguishes first between a kind of false consciousness and having a true conception of one’s despair. One may acknowledge that one is in despair but do so

³⁷ Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, 42-43.

³⁸ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi says that consuming has become a way of responding “to the void that pervades consciousness when there is nothing else to do. Shopping and surrounding ourselves with possessions is a relatively easy way to forestall the dread of nonbeing. . . . A particularly egregious example of such dependence on purchasing as a pabulum for terror was the reaction of so many political leaders after the September 11 attack. The advice one heard most often in the aftermath of that tragedy was to go out and shop. Buying an extra car or refrigerator was supposed to be an act of patriotic defiance against the enemies, an act that confirmed the meaningfulness of our lives” (102). In sharp contrast, while President of the United States, Jimmy Carter commented on the way Americans were increasingly turning to consumption for identity and meaning and on how these efforts were failing: “Human identity is no longer defined by what one does, but by what one owns. But we’ve discovered that owning things and consuming things does not satisfy our longing for meaning. We’ve learned that piling up material goods cannot fill the emptiness of lives which have no confidence or purpose.” See “Energy and National Goals,” Address to the Nation, July 15, 1979, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 1979*, book 2—June 23-December 31 (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1980), 1237. Ron Beasley and Marcel Danesi write: “Advertising has become the fuel for an entertainment-driven society that seeks artifice as part of its routine of escapism from the deeper philosophical questions that would otherwise beset it.” See *Persuasive Signs: The Semiotics of Advertising* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2002), 18.

³⁹ Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, 44-46.

merely by comparing oneself with others. Of course, such a one is correct about being in despair but “wrong in regarding the others as not being in despair.” Like the person under the spell of Girardian metaphysical desire, this despairing one judges herself in the name of a misconception of others. She knows her own weaknesses but imagines she is alone, and so she judges herself by way of comparison with the others as she imagines them to be. Anti-Climacus also describes another border case—the person who has a dim awareness of being in despair but tries to remain in the dark through diversions,⁴⁰ a strategy for which consumerism seems perfectly suited. Bauman says that a happy life in consumer culture is simply a “life insured against boredom.” There is normally no state of happiness but merely brief moments of pleasure followed by boredom. But in consumerism, desires are aroused more rapidly than people can get bored with the most recent possession. “Not being bored—ever—is the norm of the consumers’ life, and a realistic norm, a target within reach, so that those who fail to hit it have only themselves to blame while being an easy target for other people’s contempt and condemnation.”⁴¹ Again the consumer is here buying into an unrealistic assessment of others and judging herself against this assessment.

Within his discussion of despair not to be oneself or despair in weakness, Anti-Climacus discusses despair over the earthly or over something earthly. A person who despairs in this manner soon “learns to copy others,” and begins to live as they live. “In Christendom he is also a Christian . . . but a self he was not, and a self he did not become.” This person may despairingly will to be another person, wishing for a new self. Anti-Climacus depicts a self who decides he might become someone other than himself.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 47-49.

⁴¹ Bauman, *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor* 32, 39.

This person imagines that the self can be changed like clothes for he does not know himself and identifies himself with his clothes and other externalities. Thus when the externals have changed, he has despaired, but then he wonders if he might become someone else—if he might get “a new self. Well, what if he did become someone else? I wonder whether he would recognize himself.”⁴² Thus, even if the person who longs to be Caesar or the Marlboro Man were to succeed in such a dubious enterprise, would such a one be able to appreciate the longed for change or would one have so taken on this new role as to forget the old one?

This kind of identity loss through relating oneself to what is external and transitory is prevalent in consumer society.⁴³ In contrast, Martin Luther King, Jr. said he would not put his “ultimate faith in gadgets and contrivances. . . . I decided early to give my life to something eternal and absolute. Not to these little gods that are here today and gone tomorrow. But to God who is the same yesterday, today, and forever.”⁴⁴ Twitchell, on the other hand, believes that relating one’s identity to one’s belongings is necessary: “Lear knows that possessions are definitions—superficial meanings perhaps, but meanings nonetheless. Without soldiers he is no king.”⁴⁵ Perhaps this is true for Lear, but can the same be said for an identity that truly matters, one that will be maintained in eternity (for the king will not be king in eternity)? Does the identity of the Christian, of the knight of faith, or of Christ depend upon the possessions of each? Christ disappoints

⁴² Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, 51-53.

⁴³ See for example Seabrook, 171.

⁴⁴ See “Rediscovering Lost Values,” 28 February 1954, Detroit, MI, in *Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, vol. 2, *Rediscovering Precious Values, July 1951-November 1955* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 254-55.

⁴⁵ Twitchell, *Lead Us into Temptation*, 38.

all assumptions—with no crown and no soldiers, he is still the King of Kings and the messiah.

Despair is somewhat different for the person who is a bit more self-reflective. This despairing one has to some degree separated the self from externalities. He has, according to Kierkegaard, a vague sense that there could “be something eternal in the self,” but he thinks of his self as his attributes, and he puts these to use in an active life. He turns from any inward path and hides from the little reflection he has within himself, and when he is with other competent people he forgets all about this bit of reflection, which once troubled him. He is a husband, father, citizen, and a dynamic, enterprising man; “his conduct is based on respect of persons or on the way others regard one, and others judge according to one’s social position. In Christendom he is a Christian (in the very same sense as in paganism he would be a pagan and in Holland a Hollander), one of the cultured Christians. The question of immortality has often occupied him, and more than once he has asked the pastor whether there is such an immortality, whether one would actually recognize himself again—something that certainly must be of very particular interest to him, since he has no self.”⁴⁶ The question of immortality is nonsensical in regard to the despairing person for, lacking a self, there is no self that such a one can hope to recognize in eternity. It is in part for this reason that I will suggest a kind of purgation in the final section of this dissertation, “Eschatological Identity.” The despairing consumer must somehow salvage and develop an identity that was continually stunted and dispersed in this world. Were such consumers merely to awaken in some kind of heaven, how could they recognize themselves? How would it even make sense to speak of their awakening?

⁴⁶ Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, 55-56.

Within his discussion of despair not to be oneself, Anti-Climacus discusses not only despair over the earthly, but also despair over the eternal or over oneself. He says that the despair over the earthly is, in fact, also despair over the eternal or over oneself as is all despair, but those who are said to despair over the earthly believe that they despair over something earthly. The very assigning of such value to something earthly is in fact despair of the eternal. Those who are said to despair over themselves are first conscious of having selves, but they do not wish to acknowledge these selves of which they are ashamed. They do not live in immediacy, but rather in its opposite, inclosing reserve, where they are preoccupied with their selves but with not willing their selves. The emphasis they place on their weakness seems like humility but is in fact a form of pride for it is the desire to be proud of themselves that leads them to find their weakness so unbearable. They are correct concerning their weakness, but they should not despair over that fact. Instead, “the self must be broken in order to become itself,” and that is no reason to despair. Those who despair over themselves in this way require solitude, which does demonstrate that they have spirit. Those who are said to despair over the earthly, on the other hand, fear it.⁴⁷

After explaining despair over oneself, Anti-Climacus discusses despair to be oneself or despair in defiance. This despair is close to the truth and is a “thoroughfare to faith.” It is conscious of an infinite self, but this infinite self “is really only the most abstract form, the most abstract possibility of the self. And this is the self that a person in despair wills to be, severing the self from any relation to a power that has established it, or severing it from the idea that there is such a power. With the help of this infinite form, the self in despair wants to be master of itself or to create itself, to make his self into the

⁴⁷ Ibid., 60-65.

self he wants to be, to determine what he will have or not have in his concrete self.”

Though his concrete self has the limitations of his specific being with natural capacities and predispositions, he wants to transform it all and make from it a self more to his liking. It is on these terms that he wills to be himself, with the help of the infinite form, the negative self. “In other words, he wants to begin a little earlier than do other men, not at and with the beginning, but ‘in the beginning’; he does not want to put on his own self, does not want to see his given self as his task—he himself wants to compose his self by means of being the infinite form.”⁴⁸

In consumer society, the negative self may well be the construction of advertising—the person the viewer could be if only she would purchase and use the right products. Like the negative self that Kierkegaard describes, the advertising self is unconcerned with the limitations of the concrete self and thus leads inevitably to the concrete person’s failure to live up to this goal. Even if the transformation were successful, the transformed person would remain in despair. Such a self lacks earnestness. Like Girard’s coquette, this self seems satisfied with its own attention toward itself, “which is supposed to bestow infinite interest and significance upon his enterprises, but it is precisely this that makes them imaginary constructions.” A derived self, as all human beings are, cannot “give itself more than it is in itself by paying attention to itself—it remains itself from first to last; in its self-redoubling it becomes neither more nor less than itself.”⁴⁹ While the coquette’s strategy may be effective in fooling a few admirers, it does not change anything about the coquette.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 67-68.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 69.

In explaining despair as sin, Anti-Climacus describes a corollary to the despair of defiance. Those who despair in this way are aware that they are guilty of certain sins, but they lack continuity with regard to their consciousness of self. These people “play along in life,” never arriving at any singular focus or self-consistency. They talk about particular good deeds and particular sins, but do not understand the state of sin. In their despair over their sin, they have lost all relation to grace and to themselves. If they avoid a particular sin for some time, they may mourn a relapse, saying that they will never be able to forgive themselves. This despair may pass as the sign of a deep and pious nature, but it is in fact “a more intensive qualification of sin, the intensity of which is absorption in sin.” The insistence on being unable to forgive themselves is “the opposite of the brokenhearted contrition that prays God to forgive.” While kept from temptation, they imagined themselves better than they were. They are proud and selfish, and thus they refuse to thank God humbly for granting the strength to resist temptation for so long and humbly recollecting what they have been. They fail to understand that God may sometimes let believers stumble precisely in order to teach them this humility (an idea explained in greater depth in the next chapter in connection to Augustine). They may sink into depression and may for that be admired for the earnestness that makes them sorrow over sin.⁵⁰

Anti-Climacus discusses despair as sin more thoroughly, but that analysis will primarily be examined in Chapter 6 because consumerism fails to recognize that the behavior it encourages is sin; consumers, therefore, have for the most part not even arrived at the level of sin consciousness. Anti-Climacus wonders: “[H]ow in the world can an essential sin-consciousness be found in a life that is so immersed in triviality and

⁵⁰ Ibid., 107, 110-12.

silly aping of ‘the others’ that it can hardly be called sin, a life that is too spiritless to be called sin and is worthy only, as Scripture says, of being ‘spewed out.’” Christianity is presented, but it is presented so as to seem trivial. The highest and the holiest things “are given sound and are listened to as something that now, God knows why, has become routine and habit like so much else.” Thus rather than defend their actions before the demand of Christianity, “Christians” feel it necessary to defend Christianity. Just as offering proofs of and reasons for one’s love is unbecoming the true lover, so too is offering defenses of Christianity unworthy of the Christian, or more importantly, of Christianity.⁵¹ While the pastors give reasons and proofs, Kierkegaard insists throughout his authorship in keeping Christianity indirect (an idea further explored in Chapter 6).

The Crowd, Christendom, and Christianity

While the previous section sought to diagnose consumers in terms of Kierkegaard’s category of despair, this section will primarily seek to demonstrate how difficult a cure is within the consumer society using Kierkegaard’s analysis of “the crowd.” He suggests that through comparison one becomes nothing more than a number in the crowd.⁵² Having taken the path of the crowd, one becomes a slave to this many-headed monster: “One is scarcely aware that it is a slavery that is being created, and just this makes it so difficult to tear oneself away from it. This slavery is not that one person wants to subjugate many (then one would of course become aware), but that individuals, when they forget the relation to God, become mutually afraid of one another; the single individual becomes afraid of the more or of the many, who in turn, each one out of fear of

⁵¹ Ibid., 101-04.

⁵² Similarly, Martin Luther King, Jr. describes an ethics of the crowd—“a sort of numerical interpretation of what’s right” (251).

people and forgetting God, stick together and form the crowd, which renounces the nobility of eternity that is granted to each and every one—to be an individual.”⁵³ Having renounced this nobility by seeking first to be like the others, one has wasted one’s life.⁵⁴ Because they form a mass of many people, they have the appearance of great power, “but viewed ideally this mass, these millions, are a zero, less than zero, are wasted, lost lives. . . . To be like the others is the law for all worldly temporal shrewdness. It is this shrewdness which, from a Christian point of view, is so shrewd that it cheats itself out of eternity.”⁵⁵

In Christendom, the mass calls itself Christian, but this Christian mass is for Kierkegaard an impossibility. He distinguishes between the triumphant view and the militant view of the church: “The triumphant view assumes that on the average most people, the majority of people, are of the truth; for that very reason the possession of power and honor is a sign that one is eminently good. But the militant view teaches that the good must get the worst of it, and therefore its servants are persecuted, insulted, treated as criminals or as fools—alas, and by this they are known, and for that very reason they do not wish power and honor, because that implies a false admission with

⁵³ Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, 327.

⁵⁴ Georg Simmel offers another and in some ways quite Kierkegaardian reason to join the crowd and follow fashion. He describes sensitive people who use fashion “as a sort of mask. They consider blind obedience to the standards of the general public in all externals as the conscious and desired means of reserving their personal feeling and their taste, which they are eager to reserve for themselves alone. . . . It is therefore a feeling of modesty and reserve which cause many a delicate nature to seek refuge in the leveling cloak of fashion; such individuals do not care to resort to a peculiarity in externals for fear of perhaps betraying a peculiarity of their innermost soul.” Thus fashion enables people “to save their inner freedom all the more completely by sacrificing externals to enslavement by the general public” (552-53). Here fashion enables people to keep their inwardness hidden, free from the demands of the crowd. Fashion simply serves as a way of appeasing the crowd. Simmel’s suggestion does not challenge the argument presented in this dissertation, however, for the dissertation does not find fault with fashion per se but with people’s comportment toward it and toward consumer products more generally.

⁵⁵ Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, 2:2066.

regard to their view.”⁵⁶ To those who share the triumphant view, to refuse this power and honor seems to be both an accusation against Christendom and a sign of arrogance and illusion.⁵⁷ One must not stand out from the crowd of Christians in order to follow Christ: “Now that we are all Christians, to want to be an imitator in the decisive sense, in contrast to the rest of us, to want to seek out the danger (futilely, to be sure) of confessing the faith—this must appear just as odd as a youth educated or, more correctly, made quixotic, by reading novels, and therefore with his head full of trolls, monsters, enchanted princesses, appears in the world of actuality where he seeks in vain for this fabulous world.”⁵⁸ In the church triumphant, the situation of Christianity has been stood on its head. Once, Christians were forced to confess that they were not Christians or face martyrdom. Now, on the contrary, one must confess that one is a Christian. Yet when one earnestly confesses Christ in Christendom, one does not thereby proclaim Christianity but instead judges “those who *call* themselves Christians, that they only *pose* as Christians, thus judging of them that they are not Christians, therefore most leniently judging them for light-mindedness and thoughtlessness, most harshly for hypocrisy.”⁵⁹ Here Kierkegaard reveals one of the reasons for the non-Christian pseudonyms: Kierkegaard cannot directly confess his own faith without thereby accusing his readers.

The central requirement for the Christian is to be a follower of Christ, but Christendom cannot tolerate such a requirement. As Kierkegaard says, “Christ has asked for imitators and has very exactly defined what he meant: that they should be salt, willing

⁵⁶ Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, 338-39.

⁵⁷ Veblen also acknowledges the fall away from true Christianity in Christendom. See “Christian Morals and the Competitive System,” in *A Veblen Treasury: From Leisure Class to War, Peace, and Capitalism*, ed. Rick Tilman (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1993), 302.

⁵⁸ Søren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Kierkegaard's Writings 20 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 251.

⁵⁹ Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, 323.

to be sacrificed, that to be a Christian is to be salt and the willingness to be sacrificed. But to be salt and to be sacrificed are not suitable either to thousands or (even less!) to millions.”⁶⁰ There can be no triumphant interpretation if Christianity entails sacrifice; this can only be a misunderstanding. Kierkegaard believes this misunderstanding begins in the Fourth Century. Christendom emerges with the supremacy of Christmas among all the Christian festivals. People prefer to be saved by an infant because there can be no demand to imitate a baby. Indeed Kierkegaard compares being saved by a baby to learning from the lily and the bird for though they serve an important function as teachers, the learner must eventually move beyond them.⁶¹ Christianity wants imitation. The infant can be adored, but not imitated. In contrasting admirers and imitators of Christ, Kierkegaard suggests that Judas was an admirer. The one who merely admires becomes a traitor when there is danger.⁶² The New Testament makes the requirement clear: one must “follow Christ and suffer,” and thus, the worship service in Christendom is “hypocrisy and equal to blood-guilt.”⁶³

Christ is the unrecognizable god, possessing only a spiritual loftiness. His loftiness is not “the direct kind, which is the worldly, the earthly, but the spiritual, and thus the very negation of worldly and earthly loftiness.” Imitation is the demand, and this

⁶⁰ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Moment and Late Writings*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Kierkegaard's Writings 23 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 42. Georges Bataille describes the victim of sacrifice as “a surplus taken from the mass of *useful* wealth” and says that such a one can only be withdrawn from this mass of useful wealth “in order to be consumed profitlessly, and therefore utterly destroyed.” Rather than a consumer, this victim is the consumed. The victim, like the animal or harvest sacrifice, is removed from the realm of the useful. Bataille argues that sacrifice makes sacred what had been made profane by “servile use.” Servile use transforms subjects into objects. See *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 59, 55. This dissertation maintains that the consumers’ relationship with products makes them into objects as well. Christian sacrifice or dying to self removes the consumer from the order of things and restores to them what has been degraded—their identities as images of God. Chapter 8 will develop this theme in more detail.

⁶¹ Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, 2:1893.

⁶² Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 246.

⁶³ Kierkegaard, *The Moment and Late Writings*, 135.

is concerned only with Christ's suffering, not his glory. Kierkegaard declares, "So Christ entered on high, but his life and works on earth are what he left for imitation: that true loftiness is abasement or that abasement is true loftiness." To reach Christ's loftiness, the Christian must imitate his abasement. It is wrong to seek to imitate the glorified Christ as the church triumphant does for the true Christian must live as Jesus did on this earth—in worldly abasement. In relation to loftiness, Christians must humbly give up imitation and be adorers, but "the correlative of abasement and lowliness is: imitators."⁶⁴ Thus, the Christian cannot just humbly admire Christ, but must follow him. The imitation encouraged by consumerism is not like this for it tells consumers to imitate models only in their glorified state; indeed, the models exist as models only in a glorified state, not in abasement. Admiration for Christ does not interfere with the imitation of consumer models, but imitation of Christ surely does. At times, admiration does not just fall short of imitation but is as well a form of idolatry. Kierkegaard writes: "If Christ is true God, then he also must be unrecognizable, attired in unrecognizability, which is the denial of all straightforwardness. Direct recognizability is specifically characteristic of the idol. But this is what people make Christ into." The admirer wants only to admire, and so makes of Christ something that is apparently godlike; the admirer does not see the lowly servant, so obviously ungodlike. Christ is either the object of faith or an idol. In order to require faith, Christ "must deny direct communication."⁶⁵ The Christian teacher must also avoid making Christ into an idol, while nonetheless suggesting his divinity. To do this, the teacher must also deny direct communication for the teacher cannot give the student faith.

⁶⁴ Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 238, 259, 237.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 136, 143.

Christendom, on the other hand, has made Christianity direct. It has eliminated imitation and offense and has thereby in fact eliminated Christianity: “But take away the possibility of offense, as has been done in Christendom, and all Christianity becomes direct communication, and then Christianity is abolished, has become something easy, a superficial something that neither wounds nor heals deeply enough; it has become the false invention of purely human compassion that forgets the infinite qualitative difference between God and man.”⁶⁶ The offense is maintained only when Christ is observed in his lowliness and when the Christian is called to imitate this lowliness. The prototype cannot have possessed worldly advantages without a problem emerging in the very concept of prototype: one might excuse oneself from imitating him by thinking how lucky the prototype was, having possessed what one lacks. Another excuse is available to the Christian by the shifting of the Christian life into hidden inwardness: one might say that the true Christian is always indistinguishable from the false. In one’s heart of hearts one is a follower of Christ regardless of what one’s actions seem to indicate. One need not deny oneself the things of this world; one must merely be ready to do so.⁶⁷ Here, Kierkegaard, or rather Anti-Climacus, seems to be opposing not only Christendom in general, but also the pseudonymous authors Johannes de Silentio and Johannes Climacus in particular.

In *Fear and Trembling*, de Silentio discusses the incommunicability of faith. Abraham must remain silent because nothing he might say could explain the action he is setting out to perform.⁶⁸ But according to M. Holmes Hartshorne, Kierkegaard’s purpose in this work is not to defend such a conception of faith. On the contrary, he “is ironically

⁶⁶ Ibid., 140.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 239-53

⁶⁸ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 82ff.

showing the ultimate absurdity of attempting to reach faith by a mighty effort.”⁶⁹

Regardless of whether one wishes to embrace Hartshorne’s interpretation, Anti-Climacus clearly believes that the Christian life is in fact visible and in certain ways communicable. In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Johannes Climacus writes that subjectivity and inwardness are truth,⁷⁰ but again this view may well be at odds with Kierkegaard’s own. In his journals, he explains his relation to this pseudonym: “Johannes Climacus and Anti-Climacus have several things in common; but the difference is that whereas Johannes Climacus places himself so low that he even says that he himself is not a Christian, one seems to be able to detect in Anti-Climacus that he considers himself to be a Christian on an extraordinarily high level I would place myself higher than Johannes Climacus, lower than Anti-Climacus.”⁷¹

Kierkegaard himself might wish to affirm the importance of passionate inwardness and its relation to truth, but it seems doubtful that he could fully endorse Johannes Climacus’s often cited statement about the pagan and the Christian: “If one who lives in the midst of Christendom goes up to the house of God, the house of the true God, with the true conception of God in his knowledge, and prays, but prays in a false spirit; and one who lives in an idolatrous community prays with the entire passion of the infinite, although his eyes rest upon the image of an idol: where is there most truth? The one prays in truth to God though he worships an idol; the other prays falsely to the true God, and hence worships in fact an idol.”⁷² Perhaps Anti-Climacus and Kierkegaard himself would question the passion of the idol-worshipper for the idol is direct and so

⁶⁹ M. Holmes Hartshorne, *Kierkegaard, Godly Deceiver: The Nature and Meaning of His Pseudonymous Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 11.

⁷⁰ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 183-84.

⁷¹ Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, 6: 6433.

⁷² Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 179-80.

cannot inspire faith or true passionate inwardness.⁷³ And surely they would question the Christian's "true conception of God" for the Christian follows Christ, and one cannot have a true conception of the God revealed through Christ and then pray in a false spirit. Kierkegaard uses indirect communication to show that inwardness is not sufficient. The true Christian must imitate Christ in suffering. It is fitting that Kierkegaard uses indirection here for faith in Christ itself depends on Christ's indirect communication.

Christianity, though not exclusively an inward venture, is certainly not a mere doctrine either, and yet Christendom has turned faith into the acceptance of the correct objective doctrines. The Christian ventures nothing but waits for Christianity—"before I get involved, it must first justify itself to me. Good night to all Christianity! Now doubt has conquered."⁷⁴ What passes for confident faith is actually nothing more than doubt seeking assurance in reasons. Kierkegaard writes: "Christianity is not a doctrine. Christianity is a believing and a very particular kind of existing [*Existeren*] corresponding to it—*imitation* [*Efterfølgelse*]. Note: Christianity is not to be defined as a faith [*en Tro*], which is somewhat like a 'doctrine'—but is a believing [*en Troen*]." Proofs are not given beforehand through reason. Instead, there is but one proof, and it, through imitation. Christ never bothers trying to prove the validity of his teachings. He offers a single proof: "If any man's will is to do my father's will, he shall know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority." A particular "action-situation" must be in place first to generate the tension out of which the decision of faith comes.

⁷³ Fromm argues that God becomes an idol "in the having mode." He defines an idol as a thing that people make and into which they project their own powers. People "can *have* the idol because it is a thing," but because they submit themselves to the idol, it also has them. "Faith, in the having mode, is a crutch for those who want to be certain, those who want an answer to life without daring to search for it themselves" (42). Of course, consumers know little other than "the having mode," and it may well be that the Christian God is taken up as an idol in consumer society. It does not seem, however, that their conception of God could in any way be called "true."

⁷⁴ Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, 2: 1902.

First there is the venture; then one experiences that the teaching is truth, and this is the proof. But because people do not want to venture anything, “they have made Christianity into doctrine.”⁷⁵ Thus the one who truly believes is also the one who truly follows Christ. The incommunicability of the knight of faith gives way to the Christ-like actions of the imitator. God does not command his worshippers to kill; Christ commands his followers to do as he has done: “If the person who is preaching grace is someone whose life expresses the opposite of imitation, then it is taking grace in vain Here we see again that Christianity is related to the person who proclaims it—consequently it is as far as possible from a ‘doctrine.’”⁷⁶ This relation to the one proclaiming shows that Christianity is indirect communication for it cannot be judged by its content alone. One’s life indicates what one means by grace. The student then cannot listen only to the teacher’s words but must watch the teacher as well.

Conclusion

Consumerism can accept neither the imitation of Christ nor faith. The imitation of Christ makes the imitation of consumer models impossible. The person who has faith has been offended and so has understood the significance of the lowly, despised, and crucified one who claims to be God. The person of faith believes nonetheless and also understands the demand made by this belief—to be like the lowly one. According to Kierkegaard, faith and imitation lead to the richest relationship with God and thus lead to the fullest identity. Whereas Kierkegaard’s Christianity leads to the greatest intensification of self, consumerism leads to the deadening of the self. Christianity

⁷⁵ Ibid., 2; 1880, 1881.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 2; 1877.

refuses all comparisons, whereas consumerism depends upon the constant proliferation of comparisons, which lead to discontent, self-judgement, loss of love, and ultimately the loss of one's humanity. This chapter has shown that consumerism damages identity development through its preoccupation with comparison.

This chapter has also diagnosed consumerism's harmful effects on identity in terms of despair. Consumerism seeks to distract people with constant stimulation, thereby leaving them in despair not to be conscious of having a self; it sells people on the need to constantly transform themselves in the name of their models, thereby leading some into despair not to will to be themselves; even the most elevated of celebrities, the most celebrated of consumers, can merely hope to attain the despair to will to be themselves. Thus, these consumers do not even will to be in identity with themselves. Faith, on the other hand, is "the state of the self when despair is completely rooted out;" the formula that describes this state is: "in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it."⁷⁷ This state will be analyzed more carefully in Chapter 6.

Finally, this chapter has shown the difficulty of healing damaged identities in consumer society. People are distracted from their loss of self and indeed are able to function all the more effectively in this society without a strong sense of self. In consumerism, each person gets lost in the crowd, but Christianity pries each person loose and through the offense addresses itself to each one individually. In conversation with

⁷⁷ Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, 14, 49. Erik Erikson too finds a connection between faith and identity, as it is "an adult condition in which childlikeness has not been destroyed, and in which a potential return to a childlikeness has not been destroyed, and in which a potential return to childlike trust has not been forestalled." Thus, there is a continuity in development, as true childlikeness continues into maturity. See "The Galilean Sayings and the Sense of 'I,'" *The Yale Review* 70 (1981), 349.

Augustine, the next chapter will complete the diagnosis of the problem of identity in consumerism and begin to suggest a solution.

CHAPTER V

Like Girard's discussion of mimetic desire and Kierkegaard's analysis of comparison and despair, Augustine's theology of desire and love offers a basis for the ongoing criticism of consumerism in this dissertation, and it provides the foundation for an alternative vision of identity. His discussion of sin is pertinent to the kinds of desires fostered by consumerism, in which the consumer is pulled in countless directions by countless products and advertisements. Pulled in this way, the consumer's identity, like the sinner's, is scattered and split apart. In pride, consumers want something of their own independently of God, and ultimately they want to be responsible for their own being like God and as they imagine their models to be. While some might criticize people caught up in the consumerist ethos as materialistic and egocentric self-lovers, Augustine would see them as self-haters for they love themselves unjustly. True identity comes through God's grace. Human freedom develops not by choosing among countless options but by submission to God. God's will is not thereby imposed from the outside upon the person for the person must choose God's will in love; of course, grace is given and not chosen, but even when the sinner is suddenly struck from without (as with Paul's conversion), grace itself is the love of God, and thus the one who has received grace chooses the good in love. Through this love, the person is able to be truly free for the first time and is recreated by God—made into what the person is meant to be.

This chapter will explicate Augustine's understanding of pride as the root of all sin and show that consumerism thrives by promoting and exploiting pride. Through the sin of pride, consumers lose their identities and their freedom. The second half of the

chapter is the beginning of the second half of this dissertation. Augustine shows how the Christian salvation narrative is the remedy for pride. Christ is the perfect model of humility and thus, I will argue, the perfect alternative to the models of consumer society. The Christian's utter dependence on Christ and grace is a constant source of humility. Even the results of the Fall—hereditary sin, mortality, etc.—serve to lead people away from pride. Augustine will also serve to correct misunderstandings of freedom propagated by consumerism. By the end of this chapter, with Augustine's help, I will have begun to present the Christian solution to identity problems, and I will have redefined “freedom”—a key term in the discussion of consumerism and identity.

Pride and the Fall of Satan

Pride is most fundamentally a choice of self over God. According to John Cavadini, Augustine defines pride as “apostasy, the desertion of God” and as “love of self as an alternative to God.”¹ God created good and evil angels with the same natures. Their difference arises out of their wills and desires. The good angels continued to choose and desire the good of God, which is common to all, whereas the evil angels chose themselves and delighted in their own power, as if they were God.² Angels are blessed through participation in the divine, but the devil, swollen with pride, fell away from this blessedness by rejecting any participation and turning to himself.³ Because the devil loved his own power, his perverse self-love separated him from all holy

¹ John C. Cavadini, “Pride,” in *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 680.

² Augustine, (*civ. Dei*) *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin, 1984), 12.1. First references to primary materials will be given in full. Subsequent references will give only the Latin abbreviation of the title.

³ Augustine, (*Gn. litt.*) *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, trans. Edmund Hill, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* (Brooklyn: New City Press, 2002), 4.24.41.

companionship—not just from God, but also from the good angels.⁴ The private enjoyment of his own power, which was his desire and the source of his fall, is thus also his punishment. In contemplating the divine, the mind may become aware of itself. While it is best for the mind to forget itself in love for God, the mind can take pleasure in itself, wanting to enjoy its own power. This perverse imitation of God is the first sin.⁵ No creature can successfully become God, but a creature can imitate God. The Devil did so in a perverse manner by opposing his powers to God's.⁶ Augustine speaks of the proud spirits who long to be worshipped in God's stead.⁷ Pride is the devil's motive for rejecting the blessed angelic life.⁸

While Adam is the progenitor of the race, the devil is the father of sin. When human beings sin, they sin in imitation of the devil, not Adam.⁹ The devil is a false mediator. He does not elevate people but rather bars their way to all that is higher by inspiring in them the same pride and malignant desires that were his downfall. He appeals to the proud because he is immune to death, and he teaches them to “scuff at the death of Christ.”¹⁰ Any mediator between God and humanity must have something in common with humanity. Satan shares in sin, whereas Christ shares mortal flesh, which

⁴ Ibid., 11.15.19.

⁵ Augustine, (*lib. arb.*) *On Free Will*, trans. John Burleigh, in *Augustine: Earlier Writings*, ed. John H. S. Burleigh (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953), 3.25.76.

⁶ D. J. MacQueen, “Contemptus Dei: St Augustine on the disorder of Pride in Society, and its Remedies,” in *Recherches Augustiniennes*, vol. 9 (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1973), 244.

⁷ Augustine, (*Trin.*) *The Trinity*, trans. Edmund Hill, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1991), 4.14.19.

⁸ William E. Mann, “Augustine on Evil and Original Sin,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, ed. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 46.

⁹ Augustine, (*pecc. mer.*) *On the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins*, trans. Peter Holmes, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 5, *St. Augustin: Anti-Pelagian Writings* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1980), 1.9.9.

¹⁰ *Trin.* 4.12.15, 4.13.18.

the devil prides himself on being without.¹¹ He is a more appealing mediator to sinful people because he, like them, loves power, not justice.¹² That which attracts their pride, however, is not the same attribute through which he serves as their mediator and model. Human beings come to be like the devil not by sharing in his freedom from death or his incorporeality, but by living according to the “rule of self.”¹³ The devil, who is himself puffed up with pride, puffs up human beings with false philosophy and holds them in his subjection through “swollen self-esteem” and a “preference for power over justice.”¹⁴ Consumerism generates mediators like the devil—ones who attract human pride with their power but who inspire imitation in ways that do not yield real power.

Pride and the Fall of Humankind

Though tempted by the devil posing as a serpent, Adam and Eve were already guilty of pride before their temptation. The proud being, Satan, tempted them with proud roles because they were already proud.¹⁵ According to Augustine, Eve believed the devil’s assertion that God’s jealousy was holding them back from something good only because there was already “in her mind that love of her own independent authority and a certain proud over-confidence in herself, of which she had to be convicted and then humbled by that very temptation.”¹⁶ They are convicted through the commandment not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The forbidden fruit is not itself evil.

Augustine claims that had there been no prohibition, Adam and Eve might have eaten of

¹¹ Augustine, (*conf.*) *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 10.42.67.

¹² *Trin.* 13.13.17.

¹³ *civ. Dei* 14.3.

¹⁴ *Trin.* 4.10.13.

¹⁵ Augustine, (*s.*) *Sermons*, trans. Edmund Hill, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1990-97), 197.1.

¹⁶ *Gn. litt.* 11.30.39.

the fruit with no evil results. The tree did not produce injurious fruit; the violated commandment did. God forbade something good to show that submission and obedience to God was good—and good, not for God, but for Adam and Eve. The inherent value of obedience could not be more clearly demonstrated than by forbidding a fruit that was of itself good.¹⁷ That the fruit itself was good can be deduced from the general Augustinian principle that there is no such thing in nature as “evil” for “‘evil’ is merely a name for the privation of good.”¹⁸ Likewise, I do not wish to suggest that consumer products are evil in themselves, but consumerism encourages buyers to love these goods inappropriately.

Wanting Something to Call Their Own

Like the devil, Adam and Eve wanted something of their own, independently from God, and it was this desire that constituted their pride. Pride is the product of the human will, not God’s will.¹⁹ Augustine claims that in pride the soul delights in its power instead of in God’s.²⁰ R. A. Markus suggests that privacy is key to this concept for pride is “taking pleasure in God’s good things, but as if one had proprietary rights to

¹⁷ *pecc. mer.* 2.21.35.

¹⁸ *civ. Dei* 11.22. For Augustine, no object is evil, but human comportment toward the object can be. Charles Mathewes summarizes Augustine’s distinction between *uti* (use) and *frui* (enjoy): “To enjoy something is to value it in itself, for itself; to use something is to value it for its instrumental value for another end. . . . The contrast between ‘enjoy’ and ‘use’ does not distinguish *what* should be loved from what should not be loved; it is rather a contrast in *how* one should value things.” See “On Using the World,” in *Having: Property and Possession in Religious and Social Life*, ed. William Schweiker and Charles Mathewes (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 202. David E. Klemm writes: “Augustine’s principle is that one *is* as one *loves*. The proper end of one’s desire determines the morality of human actions.” One who loves goods for their own sake has a distorted love leading to frustration and unhappiness. See “Material Grace: The Paradox of Property and Possession,” in *Having: Property and Possession in Religious and Social Life*, ed. William Schweiker and Charles Mathewes (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 225.

¹⁹ *pecc. mer.* 2.19.33.

²⁰ Cavidini, 680.

them.” Pride is then most basically the “desire for privacy at the expense of sharing.”²¹ Augustine uses this language in *The Trinity*: “What happens is that the soul, loving its own power, slides away from the whole which is common to all into the part which is its own private property.” If the soul merely remained obedient and subservient to God, it could enjoy the entire universe, but “by the apostasy of pride which is called the beginning of sin it strives to grab something more than the whole and to govern it by its own laws; and because there is nothing more than the whole it is thrust back into anxiety over a part, and so by being greedy for more it gets less. That is why greed is called the root of all evils.”²² By claiming something as its own, the soul loses all that it shared, which was, in fact, all of creation.²³

Augustine makes the social component of this privacy argument more explicit when he describes the two loves. The holy one is social and takes thought for the common good. The unclean one is private and tries to control that which is common for its own good.²⁴ Augustine claims that the unchangeable, divine good is public and common to all, but just as the serpent tempts Eve, so does carnal desire tempt each human to enjoy things as private goods.²⁵ Augustine describes people who claim to be the sole cause and owner of their goodness but whose goodness is a gift to be shared.²⁶ Augustine says people labor to find some good of their very own not given by God, but

²¹ R. A. Markus, “De ciuitate dei: Pride and the Common Good,” in *Collectanea Augustiniana: Augustine—“Second Founder of the Faith,”* ed. Joseph C. Schnaubelt and Frederick Van Fleteren (New York: Peter Lang, 1990), 250. Gordon McConville writes: “We do not, strictly, possess anything. All things are the Lord’s. This implies that ‘things’ are not evil in and of themselves, but that they can become so when treated as personal possessions or commodities for exclusively private use.” See “The Old Testament and the Enjoyment of Wealth,” in *Christ and Consumerism: Critical Reflections on the Spirit of Our Age*, ed. Craig G. Bartholomew and Thorsten Moritz (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000), 78.

²² *Trin.* 12.9.14.

²³ *Gn. litt.* 11.15.19.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.15.20.

²⁵ *Trin.* 12.12.17.

²⁶ *conf.* 10.39.64.

he cannot imagine how such a good could be found.²⁷ The soul's turning from God to self so as to will its own power independently of God is the beginning of all sin, and the punishment that follows this sin teaches the sinner "the difference between the good which it abandoned and the evil into which it has fallen."²⁸ But perhaps the language of punishment and results is inappropriate for the loss of the common good and the separation from God are not arbitrary punishments meted out by a wrathful God; they are the very things that the sinner has chosen in pride.

The mind is commanded to know itself so that it might live according to its nature. Instead its desires are twisted, so that when it sees some inner beauty in God, rather than delighting in this beauty, it longs to possess it exclusively, and it desires, not to be like God by having been made by God in God's image, but to be like God in so far as God depends on nothing for God's existence.²⁹ The mind turns away from God and finds no satisfaction in itself or anything else for it descends farther from God who alone can satisfy it. It loses the security it might have had resting in God because it knows it can easily lose what it has.³⁰ According to Patout Burns, after the devil tempted Adam and Eve to "prefer their own power and goodness to that of God," their minds "turned from God to self. Thus humans attempted to attain divine autonomy, to possess their happiness as only God can, independently of any other nature."³¹

²⁷ *pecc. mer.* 2.18.28.

²⁸ Augustine, (*Gn. adv. Man.*) *On Genesis: A Refutation of the Manichees*, trans. Edmund Hill, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* (Brooklyn: New City Press, 2002), 2.9.12.

²⁹ Martin E. Marty sees just such a desire in consumerism. See "Equipoise," in *Consuming Desires: Consumption, Culture, and the Pursuit of Happiness*, ed. Roger Rosenblatt (Washington: Island Press, 1999), 187.

³⁰ *Trin.* 10.5.7.

³¹ J. Patout Burns, "Augustine on the Origin and Progress of Evil," in *The Ethics of St. Augustine*, ed. William S. Babcock (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), 77.

The mind fails to know itself and its place when it seeks, not truth, but the possession of some knowledge as exclusively its own. Undue attachment to one's own view is pride.³² It is perverse "to abandon the basis on which the mind should be firmly fixed, and to become, as it were, based on oneself, and so remain."³³ Pride originates in someone obsessed with gaining liberty "from God's exclusive proprietary rights."³⁴ Like the devil, Adam and Eve desire to shine with their own light rather than merely reflecting God's light, but the consequence of turning from God is not luminosity but darkness. Burns explains that the "created intellect comes to an understanding, both of the divine reality and of the created world, through an interior illumination received from the Word of God, the eternal Truth Because this kind of knowledge never becomes the 'possession' of the created mind, it is maintained by submission to God, by focusing attention on the divine Light."³⁵ The failure to submit is of course the sin of pride. Augustine says that the original evil is to regard oneself as one's own light and to turn away from the true light that would make one into a light if one would set one's heart on it.³⁶ In discussing the prideful turn from divine illumination, Augustine has in mind all people but in particular the Platonists who aspire to a kind of God-like self-sufficiency. This to Augustine is a proud and wicked ambition for no human beings can save themselves.³⁷ The mind that, trying to live by its own lights, turns from the divine Light is in darkness. Of course consumerism is all about exclusive private possession, and its models tempt consumers by telling them that they too can shine with their own light (if

³² Thomas Williams, "Biblical Interpretation," in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, ed. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 66.

³³ *civ. Dei* 14.13.

³⁴ MacQueen, 247.

³⁵ Burns, "Augustine on the Origin and Progress of Evil," 71.

³⁶ *civ. Dei* 14.13.

³⁷ Martha Nussbaum, "Augustine and Dante on the Ascent of Love," in *The Augustinian Tradition*, ed. Gareth B. Matthews (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 69.

only the consumer the right product) just as the serpent tempts Adam and Eve (if only they consume the forbidden fruit).

Wanting to Be God

The sin of pride is not just wanting something of one's own but more specifically is wanting to be responsible for one's own being—that is, wanting to be God. Augustine says that Adam was conquered by Satan because, though only man, he wanted to be God.³⁸ The serpent's promise that Adam and Eve would become like gods shows that they "were persuaded to sin through pride." Satan's temptation succeeded because Adam and Eve did in fact long to be like God, and so they lost what they had been given by trying to take what they had not been given (the capability of ruling themselves and generating their own happiness independently of God).³⁹ Those who seek God through worldly powers and things are completely misguided; they are destined to fail and are trying to emulate God in the wrong way. They desire only to perform great deeds that are impossible for human beings, so that they might amaze others. They want to be able to do things that they imagine angels can do rather than seeking to be what an angel truly is for the holy angels take no pleasure in their own power but only in the power of God, the source of their power. Angels know that it is better to be devoutly bound to God than to

³⁸ *Trin.* 13.18.23.

³⁹ *Gn. adv. Man.* 2.15.22. Advertising promotes this sense of self-causation, self-satisfaction, and self-rule: "The copy, placed on the left-hand page, reads: 'I look temptation right in the eye and then I make my own decision. Virginia Slims. Find Your Voice.' This ad is typical of its kind in that it has coopted the language of feminism. . . . This woman is so strong that she refuses to run away from her own desires (to smoke), as she looks 'temptation' in the eye. She isn't controlled by others (like the medical community or the boring status quo) but makes her own decisions. She doesn't smoke just because it is cool or socially acceptable—she is a rugged individual who is 'empowered' enough to *choose* to smoke. Smoking is a sign of her rebellion against those who would silence 'her voice.'" See Vickie Rutledge Shields and Dawn Heinecken, *Measuring Up: How Advertising Affects Self-Image* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 162.

perform amazing feats through their own power.⁴⁰ But the proud do not want to be like the angels in this regard. In pride, the soul prefers “imitating God to serving God.”⁴¹

Augustine examines his own pride as a desire to usurp God’s position. He depicts an incident when, as a boy, he stole pears that he did not even want; his desire, he says, was to “viciously and perversely imitate my Lord.” He wanted to break God’s law, and in so doing, he acted “like a prisoner with restricted liberty who does without punishment what is not permitted, thereby making an assertion of possessing a dim resemblance to omnipotence.”⁴² The thrill was found not just in breaking the law as is so often emphasized in regard to this episode but also in getting away with breaking the law. In breaking the law, one rejects God, but in going unpunished, one asserts some power over God. Such a one is said to be “above the law” for the lack of punishment demonstrates the person’s superiority. The evil soul desires “to claim as due to itself, that which is properly due to God only.” It longs to rule over others—over what is lower and even what is equal—though in its arrogance, it refuses to submit to what is higher, even to the Most High.⁴³ Bill McKibben argues that this is precisely the message of television and consumerism: “*You are the most important thing on earth. . . . [A]ll things orbit your desires.*”⁴⁴

If Adam had not put himself before God, he would not have fallen. If he had not loved himself wrongly, he would have desired to remain subject to God. Instead he

⁴⁰ *Trin.* 8.7.11.

⁴¹ Augustine, (*mus.*) *On Music*, trans. R. Catesby Taliaferro (Annapolis: The St. John’s Bookstore, 1939), 6.13.40.

⁴² *conf.* 2.6.14.

⁴³ Augustine, (*doc. Chr.*) *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. J. F. Shaw, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 2, *St. Augustin’s: “The City of God” and “Christian Doctrine”*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 1.23.

⁴⁴ Bill McKibben, “Consuming Nature,” in *Consuming Desires: Consumption, Culture, and the Pursuit of Happiness*, ed. Roger Rosenblatt (Washington: Island Press, 1999), 90-91.

desired through self-love to do his own will. Augustine cautions Adam's descendents: "Put God's will before all that; learn to love yourself by not loving yourself."⁴⁵ By loving themselves more than God, humans slide down the path of failure and end up, not like God, but like beasts. Augustine writes of the *imago dei*: "For man's true honor is God's image and likeness in him, but it can only be preserved when facing him from whom its impression is received." One can cling more closely to God when one loves less what one can claim as one's very own. By greed for his own power, Adam fell into himself, and then as punishment he was thrown down to the level of beasts.⁴⁶ The language of punishment is again unnecessary for by turning from God Adam loses God's image, and it was this that had made him higher than the beasts.

Pride, Sin, and Identity

The prideful choosing of self over God is a fall not only from God but also from self. If Adam had trusted in God's help, he could have overcome the devil's temptation, but through his own pride, he deserted his helper and thus was overcome. Human beings were created good and would have remained in this good state so long as they lived by the standard of their creator. Their falsehood consists in not living in the way for which they were created. All sin is falsehood for through it people pursue happiness in ways that make it impossible to attain. They sin to promote their welfare, but it results in their misfortune. Well-being can only come from God, not from oneself.⁴⁷ Augustine claims

⁴⁵ s. 96.2. James Alison argues that "the duality of desire" can be found throughout both Augustine and Girard's thought and that this duality "structures both of their visions. . . . Augustine and Girard agree that this duality is best maintained by treating desire as capable of two valencies: in Girard's terms we have pacific or rivalistic mimesis; in Augustine's we have 'amor Dei usque ad contemptum sui' and 'amor sui usque ad contemptum Dei'" (293-94).

⁴⁶ *Trin.* 12.11.16.

⁴⁷ *civ. Dei* 14.27, 14.4.

that all sin “is contrary to nature,”⁴⁸ and so the origin of evil is to be found, not in some evil nature, but in free-will.⁴⁹ Thus God’s enemies oppose God not by nature, as the Manicheans believed, but by perversion. They are God’s enemies because of their will to resist God, which hurts, not God, but themselves because that resistance does harm to the goodness of their nature. Fault cannot exist in the Highest Good, but it can only exist in some good: “The natures which have been perverted as a result of the initiative of an evil choice, are evil in so far as they are vitiated, but in so far as they are natures, they are good.”⁵⁰ All natures are good for God makes nothing evil.⁵¹ Because of the sin of Adam and Eve, human nature changed for the worse: bondage to sin and inevitable death became the legacy of the first parents to their posterity. Their offspring would all head toward the second, unending death if not for the grace of God.⁵²

The proud fall into disorder through the disordered valuing of self above God. The self is not evil in itself of course for nothing is evil by nature. Rather, evil is the disordering of the natural state. Sin is a turning away from God that causes disorder. Paul Weithman writes: “It introduces disorder into our loves so that we give ourselves and the satisfaction of our own desires undue importance, a disorder Augustine associates with the sin of pride. Because of this prideful exaltation of self, the way we love things is

⁴⁸ Augustine, (*spir. et litt.*) *A Treatise on the Spirit and the Letter*, trans. Peter Holmes, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 5, *St. Augustin: Anti-Pelagian Writings* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 27.47.

⁴⁹ Augustine, (*c. Faust.*) *Reply to Faustus the Manichæan*, trans. Richard Stothert, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 4, *St. Augustin: The Writings Against the Manichæans and Against the Donatists* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 22.22.

⁵⁰ *civ. Dei* 12.3.

⁵¹ Augustine, (*Jo. ev. tr.*) *The Homilies or Tractates on the Gospel of John*, trans. John Gibb (1-37) and James Innes, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 7, *St. Augustin: Homilies on the Gospel of John; Homilies on the First Epistle of John* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986), 42.10.

⁵² *civ. Dei* 14.1-2.

at odds with what their nature merits.”⁵³ Rodney Clapp connects Augustine’s diagnosis of disordered desire to consumerism: “Augustine would surely consider our consumer compulsions a symptom of disordered desire, of the sort of desire that should be directed only to God instead of to God’s creatures. This is theologically a serious matter indeed, since such disordered desire can verge on, if not become outright, idolatry.”⁵⁴ Kenneth Paul Wesche observes that infinite desire for consumer goods is misplaced desire for God. We fail to realize “that the insatiable desire that agitates us is for the divine, and in our egoistic blindness we violate the natural integrity of the world that has been given us. We fail to see that our desire and the world’s essence can never be fulfilled until we undertake the journey in the Logos of our being—whom the church identifies as Jesus Christ—toward full individuation, full personhood in communion with the divine in the Divine Logos incarnate.”⁵⁵ This disorder of desires leads to non-existence because creatures exist only in so far as they attain agreement. God is simple and thus exists by Godself, but composite beings merely imitate simplicity through the agreement of their parts.⁵⁶

Humans decide to sin through free choice but then lose that choice to invincible habit. These habits war against the soul.⁵⁷ After the soul disdained to be God’s servant,

⁵³ Paul Weithman, “Augustine’s Political Philosophy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, ed. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 235-36.

⁵⁴ Clapp, *Border Crossings*, 146.

⁵⁵ Kenneth Paul Wesche, “ΘΕΩΣΙΣ in Freedom & Love: The Patristic Vision,” in *The Consuming Passion: Christianity & the Consumer Culture*, ed. Rodney Clapp (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 128.

⁵⁶ Augustine, (*mor.*) *On the Morals of the Manichaeans*, trans. Richard Stothert, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 4, *St. Augustine: The Writings Against the Manichaeans and Against the Donatists* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 6.8.

⁵⁷ Augustine, (*c. Fort.*) *Acts or Disputation against Fortunatus the Manichaean*, trans. Albert Newman, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 4, *St. Augustine: The Writings Against the Manichaeans and Against the Donatists* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 2.22.

the body too rebelled against its master, the soul.⁵⁸ It is for this reason that Adam and Eve become ashamed of their nakedness for “they perceived the rebellious motion of the flesh, which they had not felt before.”⁵⁹ Augustine describes his own bondage to sin by which his will was held in chains: “By servitude to passion, habit is formed, and habit to which there is no resistance becomes necessity. By these links, as it were, connected one to another (hence my term a chain), a harsh bondage held me under restraint.”⁶⁰ He confesses that he has made his own chains⁶¹ and says that he was unaware of God’s wrath against him, deafened as he was “by the clanking chain of my mortal condition, the penalty of pride.” This self-imprisonment made him like nothingness. Sinners are unable to do many of the things they wish as they are disobedient even to themselves for their minds and their flesh do not submit to their own wills.⁶² The punishment of sin is in fact itself disobedience. Augustine finds himself unable to do what he wills, because he is “stuck fast in the glue of [his] pleasure.”⁶³

Stuck fast to each of the myriad objects of pleasure, the slave to sin is torn in many directions. Augustine says that people get stuck to the things they love “with the glue of care” so that when the mind turns back toward itself, it drags these other things with it, and “it gives something of its own substance to their formation.”⁶⁴ One leaves a bit of oneself with every object desired, and thus the result of many desires, such as those of consumers, is a split consciousness.⁶⁵ Augustine was “in conflict with [himself] and

⁵⁸ *civ. Dei* 13.13.

⁵⁹ *pecc. mer.* 2.22.36.

⁶⁰ *conf.* 8.5.10.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 3.8.16

⁶² *civ. Dei* 14.15.

⁶³ *conf.* 6.12.22.

⁶⁴ *Trin.* 10.5.7.

⁶⁵ Mathewes also notes the connection between Augustine’s understanding of desire and the desire embodied in consumerism (200).

was dissociated from [himself].”⁶⁶ This conflict is only heightened when one retains some desire to do the good⁶⁷ for then one is not only drawn toward the object of each illicit desire, but also pulled away from them by the desire not to sin. Augustine was thus “embattled against” himself and had become a problem to himself.⁶⁸ The will is scattered or spread abroad so that it loses its strength and identity. Vincent Miller argues that consumer seduction channels insatiable human desire into “the endless seeking of fulfillments in more objects.” He warns: “The constant arousal of new desire short-circuits the lessons that could be learned from the disappointments with particular acts of consumption.” In addition, seduction makes “desiring pleasurable in itself. Unlike Augustine, we do not experience restlessness, *inquietes*, as a discomfort, as a spur to change the way we live our lives. Rather we consider it a source of pleasure.”⁶⁹ This analysis seems to overlook the underlying desires of people to be their models and to be self-caused. These desires go perpetually unfulfilled in consumerism and thus do cause discomfort (even if it is unconscious, as in Kierkegaard’s first form of despair). Though consumerism may offer the most elaborate system of distractions ever produced, it cannot turn restlessness into a source of comfort. Augustine poetically and prayerfully sums up the notion of division against oneself: “I was tossed about and spilt, scattered and boiled dry in my fornications. And you were silent. How slow I was to find my joy! At that time you said nothing, and I traveled much further away from you into more and more sterile things productive of unhappiness in my self-pity, incapable of rest in my

⁶⁶ *conf.* 8.10.22.

⁶⁷ Weithman, 236.

⁶⁸ *conf.* 8.5.11, 10.33.50.

⁶⁹ Vincent Jude Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 128.

exhaustion.”⁷⁰ Here he is like the consumer who is pulled in as many directions as there are products and who must settle for an illusion of identity called “brand loyalty.”⁷¹

Split and scattered, the self is dispersed and spread thin between all of its desires, leaving itself little strength or integrity. Sinners forsake “God to love themselves, and then are driven out of themselves to love what is outside themselves.” Augustine advises: “Stay in yourself, if you can. Why go outside? Has money really made you rich, you lover of money? As soon as you began to love things outside yourself, you lost yourself.” The effort to found oneself on some external good leads to one’s dissolution. When one’s love reaches beyond the self to what is outside, one begins to disintegrate in dissipation and to squander one’s powers.⁷² The effort to accumulate and consume products deprives the self of integrity and strength. Here one’s loves are spread abroad among things. Responding to this line of reasoning, some critics charge Augustine with rejecting plurality. Catherine Keller represents this criticism when she says that in Augustine the only solution to distraction is separation. She claims that Augustine is unable to distinguish between fragmentation resulting from “the separative ego” and complex plurality and that he chooses “only between ‘tumultuous varieties’ and ‘the One.’”⁷³ Despite Keller’s claim, Augustine does not ignore the complex plurality but rather insists that the individual approach it through the love of God. One cannot treat God as just another item in the plurality of things; instead, one must love God first and love the complexity only through this love of God. Rather than loving things for their

⁷⁰ *conf.* 2.2.2.

⁷¹ Alan Storkey comments on the fracturing of identity in consumer society: “The psalmist’s ‘Unite my heart to fear thy Name’ becomes ‘Scatter my identity by buying’” (115).

⁷² *s.* 96.2.

⁷³ Catherine Keller, *From a Broken Web* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 165.

own sake, one should love God.⁷⁴ According to Augustine, anyone who fails to love God cannot really love herself either. Though self-love is innate, a person who does not love God can be said to hate herself because she acts against her own self-interest.⁷⁵

The disorder of sin lies in loving as an end in itself what should be loved as a means to a higher end.⁷⁶ Through grace, sins are forgiven and one is infused by a spirit of charity that makes fulfilling the law pleasant. Grace here has the opposite effect of sin, which makes violating the law sweet. Human beings naturally want to do what gives pleasure, but sin distorts the will by giving greater pleasure in lesser goods.⁷⁷ Augustine accuses the Manicheans of acting out of pride or a kind of pharisaic adherence to ascetic rules instead of love, which is the proper motive for Christian action.⁷⁸ Given the fact that evil is disorder and disagreement among the parts of a being, it follows that love must be the only legitimate motive for action. To do something for any other reason is to be divided.

One is called to love the good in oneself but not to defend oneself and one's autonomy over against God. To do so is contradictory for to struggle against God in this way is, in fact, to struggle against oneself. Augustine argues that the Christian should love other people "either because they are just or in order that they might be just," and one should love oneself in the same way. To love oneself in any other way is to love

⁷⁴ Mathewes writes: "Contrary to popular suspicions, Augustine's project is not world-denying but world-affirming; furthermore, the Augustinian proposal can help us resist the sort of reductionistically materialistic vision so powerful today, because it acknowledges that our ends transcend any worldly satisfaction, but are vectored by our loves in this world toward a transcendent God beyond" (201). Mathewes says that for Augustine, the problem lies not with the world but with inordinate human love for the world (203).

⁷⁵ *Trin.* 14.14.18.

⁷⁶ *c. Faust.* 22.78.

⁷⁷ Augustine, (*Simpl.*) *To Simplician—On Various Questions*, trans. John Burleigh, in *Augustine: Earlier Writings*, ed. John H. S. Burleigh (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953), 1.1.6-9.

⁷⁸ *mor.* 14.35.

oneself unjustly because it is loving oneself in order to be unjust and thus in fact no longer really loving oneself at all.⁷⁹ Pride is the root cause of this injustice toward oneself. It is, Augustine suggests, a self-love that alienates one from the source of happiness and is thus in truth a form of self-hatred rather than self-love. Deluded by this self-hatred, people become unable to imagine any other source for their identities than the honors and goods that they have accumulated.⁸⁰ In seeking to claim responsibility for and possession of one's own identity and goodness, one engages in a perverse imitation of God that leads not to greater power but to dissipation and diminution.⁸¹ Augustine pleads with God: "May I not be my own life. On my own resources I lived evilly. To myself I was death. In you I am recovering life."⁸² Consumerism gives people the illusion of self-sufficiency and encourages them to see themselves in terms of goods accumulated and achievements accomplished. It seeks to make identity dependent upon these *things* and thus destroys true freedom and identity.

All these penalties of pride—darkness, disorder, and loss of being—can be simply expressed as separation from God. It is both the sin and the penalty. Pride is the choosing of self over God, but the consequent disorder makes reversing that decision far more difficult than the decision itself. Augustine explains: "But when in my arrogance I rose against you and ran up against the Lord 'under the thick boss of my shield' (Job 15: 26), even those inferior things came on top of me and pressed me down, and there was never any relaxation or breathing space. As I gazed at them, they attacked me on all sides in massive heaps. As I thought about them, the very images of physical objects

⁷⁹ *Trin.* 8.6.9.

⁸⁰ Cavidini, 682.

⁸¹ J. F. Procopé, "Initium omnis peccati superbia," in *Studia Patristica*, vol. 22, ed. Elizabeth A. Livingstone (Leuven: Peeters Press, 1989), 316.

⁸² *conf.* 12.10.10.

formed an obstacle to my return My swelling conceit separated me from you.”⁸³

Consumers too lack breathing space, surrounded as they are by heaps of inferior things blocking intimacy with God. Consumers are scattered among those many possessions that in turn possess their owners. Now I will turn from the diagnosis of the consumer identity crisis that has occupied the last two and a half chapters and move into the explanation of the Christian understanding of identity and its power to heal this identity problem.

Salvation from Pride

The Humility of Christ

The significance of Christ in relation to pride is to be found first and foremost in the humility of the Incarnation itself. Burns writes: “Augustine found the counter to pride in the humility of Christ in the incarnation. More than any of the works of Christ’s life and ministry, the very taking of humanity by the Word of God itself reversed the pretensions of human sin. It demonstrated the divine humility which is at once the antithesis to and the remedy for the human self-assertion which divides persons from God and sets them against each other.”⁸⁴ To offer a model for humanity, which had turned from God, Christ emptied himself, “not by changing his divinity but by taking on our changeability.”⁸⁵ The remedy to pride comes through God humbling Godself by descending into humanity and showing grace to people who through pride seek to lift themselves up.⁸⁶ Cavadini claims that the “self-willed humiliation of God” served to

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 7.7.11.

⁸⁴ Burns, “Augustine on the Origin and Progress of Evil,” 82.

⁸⁵ *Trin.* 7.3.55.

⁸⁶ *pecc. mer.* 2.17.27.

shake the human imagination and reorder human affections.⁸⁷ The Incarnation is an example of humility for humanity and a demonstration of divine love. This humble act of love is “a medicine to heal the tumor of our pride and a high sacrament to break the chains of sin.” In Christ, “God was humbly wearing that man, not governing him as he does the other saints.” Christ chose to appear in mortal flesh and even to die so that proud people would not be induced to worship proud spirits because of their lack of bodies and seeming immortality. Christ, shunning proud displays, might have overpowered the devil but instead chose justice. As human, he could die, but if he had not also been divine, people would have believed that he was defeated and not that he chose to die.⁸⁸

The Incarnation reveals the greatness of God’s mercy and the great chasm between human pride and the ways of God.⁸⁹ MacQueen points out the contrast here between Augustine and pagan philosophy as Augustine argues that pagan morality cannot conceive of “humility as a standard of perfection” because without divine aid the human intellect cannot “apprehend or appreciate the condescension of the Divine love as the Incarnation was one day to reveal it.”⁹⁰ Augustine argues that the cause of all human sin is pride, and thus the good doctor that would treat the disease rather than the symptoms must cure pride. Christ does so through his humility in becoming Incarnate.⁹¹ God’s willingness to lower Godself for humanity should then challenge humanity’s pride.

While human beings might be too proud to imitate a lowly man like Jesus, they are surely

⁸⁷ Cavidini, 682.

⁸⁸ *Trin.* 8.5.7, 13.18.23, 13.17.22, 13.14.18.

⁸⁹ Augustine, (*ord.*) *Divine Providence and the Problem of Evil*, trans. Robert P. Russell (New York: Cosmopolitan Science & Art Service, 1942), 2.5.16.

⁹⁰ MacQueen, 280.

⁹¹ s. 159b.11.

not too noble to “imitate the lowly God.” Christ was made low as an example of humility. Humans are not, thereby, asked to set aside their humanity and become brutes. God became human and asks only that humans recognize their own humanity. Humility is nothing more than self-knowledge.⁹² Humans are asked to recall their position below God, not to lower themselves to the level of beasts. Unlike the models presented in advertisements that stoke human pride, here then is the true model for human beings.

Christ is the mediator and model for human humility. The very fact of his serving as mediator is an antidote to the pride of people who think they need no mediator to reach God. Mary Clarke writes: “Both Plotinus and Porphyry held that the human intellect could know God without a mediator or faith; Porphyry also considered it beneath human dignity to have faith in a God made flesh and crucified. Citing this as a sin of pride, Augustine declared that to know the existence of God and something about him is not union with him.”⁹³ Like the devil, Christ offers himself as a model, but rather than a model of pride he serves “as a pattern of humility for our imitation.”⁹⁴ Augustine elaborates on this contrast: “Just as the devil in his pride brought proud-thinking man down to death, so Christ in his humility brought obedient man back to life. The devil grew high and mighty, he fell, and pulled down man who consented to him; the Christ came humble and lowly, he rose, and raised up man who believed in him.” Christ lets himself be tempted by the devil so as to serve as a mediator for overcoming the devil’s temptations.⁹⁵ Human beings cannot rightly compare themselves to their Creator and so

⁹² *Jo. ev. tr.* 25.16.

⁹³ Mary T. Clarke, “De Trinitate,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, ed. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 94-95.

⁹⁴ *lib. arb.* 3.25.76.

⁹⁵ *Trin.* 4.10.13, 4.13.17.

require a mediator. People are children of the devil not by birth or creation but by imitation, and so they need a counter model.⁹⁶

Like Girard, Augustine here emphasizes the importance of models and of imitation. Because the human fall came through imitation and human sin is tied up in imitation, salvation must offer another kind of imitation and a new model.⁹⁷ Through the Incarnation the soul, which had forsaken God in pride, is able to find God again in the humble form of a human being. By imitating this visible humility, the soul returns “to its invisible position of superiority.”⁹⁸ To be happy, human beings must follow God, but they lost the capacity to perceive God. Through Christ, however, they can follow God made human.⁹⁹ Even here, there is the danger of pride for one may wish to be the best or greatest follower of Christ. The tenacious sin of pride crept in even among Christ’s disciples as they desired to be higher than each other. Christ, seeing their pride, placed a child before them and told them to become like it, thereby indicating that they must be humble.¹⁰⁰

In conquering human pride, Christ leads humanity out of its darkness. Augustine says that human beings should be “enraptured with [Christ’s] brightness.”¹⁰¹ People are to “copy the example of this divine image, the Son, and not draw away from God.” All people are the image of God, though not born of the Father like Christ. People are illuminated with divine light, whereas Christ is the light that illuminates. Christ is a

⁹⁶ *Jo. ev. tr.* 42.10.

⁹⁷ On this understanding, because the devil fell without a model, his salvation could not come through a mediator, and indeed for Augustine the devil is not saved because he sins spontaneously rather than through persuasion. See Burns, “Augustine on the Origin and Progress of Evil,” 78.

⁹⁸ *lib. arb.* 3.10.30.

⁹⁹ *Trin.* 7.3.55.

¹⁰⁰ *s.* 340a.1.

¹⁰¹ *lib. arb.* 3.25.76.

model without models.¹⁰² God sometimes holds back knowledge or joy so the saints may recall that it is from God alone that they receive the light that illumines their darkness for no one “is illuminated except with that Light of the truth, which is God.”¹⁰³ By sharing in the unchanging divine light, “the reasonable soul is in a certain sense inflamed, and becomes itself a created and reflected luminary.”¹⁰⁴ Christ restores to humanity its reflected brilliance by conquering pride, which turned from the source of light.

If pride is the root of sin, humility must be the foundation of righteousness.¹⁰⁵ No reasoning however subtle could overcome the darkness into which humanity had fallen. But because God became human and taught humanity through Christ’s words and deeds, human beings have been awakened and are able now to return to their native light.¹⁰⁶ Christ performs miracles but tells his listeners to follow him, not because he performs great deeds, but on the contrary because he is “*meek and lowly of heart* (Mt 11:28).” Through Christ, humility is made more acceptable because he could have avoided humiliation if he had chosen to.¹⁰⁷ Through this act, Christ shows that only God rules without pride.¹⁰⁸ Human beings should, therefore, put all their pride in the cross. They should not be ashamed of the humiliation that God chose to suffer on their behalf.¹⁰⁹ Through this humility, true identity and true human nature damaged by pride are restored. In consumerism’s worship of the individual, the self is actually undermined. The next

¹⁰² *Trin.* 7.3.55.

¹⁰³ *pecc. mer.* 2.19.32, 1.25.37.

¹⁰⁴ *spir. et litt.* 7.11.

¹⁰⁵ Procopé, 320.

¹⁰⁶ Augustine, (*c. Acad.*) *Against the Academics*, trans. John O’Meara (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1951), 3.19.42.

¹⁰⁷ *Trin.* 8.7.11, 13.14.18.

¹⁰⁸ *conf.* 10.36.59.

¹⁰⁹ *s.* 160.7.

subsection will seek to show how three key Christian concepts, which are antithetical to consumerism, are connected to humility and the establishment of identity.

Fallenness, Grace, and Charity

The symptom of mortality can itself help to serve as a remedy for the disease of pride. The body is not made immortal immediately after baptism because it would make faith impossible as immortality would no longer be awaited in hope.¹¹⁰ Faith itself is for Augustine an admission of one's dependence upon God, and so the gift of immortality prematurely given could lead human beings to forget once again this dependence and thereby lose faith. Burns points out that in Augustine's system, humans can be saved by Christ's persuasion because they fell through the persuasion of demons unlike the demons themselves who sinned spontaneously and are thus irredeemable. Humans are punished through their mortal bodies, whereby their spirits are humbled and prepared "to accept God's mercy."¹¹¹ Humans are forced to live in dread of injury and death from even the lowest of beasts. Utterly insecure as to their own futures, they learn to restrain their sinful impulses and curb their pride, which persuaded them to fall and which is the one vice that "refuses the medicine of mercy."¹¹²

Human sinfulness can serve as a reminder of the human being's need for help and as a spur toward humility. Human beings must suffer the humiliation of serving the devil in sinfulness.¹¹³ God uses the devil's temptations for the benefit of the saints; indeed, God created the devil in the awareness of the good use God would make of the devil's

¹¹⁰ *civ. Dei* 13.4.

¹¹¹ Burns, "Augustine on the Origin and Progress of Evil," 78.

¹¹² *lib. arb.* 3.10.29.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 3.10.31.

wickedness.¹¹⁴ According to William Green, Augustine believes that his own difficulties with sexual desire and a worldly career “served as a ‘medicine’ to cure his pride.”¹¹⁵ He believes that it was for his correction that he was, at times, “too little assisted by” God.¹¹⁶ Through sin and affliction, God teaches humanity not to be self-confident or self-reliant.¹¹⁷ God never wishes anyone to be condemned but desires all to be humble. On account of pride, people are humiliated in their sins. To fight against that pride, they must strive and pray to God, always recognizing that it is by God’s grace that anyone has the power even to strive or pray. Thus, never looking to themselves, they will raise their hearts to God, always thankful and glorying in God alone.¹¹⁸

Sometimes, as Augustine noted in his own case, God holds back help so as to remind even the saints that they are never justified in God’s sight. Through humility they may be healed from the root of all sin.¹¹⁹ God does not heal completely in this life so that the saints might not become complacent in or proud of their goodness. God uses all things for the good of those who love the Lord so that even their going astray will serve their good by leading them to return to God in greater humility and wisdom. For example, through his denial of Christ, Peter learned not to be confident in his own loyalty and goodness, and this lesson was of great value to him.¹²⁰ When God leaves humanity to itself, it loses its way and even its very breath, which was indeed its pride. In

¹¹⁴ *civ. Dei* 11.17.

¹¹⁵ William M. Green, “Initium Omnis Peccati Superbia: Augustine on Pride as the First Sin,” in *University of California Publications in Classical Philology*, vol.13, no. 13 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1949), 425.

¹¹⁶ *pecc. mer.* 2.17.26.

¹¹⁷ *Gn. litt.* 11.35.47.

¹¹⁸ *pecc. mer.* 2.19.33.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.13.23.

¹²⁰ Augustine, (*corrupt.*) *A Treatise on Rebuke and Grace*, trans. Robert Ernest Wallis, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 5, *St. Augustin: Anti-Pelagian Writings* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 9.24.

repentance, one confesses one's weakness and acknowledges that without God one would fall back into the dust from which one was created.¹²¹ Through sinful pride, humanity lost its freedom, and its weakness stands in need of divine grace. In order to heal this pride, God insures that no one may glory in the divine presence.¹²²

To spare the saints from pride in their goodness, God does not give mortals assurance of their salvation. Augustine describes the back and forth of confidence and doubt regarding one's own perseverance in the good and sees in this wavering a lesson regarding dependence upon grace that serves as a remedy to pride.¹²³ Without this understanding, many fall back into pride. They try to return to God through their own efforts, but they fail. They are lifted up by pride, "inflating their chest rather than beating their breast."¹²⁴ Because pride is always a danger in this mortal life, God does not give the saints knowledge of their predestination. Even Paul is continually battered by some demon so that he may avoid pride.¹²⁵ Augustine states that "the trembling of humility is better than the confidence of pride." The saints are to work with fear and trembling for if they do not fear God, God will take away the grace that supports them.¹²⁶ Presumption in this time of trial is inappropriate. Without human doubt, a sense of security and confidence could lead to pride.¹²⁷ Consumerism, on the other hand, "would make the radical gift of grace into a commodity that, once possessed, will guarantee health and

¹²¹ Augustine, (*en. Ps.*) *Expositions on the Psalms*, trans. J. E. Tweed, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 8, *St. Augustin: Expositions on the Psalms* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), 104.41.

¹²² *corrept.* 12.37.

¹²³ *pecc. mer.* 2.17.27.

¹²⁴ *conf.* 10.42.67.

¹²⁵ *corrept.* 13.40.

¹²⁶ *en. Ps.* 104.43.

¹²⁷ *corrept.* 13.40.

wealth.”¹²⁸ It sells the illusion of eternal youth, promotes pride and selfishness, and encourages the belief that consumers can be self-sufficient like their models.

To avoid sinful pride, human beings must confess that they receive all good things from God. Augustine advises: “Let no man therefore boast of that which he seems to possess, as if he had not received it.”¹²⁹ The turning away from God in pride is a human act of evil will, but turning back is not possible without the help of God. Thus Augustine asks, “[W]hat have we that we have not received? But if we received, why do we glory as if we had not received?”¹³⁰ If one dared to list one’s merits before God, one would merely be enumerating gifts received from God.¹³¹ God does not show mercy to those who know God or are righteous, but *so that* they may know God and become righteous. This economy does not lead to pride, which comes when one has too much confidence in oneself.¹³² The weak are given power through grace, and this “dependence on grace produces awareness of one’s own weakness.”¹³³ To return to God, one must deny oneself, and this means ceasing to rely on oneself and realizing that one is human and therefore dependent upon God for all one’s goodness. All evil comes from one’s will, however, and so one must abandon everything of one’s own in recognition of the fact that one has been one’s “own undoing.”¹³⁴ Here one does not need to sacrifice oneself in order to be humble; rather, one’s self is restored only through humility.

In regard to this sin of relying upon one’s own power, Augustine again singles out the pagan philosophers for criticism. Because they can direct their gaze beyond creation

¹²⁸ Robert Webber and Rodney Clapp, *People of the Truth: A Christian Challenge to Contemporary Culture* (Harrisburg: Morehouse, 1993), 31.

¹²⁹ *spir. et litt.* 29.50.

¹³⁰ *pecc. mer.* 2.18.31.

¹³¹ *conf.* 9.13.34.

¹³² *spir. et litt.* 7.11.

¹³³ *conf.* 10.3.4.

¹³⁴ *s.* 96.2.

and attain in some small degree the unchanging light of truth, they assume that they can purify themselves, and they scoff at Christians who have not attained this vision but live out of faith alone. Augustine compares the cross to a boat and asks what good their knowledge does them when they are too proud to climb aboard. Though they can see to the other side of the sea, they are unable to cross over because they refuse to get on board. Conversely, humble Christians may not be able to see so far but are nonetheless able to cross over.¹³⁵ The ungodly may attain some knowledge of God, but in their pride they fail to profit by this knowledge, for they fail to glorify God as God and thank God for their knowledge.¹³⁶ If these proud philosophers could admit their need and give God the credit, they would be able to hold onto what they have managed to see, and then they “might be cured by the one who enabled them to see. Because if they did this, they would preserve humility, and be able to be purified, and so continue to enjoy that most blissful contemplation.”¹³⁷ The saints rest in the simple knowledge that God is God, whereas the proud, having listened to the temptation of the devil, seek to be God. They abandon “the true God” who would have helped them become gods, but through participation, not desertion. All good works, when understood to be God’s work, merit the attainment of the “Sabbath rest,” but when the proud credit themselves with their works, these works are servile and, therefore, not only lacking in merit, but actually “forbidden on the Sabbath.”¹³⁸

Grace then not only provides unmerited forgiveness for prideful sin, but also offers a cure for sinful pride itself. The proud do not know this grace for they seek to

¹³⁵ *Trin.* 4.1.20.

¹³⁶ *spir. et litt.* 26.44.

¹³⁷ *s.* 197.1.

¹³⁸ *civ. Dei* 22.30.

establish their own righteousness rather than subjecting themselves to Christ.¹³⁹ The devil, who conquered Adam, held the human race in his power until he was conquered by the second Adam and lost possession of the part of the human race that is Christian. The conqueror did not himself share in the crime of the human race, though he did come from that race. Thus the devil was conquered by the race he had conquered but in such a way as to prevent humanity from growing conceited through its victory.¹⁴⁰ As has been argued, Christ is both model and teacher of humility, but neither his example nor his lessons can transform pride into humility. The sinner requires divine grace.¹⁴¹ All deserve condemnation, so if none were delivered, none could blame God. Because all those delivered owe their salvation to grace, they must give thanks for it and glory in the Lord rather than glorying in any accomplishment of their own.

The gift of grace is charity, through which one is enabled to love as one should, free from proud self-love. In order to have the courage to reach to God, humanity had to know how much God loved it. On the other hand, so that humanity would not be too proud and thereby sink even further under its own failed efforts, humanity needed to know exactly what it was. Thus God brings the power of charity “to perfection in the weakness of humility.”¹⁴² MacQueen observes that in Augustine, just as pride is the full perversity of self-love, so too is humility the root of charity.¹⁴³ One who is in darkness cannot see the light. Even ordinary vision allows such a one to see a fellow human being, and if such a one loved one’s fellow human beings with charity, then this one would also see God for God is charity. But the one who does not love the other cannot love God for

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.24.

¹⁴⁰ *Trin.* 13.18.23.

¹⁴¹ MacQueen, 283.

¹⁴² *Trin.* 4.1.2.

¹⁴³ MacQueen, 285.

such a one is in darkness and lacks the light and love that is God.¹⁴⁴ If one envies another, one cannot love, for charity and envy cannot exist together.¹⁴⁵ Charity must love something, and when it loves itself, it must love itself in loving another.¹⁴⁶ Here charity is shown to be the true opposite of pride for it is in pride that human beings love themselves as ends, whereas charity only loves itself in loving another, and ultimately that other must be the one through whom charity itself and all other goods come. Charity thus shows itself opposed to consumerism, which always promises a purely self-directed love. Consumerism teaches that the individual does not need grace or charity but merely the right products to be saved. This “solution” promotes pride and leads to more frustration and more identity problems. As the next subsection will show, grace, on the other hand, restores human nature to its created glory and allows human beings to know and accept their selves and their proper place in creation.

Grace and Identity

Through grace, freedom is restored. Augustine claims that the choice of the will is “genuinely free only when it is not subservient to faults and sins. God gave it that true freedom,” and only God can restore it once it is lost. Before the Fall, Adam and Eve could not do everything, but they could, Augustine claims, do whatever they wished for the simple reason that they did not want to do anything that they could not do.¹⁴⁷ In this analysis, Augustine anticipates what Camus calls Nietzsche’s paradoxical definition of

¹⁴⁴ *Trin.* 8.8.12.

¹⁴⁵ Augustine, (*ep. Jo.*) *Ten Homilies on the First Epistle of John*, trans. H. Browne, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 7, *St. Augustin: Homilies on the Gospel of John; Homilies on the First Epistle of John* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986), 5.

¹⁴⁶ *Trin.* 8.8.12.

¹⁴⁷ *civ. Dei* 14.11, 14.15.

freedom—the “total acceptance of total necessity.”¹⁴⁸ One need not be free to do everything in order to have unbounded freedom so long as one does not desire to do what one cannot do. The person who works out her freedom in God wills only what God wills and thus is most free. Like the Nietzschean hero, she has learned to accept necessity, but the means of this acceptance and this freedom is not *amor fati*, but *amor Dei*. In this way, one is freed from the endless pursuit of the next consumer good or status symbol, which always promises to be the product that finally satisfies and makes one complete.

Augustine’s suggestion that Christians should will only what God wills is seen by some critics as an endorsement of hierarchy and a valorization of subservience. Nancy Victorin-Vangerud claims that in the traditional patriarchal pneumatology, the Spirit does not inspire fiery tongues but conforms “docile and useful persons, just like himself, to the authority of the Father.”¹⁴⁹ Augustine would take issue with this understanding of the Trinity. He argues, for example, that when Christ glorifies His Father, Christ does not thereby indicate division in the Trinity for the Trinity is inseparable; rather Christ is offering human beings an example of proper humility.¹⁵⁰ Furthermore, it is Augustine’s claim that any notion of freedom juxtaposed to the supposed docility described by Victorin-Vangerud is in fact nothing but slavery, and that this so-called docility is in fact precisely the means by which the individual gains her true freedom and becomes herself. Subservience to God does not lead inexorably toward worldly, political subservience but is instead the latter’s antidote. When the slave is in subordination to her master or the

¹⁴⁸ Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, trans. Anthony Bower (New York: Vintage, 1956), 72.

¹⁴⁹ Nancy M. Victorin-Vangerud, *The Raging Hearth: Spirit in the Household of God* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), 140.

¹⁵⁰ Augustine, (*ep.*) *Letters*, trans. J. G. Cunningham, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 1, “*The Confessions*” and *Letters of St. Augustin* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 194.3.12.

child is in subordination to her parents or the wife is in subordination to her husband, this usually means that the subordinated one is forced to act against her will. The Christian tradition has taught that so-called “subordination” to God is, on the contrary, precisely what enables one to do one’s own will. Thus Augustine argues that rather than making void the freedom of choice, grace instead establishes freedom of choice.¹⁵¹

Though critics see a loss of human freedom and autonomy in subservience to God, Augustine argues that the fact of one’s being “unable to delight in sin does not entail” a corresponding loss of free will. On the contrary, the will becomes “freer in that it is freed from a delight in sin and immovably fixed in a delight in not sinning.”¹⁵²

Augustine’s view here is at odds with the philosophy of the market. Douglas Meeks writes: “The theory of market exchange claims that coercion can be prevented when ‘no single act of exchange is greatly more advantageous to either party than other available exchange opportunities.’”¹⁵³ For Augustine, greater freedom is found not in manifold indifferent choices subject to whim but in a fixed desire and a clear understanding of what is best. God cannot sin, but this does not mean that God has no free will. Rather, God has the greatest freedom. In opposition to this understanding of God’s freedom, Meeks suggests: “The freedom of God has traditionally been denoted as God’s having no need of the creation or of human beings, as God being self-sufficient and totally beatific within God’s own life. This formalistic concept construes God’s freedom as absolute freedom of choice.”¹⁵⁴ But according to Augustine, God’s freedom is so great that it has no choices to make. Freedom here is not a matter of choices, as consumers are led to

¹⁵¹ *spir. et litt.* 30.52.

¹⁵² *civ. Dei* 22.30.

¹⁵³ Meeks, 63.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 67.

believe. A shopper faced with 40 kinds of toothpaste has many choices, but this is hardly the kind of meaningful freedom Augustine has in mind for none of these choices truly enables the shopper to pursue her own goodness. Grace heals the will so that one delights most in the highest good.¹⁵⁵ In this case, choice is no longer the issue. One does what delights one the most, but through grace, the source of one's delight changes. One is then free to do the good as one was not before grace began its work. This cannot be the result of one's own efforts for "[i]f those things delight us which serve our advancement towards God, that is due not to our own whim or industry or meritorious works, but to the inspiration of God and to the grace which [God] bestows."¹⁵⁶

Through God's grace, the human will is made not only free, but also whole. With God as the true object of love, the human will is made free from anxiety because it is purified and seeks but a single destination. Augustine describes being torn to pieces by his thoughts and desires "until that day when, purified and molten by the fire of [God's] love, [he flowed] together to merge into [God]."¹⁵⁷ Through the love of sin, the human will is attracted by a myriad of pleasures so that, pulled in many directions, it becomes shattered; through grace, the human will becomes one with itself and with God.

Augustine says that God gathered him together from the state of disintegration, dispersal,

¹⁵⁵ *Simpl.* 1.1.6-9. D. Stephen Long suggests that it is through willing the Infinite, not through infinitely willing, that true freedom is found. "As a finite creature, I do not have an intrinsic capacity, of course, to will the Infinite. But in Christ, who is the mediator between God and creatures, possessing both 'natures,' we can will the infinite without becoming less or more than human creatures." See *The Goodness of God: Theology, Church, and the Social Order* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001), 120. William Schweiker writes: "The love of God, we might say, can limit the desire of acquisition precisely because what is desired exceeds objectification. . . . '[G]reed' is checked only when human desire is given a non-consumable object." See "Reconsidering Greed," in *Having: Property and Possession in Religious and Social Life*, ed. William Schweiker and Charles Mathewes (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 269.

¹⁵⁶ *Simpl.* 1.2.21.

¹⁵⁷ *conf.* 11.29.39. Peter Sedgwick suggests that a theology of consumerism must begin with desire and cites Augustine as support for his argument (146-47).

and distortion and reshaped him and strengthened him.¹⁵⁸ God is the only good that brings happiness to a rational creature. God is the only unchanging good for though the things God has made are good, they are made out of nothing and so subject to change.¹⁵⁹ Thus, God alone is safe refuge. Augustine prays: “I can find no safe place for my soul except in you. There my dispersed aspirations are gathered together, and from you no part of me will depart.”¹⁶⁰ When Christ claims that his waters quench eternally, he means that whoever drinks of his water will return to the inner spring and thus have no more need to seek rain externally.¹⁶¹ The soul is what it is through God, not itself. It is this in its innermost being, and so when the self swells with pride, it goes forth to the outermost and becomes empty; while seeking to be more and more, it in fact becomes less and less.¹⁶² Unlike life according to the flesh in which pride rules and conflict is pervasive, “[l]ife according to the spirit means love of God and personal integration by this love.”¹⁶³

While some critics find in Augustine the imposition of God’s will on human beings, Augustine argues that God’s will can only be served by human beings through love, which sets them free from any law that constrains and motivates through fear. The law exposes division and the need for healing. It is given so that grace will be sought; grace in turn is given so that “the law might be fulfilled.”¹⁶⁴ Augustine explains to the Donatists that any laws enacted against them do not force them to do the good but merely prevent them from doing ill. The proof of this is that no one can do the good without

¹⁵⁸ *conf.* 2.1.1, 12.16.23.

¹⁵⁹ *civ. Dei* 12.1.

¹⁶⁰ *conf.* 10.40.65.

¹⁶¹ *Gn. adv. Man.* 2.5.6.

¹⁶² *mus.* 6.13.40.

¹⁶³ Patout Burns, “Grace: The Augustinian Foundation,” in *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, ed. Bernard McGinn and John Meyendorff (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 336.

¹⁶⁴ *spir. et litt.* 19.34.

deliberately choosing it and loving what is chosen in free will.¹⁶⁵ When one obeys the law without grace, one acts from fear of punishment, not from the love of righteousness. Thus the good that is in the action is absent from the will. God knows that the person would have preferred to violate the law or, more accurately, would have preferred that there be no law so as to be able to commit the evil deed with impunity.¹⁶⁶ Thus even when one does the good, one is not doing it rightly if one is acting against one's will.¹⁶⁷ The sin is imputed to one who wants to sin even if the deed is not carried out, "since conscience is held guilty by reason of the consent."¹⁶⁸ While this may seem like an extremely severe extension of the law, it is in fact just the logical result of Augustine's strong emphasis on the will and on love rather than on the external actions that may or may not correspond to the will and its loves. If the law is "kept from the fear of punishment and not from the love of righteousness, it is servilely kept, not freely, and therefore it is not kept at all. For no fruit is good which does not grow from the root of love."¹⁶⁹ Given that evil is disorder and disagreement in a being,¹⁷⁰ it follows that love must be the only legitimate motive for action. To do something for any other reason is to be divided and is thus evil. In discussing Augustine, Keller says that "love, for a patriarchal metaphysic incapable of connection, boils down to fear of destruction,"¹⁷¹ but in fact this is just the opposite of Augustine's anthropology and love ethic in which love, not fear, is the only legitimate motive for good action.

¹⁶⁵ Augustine, (*c. litt. Pet.*) *Answer to Letters of Petilian, Bishop of Cirta*, trans. J. R. King, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 4, *St. Augustin: The Writings Against the Manichaeans and Against the Donatists* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 2.84.184.

¹⁶⁶ *spir. et litt.* 8.13.

¹⁶⁷ *conf.* 1.12.19.

¹⁶⁸ *Gn. adv. Man.* 2.14.21.

¹⁶⁹ *spir. et litt.* 14.26.

¹⁷⁰ *mor.* 8.11.

¹⁷¹ Keller, 168.

The love given through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit frees one from the law while freeing one truly to obey the law for the first time. Through the Holy Spirit, one loves God and all else through God. Augustine says: “[W]e need not let that question worry us about how much love we should expend on our brother, how much on God. On our brother as much as on ourselves; and we love ourselves all the more, the more we love God. So with one and the same charity we love God and neighbor; but God on God’s account, ourselves and neighbor also on God’s account.”¹⁷² It seems clear that the loves of consumerism are not and perhaps cannot be loved on God’s account, and thus are not adequate objects of love. What would it mean to love a status symbol on God’s account? This criterion is not meant to be a law, however, commanding one to love certain things in a given order or not to love other things. One cannot love a status symbol on God’s account not because there is something inherently evil about the object but rather because its being a status symbol implies something about *how* and *why* it is loved. The proper ordering of one’s loves is the natural result of the proper love for God. Once one has Christ’s grace, one is no longer under the yoke of the law because one fulfills the law in love. In other words, one does not need the law to tell one what to do; one does what one desires and that is God’s will, for “charity is the fulfillment of the law.”¹⁷³ “Thus,” Augustine says, “a short and simple precept will be given you once for all: Love, and do what you will.”¹⁷⁴

In this love, which comes through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, God recreates the individual and enables the individual to share in the divine joy. The only authentic happy life comes through worshipping God, setting one’s joy on God, and recognizing

¹⁷² *Trin.* 8.8.12.

¹⁷³ *Simpl.* 1.1.17.

¹⁷⁴ *ep. Jo.* 7.8.

that one is grounded in God, and despite many advertisers' claims to the contrary, Augustine insists that this is the happy life, and there is no other.¹⁷⁵ Augustine hopes to find his stability and solidity in God for it is God's truth that "imparts form" to him.¹⁷⁶ Though the soul is responsible for the evil in it, God must initiate the movement of formation, whether in making the soul that did not exist or in recreating it "when it had perished through its fall."¹⁷⁷ The soul loses its proper existence in the fall; it is divided and, as it were, possessed by countless objects of desire, but God recreates what God has created so that it might be good and rest in the good as it was created to do. Praising God is the desire of the human being. God stirs people to take pleasure in praising God because, Augustine says, "you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."¹⁷⁸ Of course restlessness is perhaps the most important attribute of the good consumer. Consumers are never satisfied with their goods and never content in themselves, just as Augustine would have predicted.

Conclusion

Augustine's notion of charity and the freedom from the bondage to sin that it brings present a sharp contrast to and an implicit judgment of consumer society. Even the goal of rest is itself antithetical to a society based on competition and consumption. According to Augustine, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit properly orders one's loves, and so when one acts out of this love, one is not divided at all. Rather, through compassion, one grows in one's relation with others and with the Holy Spirit and thus

¹⁷⁵ *conf.* 10.22.32.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.30.40.

¹⁷⁷ *civ. Dei* 13.15.

¹⁷⁸ *conf.* 1.1.1.

with oneself. Rather than being pulled in many directions by objects of equally little value or led by inadequate models and their desires, one is guided only by one's love, which is itself shaped by the Holy Spirit. Creation is an act of love, and this loving act is continued in redemption. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit changes the way one loves, but this change is not a destructive force through which one loses oneself. On the contrary, the process of creation continues through this indwelling so that one becomes oneself. If one's creation continues through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and the acts of love and compassion that it inspires, then the absence of these creative forces is bound to result in a stunted identity. In the western world today, persons are often trained to think of themselves as isolated individuals whose engagements with the world are composed largely of competition and consumption. One attempts not so much to develop identity as to prove one's identity through beating out other individuals in endless competition. One attempts to increase the magnitude of one's self by consuming and accumulating ever-greater quantities of products and status symbols. But actually one is only divided by such strategies for one's loves are directed toward manifold discrete things. On these grounds, Augustine's theology of love can offer a helpful criticism of consumerism and challenge first world Christians to rethink their lives and their society, not due to self-sacrifice or guilt, but to a desire to develop their own identities and to allow the continuation of God's creation of their very selves.

This chapter has merely pointed out a way in which Augustine's theology of love can be marshaled on behalf of an analysis and criticism of consumerism. It has not specified any precise alternative. It would seem to endorse no grand social change, but a personal withdrawal. Even this is dubious, however, because it is unclear how an

individual can possibly withdraw from consumer society, and even if one seeks to minimize one's participation, this strategy is no doubt a particularly strong example of attempting to establish and express one's identity through purchases (or lack thereof¹⁷⁹) and in relation to consumer society. Really this chapter speaks more to the consumer's attitude toward products than to her purchases. The Augustinian consumer need not move to a commune or monastery, but she cannot love consumer goods for their own sake or the sake of more goods. Neither can she see her purchases as foundational to her identity for only God can be that foundation. If, as this dissertation will argue, the Church should offer an alternative model of the good life and should not be afraid to challenge the ethos spread by advertising, then this chapter contends that in Augustine, the Church possesses a powerful and well-developed articulation of this Christian alternative.

¹⁷⁹ Thus Claudia V. Camp points out: "Perhaps the most radical case of defining identity by possessions (or lack thereof) is when a person, taking a vow of poverty, declares herself free from such entrapments to the material world." See "Possessing Wealth, Possessing Women, Possessing Self: The Shame of Biblical Discourse," in *Having: Property and Possession in Religious and Social Life*, ed. William Schweiker and Charles Mathewes (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 70.

CHAPTER VI

Kierkegaard too offers a vision of identity very different from the one on sale in consumer society. In this chapter, I will continue the development of my constructive proposal concerning identity by continuing the discussion of Kierkegaard begun in Chapter 4. In the previous chapter, I began my constructive proposal concerning identity by bringing Augustine's theology to bear on this discussion. That chapter focused on pride and the importance of choosing Christ rather than the devil as one's model. This chapter will further clarify these ideas by looking at Kierkegaard's emphasis on imitating the abased Christ and seeking to be like God, not through self-glorification, but through humbling oneself before God.

The consumer seeks self-glorification through comparison, but Kierkegaard calls Christians to embrace the single glory of being human. Human beings should not proudly seek to prove their independence through consumption, but must acknowledge their dependence upon God for all things. Kierkegaard's desire to leave his readers alone before God can be seen not only in the content of his theology but also in the strategy of his entire authorship. Unlike advertising that always places a mediator before consumers to lend them desire and provide them with the criteria by which they can reject their selves as they are, Kierkegaard seeks to eliminate himself from the equation. Rather than offering himself as a model, he goes to great lengths to make himself invisible to the reader. In this fashion, he is like the teachers he follows Christ in recommending—the lilies of the field and the birds of the air. Christendom has forgotten that Christianity must be based upon indirect communication for it treats Christ as an idol to be

worshipped, not as an object of offense or of faith. Christianity requires a choice, but the choice is not whether one will be persuaded by reasons for Christ's divinity but rather whether one will follow Christ in his abasement. If one does, one will then come to have faith and will have God as one's criterion—an idea for which consumerism has no tolerance. In consumerism, one attempts to ascend gradually to the greatness of one's divinities, advertising models, by doing as they do and buying what they have. According to Kierkegaard, however, Christians are glorified not by trying to be like God directly, but through an inverse relation. Only through abasement in following Christ and through prostrating oneself in worship is one truly glorified.

This chapter is divided into four sections according to the elements of the teaching moment explicated and carried out in Kierkegaard's writing. The first section discusses the teachers—primarily the lilies and the birds but also Christ and Kierkegaard himself. In contrast to advertising models, these teachers bar the unhealthy comparisons that pervade consumer society and allow their students to stand alone before God. This section serves as a counterpoint to the first section in Chapter 4, in which I discussed the dangers of comparisons. The second section describes the Kierkegaardian pedagogy of indirect communication and explains why it is essential to Christianity. This pedagogy is especially important today because it is necessary for removing the illusions propagated by consumerism as was explained in the discussions of despair and the crowd in Chapter 4. The final two sections focus on the lessons offered by Kierkegaard. The first concerns what it means to be a human being before God. Such human beings compare themselves only to God and this in an inverse relation. Sin and offense separate them from the crowd so that they struggle only with themselves. This section responds particularly to the final

section of Chapter 4. The final section of this chapter will discuss the importance of compassion and imitation of Christ. The Christian, according to Kierkegaard, relates to others in compassion rather than competition and strives to imitate, not consumer models, but only Jesus Christ.

The Teachers

The teacher's life and qualities may be constructive or destructive to the student. Kierkegaard recommends the lily and the bird because so many human teachers fail to appreciate the student's circumstances. A happy person fails to understand the person in distress; a strong person rises above the weak one in need of comfort; a worried person only increases the worries of the worried one. So it is best to look for "teachers whose words are not a misapprehension, whose encouragement does not contain any hidden blame, whose glance does not judge, whose comfort does not agitate instead of calm."¹ The "teachers" of consumerism do blame, judge, and agitate by setting themselves before their students as measuring sticks that demonstrate how short they fall. The bird and the lily do not judge but neither do they understand the learner. Kierkegaard says that in order to help the student, the teacher must understand what the student understands. He claims to have used his "familiarity with people and their weaknesses" not to profit by them or to belittle his readers, but on the contrary, "to annihilate myself, to weaken the impression of myself."²

Thus he does not boast of his own faith or Christian works but seeks indirectly to elucidate the reader's position in relation to Christianity. Through Johannes Climacus

¹ Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, 160.

² Søren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, *Kierkegaard's Writings* 22 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 45, 58.

and Johannes de Silentio in particular, Kierkegaard humbles himself in this regard—suggesting that the author is unable to make the movement of faith. The author, as it were, joins the readers or even places himself below them. There can be no question of vanity here; there is only compassionate helping. Similarly, Kierkegaard writes of the requirement that the Christian not merely set out a dinner for the poor but also call it and think of it as a banquet.³ One must not help a person as if throwing scraps to a dog under the table but must join the sufferer in compassion. Of course the teacher may always seem to be in a position of authority over the student, and for this reason Kierkegaard, like Jesus, refers his readers to the lily and the bird: “It was, to be sure, a human being who spoke, but assisted by the lilies and the birds he spoke about the lilies and the birds. Thus, that he is the speaker involves no comparison with any other human being, as if he had any advantage by being the speaker.”⁴ Avoiding comparison in this way not only comforts the worried student, but also keeps the teacher from arrogance. The lily and the bird have the additional advantage of simplicity, which for Kierkegaard means sincerity. Unlike the hypocritical teachers of Christendom, the bird and the lily are themselves what they teach.⁵

The lily and the bird do God’s will in utter simplicity, but they do not teach human beings merely to follow them for that would involve comparison. Rather, they teach and encourage human beings to do what they are themselves unable to do; they remind human beings of what it is to be a human being: “To be spirit, that is the human being’s invisible glory.” The human being is created in God’s image and so is spirit as God is spirit. The lily’s glory is visible, but the human being’s glory is to be spirit and is

³ Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 82-83.

⁴ Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, 182.

⁵ Kierkegaard, *Without Authority*, 38.

thus invisible; the human being resembles God invisibly. “Thus when the worried one out in the field stands surrounded by all the witnesses, when every single flower says to him, ‘Remember God!’ he replies, ‘I will indeed do that, my children—I will worship him, and you poor little ones cannot do that.’ Consequently the erect, upright one is a worshipper. The upright gait is the sign of distinction, but to be able to prostrate oneself in adoration and worship is even more glorious; and all nature is like the great staff of servants who remind the human being, the ruler, about worshipping God.”⁶ It seems that the servant teaches the ruler so that the teacher is humbled and the student is elevated just as Kierkegaard humbles himself to teach the reader, but still in both cases, the students—the rulers—learn that their greatest glory lies in prostration and humility.

In Matthew 6, when Jesus enjoins his followers to learn from the lily and the bird, he also issues another dictum: “No one can serve two masters.” Kierkegaard suggests that the worried one is taken into the field for this lesson so that there be no ambiguity about who the two masters might be. In the field among the lilies and birds, there can be no question “about serving a master as his apprentice or a wise person as his adherent, but only about serving God or the world.”⁷ Unlike other students, the students of the bird and the lily are not tempted to serve their teachers as their masters. Indeed Christ softens the demand of imitation by referring Christians to these humble teachers: “Christ does not want to trouble us by presenting himself (though it is the truth) as the only one who has served only one master and now with the rigorousness of the law requiring the same of us. No, he mitigates it all for us. He points to some other teachers, to the lily and the bird (who, however, like him have no arbitrary will of their own—and this is the point, if

⁶ Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, 193.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 204-05.

one is to serve only one master).”⁸ Consumerism rejects this message for it thrives by flattering individuals—telling them that their arbitrary wills are sovereign.

The bird and the lily teach simply in that they exemplify the content of their message. As teachers, they have the advantage of forestalling comparisons between their students and themselves. At the same time, the subject of their lesson is also the avoidance of comparison: “[I]n his diversion with the lilies the worried one had acquired something quite different from his worry to think about; he began to consider properly how glorious it is to be a human being. If in a worldly way he again forgets this amid the crisscrossing of comparisons and the clash of diversities among individuals, it is not the fault of the lilies; then it is rather because he has forgotten the lilies, forgotten that there was something he should learn from them and something he absolutely must remember to do for them. If worldly worry is to be defined with a single phrase, would we not have to say that it is worry about clothes, worry about appearances.”⁹ In consumer society, the focus is forever on comparisons and diversities, leading to endless worrying about appearance, which occludes the glory of simply being human—a concept anathema to consumerism. The lilies show their students that human glory lies not in comparison but in humanity itself and the humble praise of the One in whose image they are created.

The lilies of the field may all be “dressed” alike; perhaps some look better than others, but each is more finely dressed than Solomon in his riches, and they do not compare themselves, but quietly rest contented. Likewise, the birds of the air do not compare: “It does not occur to any bird, not even the bird that flies highest, that it is so highly placed that it would have to rule over others.” No bird rises so high so as to *look*

⁸ Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, 2:1907.

⁹ Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, 194.

down on another: “[E]very bird is lofty, but it seems as if every bird is essentially placed equally high. This heavenly equality among birds, or their equal loftiness under heaven, has something in common with the loftiness of eternal life—where there likewise is neither high nor low and yet there is loftiness. All birds are lofty, but among themselves none of them is lofty.” If a student challenges this teacher, suggesting that loftiness must entail comparison, that the bird cannot be lofty without being loftier than other birds, then the teacher simply answers, “How so? Am I not lofty?”—and then the bird flies high or it remains on the ground, but where it is still lofty, aware of its loftiness. Therefore it is lofty without the care of loftiness, lofty without being elevated above anyone.” The bird is lofty without comparison, without proving its loftiness by being loftier than another and is thus lofty without the care of loftiness. This is the teacher, and this is the lesson.¹⁰ The Christian should also have loftiness without this care, but the consumer does have this care. The Gospels avoid judging pagans by referring to the lily and the bird, who nonetheless show what paganism is, as well as showing what the Christian must be. The lily and the bird do not judge, and thus their students must not judge either. The Christian, therefore, cannot judge the non-Christian.¹¹ The bird and the lily teach and embody this lesson.

Though the true teacher humbly leaves the student alone before God and does not seek the student’s admiration, students often prefer to admire a teacher. Thus many resist the true teacher: “[I]f the teacher is unwilling to deceive them, is unwilling to take either their money or their admiration, if he knows only one truth and wants to know only one, the truth that he has by no means invented himself and in which he himself is only a

¹⁰ Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, 49-50.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

learner—that through sufferings, by himself in sufferings, a person will with the help of God learn the highest truth—then they become impatient and almost indignant with the teacher.”¹² Kierkegaard appeals to prototypes because they are anonymous or eternal images. The name of the teacher may distract the student so that she loses sight of herself, but the anonymous prototype keeps the student before herself.¹³

Teachers of triumphant Christianity are, on the other hand, more concerned with making favorable impressions. They want to win as many adherents as possible not for the sake of the student’s relationship to God but to increase the numbers in support of their cause. Whether these students really become Christians is irrelevant then, and indeed these teachers do not risk removing their students’ illusions or making them aware of their positions but instead flatter them in order to win converts so that they can then submit truth to the ballot.¹⁴ Kierkegaard argues that this is not Christianity and thus that “Christianity has not actually entered the world.” Even the apostles proclaimed the gospel “so powerfully along the lines of propagation that already here the dubiousness begins” as they seem too hasty to let people “pass as followers of Jesus Christ. The prototype’s proclamation was different, because just as unconditionally as he proclaimed the doctrine to all, living only for that, just as unconditionally did he hold back with regard to becoming a follower, to receiving permission to call oneself that.” Because of this reserve and thorough discipleship, in Jesus’ entire ministry (which Kierkegaard, following the Gospel of John, estimates to be three and a half years), “he won only eleven, whereas one apostle in one day, I dare say in one hour, wins three thousand followers of Christ [Acts 2.41]. Either the follower is here greater than the Master, or the

¹² Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, 251.

¹³ Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, 2:1856.

¹⁴ Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, 51.

truth is that the apostle is a bit too hasty in striking a bargain, a bit too hasty about propagation; thus the dubiousness already begins here.”¹⁵

The lily and the bird are not so eager to please or to win adherents, and though they can teach the student much and ease the worrier’s suffering, the scope of their teaching is limited. If they spoke, the student might scold them as an adult scolds children for talking about what they cannot possibly understand. After all, the adult does have to make a living, and the bird and lily do not. This student might then “become conscious of its being a perfection to be able to worry about making a living.”¹⁶ But these teachers do not speak, and so it is only the rebellious student who breaks the silence to scold the teacher.

The silence of the teacher leaves room for the student to hear herself and to hear God. Speech or writing may lead to comparison with the speaker or author, but silence respects the student’s position. Kierkegaard explains, “[W]hen the happy person says to one who is worried: Be glad, the remark also implies: as I am glad; and when the strong person says: Be strong, it is tacitly understood: as I am strong. But silence respects the worry and respects the worried one as Job’s friends did, who out of respect sat silent with

¹⁵ Kierkegaard, *The Moment and Late Writings*, 181. James F. Engel distinguishes between promising to satisfy felt needs and preaching the narrow way of imitation. See “The Great Commission Advertising Campaign Misuse of the Mass Media in World Evangelization,” *Transformation* 9.4 (October/December 1992), 23. Of course advertising of all kinds focuses on felt needs rather than any narrow way. Christian churches have increasingly turned from discipleship and placing demands on parishioners to such attempts to meet felt needs in order to increase conversions and boost attendance. See Budde, *The (Magic) Kingdom of God*, 134, 108 and Edward N. Luttwak, “Consuming for Love,” in *Consuming Desires: Consumption, Culture, and the Pursuit of Happiness*, ed. Roger Rosenblatt (Washington: Island Press, 1999), 58. Michael Budde and Robert Brimlow point out that this effort to give congregants what they want means that the Church is unable to offer the kind of criticism it should (53). Gayle White says simply: “In secular terminology, you’re a consumer and God is their product.” Churches borrow technology and methods from advertising and market themselves vehemently. See “The Ministry Meet Madison Ave.: Modern Churches Sold on Slick Marketing Techniques,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 3 November 1991, A1. R. Laurence Moore discusses the history of this kind of advertising in America. See *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 215.

¹⁶ Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, 196-97.

the sufferer and held him in respect.”¹⁷ Silently being with someone is itself a form of indirect communication. Obviously it is not direct in that no words are spoken or content given. But it is communication because one shares and respects the other’s feelings. Furthermore, this silence leads the worrier away from comparison and toward God. Conversely, the cacophony of commercials keeps consumers constantly comparing themselves to models and to other consumers and thus deafens them to the voice of God. Kierkegaard says that “the lily, who is the teacher, is profound. It does not become involved with you at all; it is silent, and by being silent it wants to be a sign to you that you are before God, so that you remember that you are before God—so that you also in earnestness and truth might become silent before God.” With the lily, the silence is perhaps even more profound than with a silent friend for when one is with the lily one remains alone. There is no one present to whom one might devote oneself, and in this silence, one comes to know how close God is.¹⁸

If one breaks this silence, one is not speaking to the teacher but to oneself: “Indeed, little by little he discovers that he is speaking about himself, that what he says about the lily he says about himself. It is not the lily that is saying it; the lily cannot speak. It is not some *other* human being who is saying it to him, since with *another* human being the agitated thoughts of comparison come so readily and promptly. Among the lilies the worried one is only a human being—and is contented with being a human being.”¹⁹ In thus speaking to oneself in the presence of the lilies, one overcomes comparison and learns what joy it is to be simply a human being. But God is close there among the lilies, and one also learns this in the silence. The chatter of the world occludes

¹⁷ Ibid., 161.

¹⁸ Kierkegaard, *Without Authority*, 17, 23.

¹⁹ Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, 165.

God's presence, but the lily and the bird do not interfere or drown out God with their noise. Here again, they are their lesson. They leave one in silence before God while teaching their students to be silent before God. While many students seek out the teacher with a famous name and scorn the teacher who humbly suffers with the student, these teachers who have no names, teach what they are; they teach their students to forget their names.²⁰ No wonder then that amid the world of comparisons these teachers are most often ignored. But this suffering with the student does not multiply suffering. On the contrary, it eases the suffering, whereas suffering is in fact multiplied by comparisons and by talk: "The bird is not exempt from suffering, but the silent bird exempts itself from what makes the suffering harder, the mistaken sympathy of others, from what prolongs the suffering, all the talk about the suffering, from what makes the suffering into what is worse than suffering, into the sin of impatience and sadness." In silence, one does not magnify one's suffering, and this silence is what the lily and the bird teach.²¹

Christ teaches his followers to seek God's kingdom first, and here too silence is required. Christ's presence itself silences the world. His presence judges what the world admires because he is self-denial.²² He seeks, not the things of the world or his own worldly advantage, but God's kingdom. And this too can be learned from the lily and the bird: "Seek first God's kingdom; that is, become like the lily and the bird; that is, become completely silent before God—then all the rest will be added unto you."²³ Many people pray eloquently, but correct prayer is silence for prayer is not to convince God to give one what one wants, but rather to seek first the kingdom of God. In fact, the student of

²⁰ Kierkegaard, *Without Authority*, 17-19.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 15-16.

²² Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, 224.

²³ Kierkegaard, *Without Authority*, 20.

the bird and the lily not only becomes silent but also becomes a listener, which according to Kierkegaard is even more directly opposed to speaking than is silence. The encounter with God only occurs in this silent listening. In the silence, one knows oneself and thus knows who it is that is standing silently before God. In this silence, one hears God and becomes aware that one is alone in the whole world and that precisely this is the one who is commanded to love God.²⁴ When one is still and silent, one experiences oneself as one feels and hears one's heart beating. Then one also hears God speaking from within oneself for the voice is not one's own, is not the voice of human comparison, and is certainly not the voice of one's teachers—the bird and the lily. This section has described these teachers recommended by Kierkegaard. The next section will show how the methods of these teachers—the birds and the lilies—are to be carried out by human teachers and also why such methods are essential for Christianity in consumer society.

The Pedagogy: Indirect Communication

Kierkegaard's indirect communication leaves the reader alone in much the same way as the bird and the lily leave their students alone. Howard and Edna Hong write: "The accent on the single individual in the pseudonymous works is embodied also in the indirect method, the purpose of which is to make the author of the authors irrelevant and to leave the reader alone with the works and the various positions presented."²⁵ In regard to *Fear and Trembling* and *Repetition* in particular, they claim that Kierkegaard employed indirect communication "to take himself as author out of the picture and to

²⁴ Ibid., 12-14, 24-25.

²⁵ Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, introduction to *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, by Søren Kierkegaard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), xx.

leave the reader alone with the ideas.”²⁶ In discussing his work, Kierkegaard himself suggests that this strategy was necessitated by the situation of his readers and the purpose of his writing: “No, an illusion can never be removed directly, and basically only indirectly. If it is an illusion that all are Christians, and if something is to be done, it must be done indirectly, not by someone who loudly declares himself to be an extraordinary Christian, but by someone who, better informed, even declares himself not to be a Christian. That is, one who is under an illusion must be approached from behind.”²⁷ Johannes de Silentio and Johannes Climacus are both examples of this strategy.

Though the issue of the illusion of thinking oneself a Christian may seem like a second reason for indirect communication (in addition to avoiding comparison), it is in fact simply an example of the first. The author’s suggesting to the reader, who thinks herself a Christian, that she is not a true Christian but that the author is, is to form a comparison, and this invites defensiveness and counter-attack. And it is precisely the game of comparison that must be avoided by the Christian. The one who challenges others in this way is doomed to fail for the challenged ones “make him out to be a fanatic and his Christianity to be an exaggeration—in the end he becomes the only one, or one of the few, who is not a Christian in earnest.”²⁸ While Anti-Climacus does offer a rigorous account of Christianity and does not deny his own faith, Kierkegaard suggests that the pseudonym nonetheless allows him to prevent his readers from becoming defensive:

²⁶ Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, introduction to *Fear and Trembling; Repetition*, by Søren Kierkegaard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), x.

²⁷ Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, 43.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 42-43.

“Someone who is no one cannot possibly offend anyone, cannot possibly judge anyone.”²⁹

Kierkegaard himself learned this method from that great teacher who was the subject of his dissertation. In that work, he says that Socrates did not stop with abstract philosophical speculation about humanity, but “addressed himself to each one individually, wrested everything from him, and sent him away empty-handed.”³⁰

Likewise, Kierkegaard seeks to take something away from his readers, and so he must employ a similar technique. Kierkegaard writes, “Take the Socratic position: error and evil are puffed-up knowledge—therefore Socrates is the ignorant one and remains that until the end. Likewise, to be a Christian has become an illusion, all these millions of Christians—therefore the situation must be reversed and Christianity must be introduced by a person who says that he himself is not a Christian.”³¹ Thus he uses the pseudonyms. He suggests that to denounce another person’s illusions directly cannot succeed and may in fact make the situation worse: “By a direct attack he only strengthens a person in the illusion and also infuriates him.” The direct attack is dangerous and destructive also because it places the learner in relation to the teacher rather than in relation to God. It presumptuously demands that, face-to-face with the teacher, the student make the confession that should rather be made to oneself secretly. The indirect method arranges everything modestly so as to avoid being witness to the confession made alone before God in which the student admits to having lived in an illusion. Before the attacking teacher, the learner’s shame sparks rebuttal and entrenchment, but before God it yields

²⁹ Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, 160.

³⁰ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony, with Continual Reference to Socrates*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, *Kierkegaard's Writings 2* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 173.

³¹ Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, 2:1962.

humble confession. Thus, because Christendom lives under an illusion, “the method must become indirect.”³² I have argued that the same can be said of consumer society.

Kierkegaard believes, not only that indirect communication is necessary to wrest illusions from so-called Christians, but also that indirect communication is precisely the necessary element within Christianity that Christendom has eliminated. The illusion of Christendom is its belief in the possibility of direct communication. When the teachings of Jesus become primary, Christ is abolished and “Christianity is nothing but *direct* communication,” but “when the teacher, who is inseparable from and more essential than the teaching, is a paradox, then all direct communication is impossible.” Christ cannot tell his listeners that he is the messiah without engaging in indirect communication. The appearance of a lowly servant makes the direct statement, “I am the Messiah” indirect. Faith is still required of the listener. But Christ does not answer John the Baptist directly when asked if he is the Messiah. Kierkegaard explains that Jesus “requires faith and therefore cannot give someone who is *absent* a direct communication. He could indeed say it directly to *someone present*, because someone present, by seeing the speaker, this individual human being, through this contradiction would nevertheless not receive a *direct* communication, since the contradiction is between what is said and what is seen.”³³ Like the bird and the lily, Christ is his message. Just as he must always speak indirectly because of who he is, so too does his message require indirection. Direct communication engages the student as a recipient of knowledge but not as an existing person.³⁴ Christianity does not speak to detached knowledge recipients but to people in their existential situations, and thus Christianity must speak indirectly. Jesus asks his

³² Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, 43-44, 52.

³³ Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 123, 135, 94.

³⁴ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 244.

listeners, not to assent to propositions, but to believe. Like Socrates, Kierkegaard sees his role in this regard as that of a midwife, but he does not believe the Christian can be only this. He writes: “It is very proper that the maieutic be used in Christendom, simply because the majority actually live in the fancy that they are Christians. But since Christianity still is Christianity, the one who uses the maieutic must become a witness.”³⁵ Socrates can claim to know nothing, but the Christian must finally confess that Jesus is the Christ.

Though the Christian must make a positive claim, the teacher is all the more restricted to indirect communication by the nature of that claim for the Christian does not make an objectively verifiable claim of fact. Kierkegaard says, “The God-man must require faith and in order to require faith must deny direct communication.” The teacher cannot give the student faith. The student is not passive in this process: “Faith is a choice, certainly not direct reception—and the recipient is the one who is disclosed, whether he will believe or be offended.” The student does not simply receive knowledge but is in fact the very subject of the revelation. One must make a choice because Jesus cannot present himself as the messiah directly. Kierkegaard writes, “Because of the communicator the communication contains a contradiction, it becomes indirect communication; it confronts you with a choice: whether you will believe him or not.”³⁶ Normally the student may judge the evidence for and against a certain view, but in this case the student cannot weigh reasons; instead, the student is judged in choosing.

Christ teaches indirectly by way of his life, and the student too must live this lesson for it is existential, not objective. To follow Christ is more than just to assent to

³⁵ Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, 2:1957.

³⁶ Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 142, 141, 134.

his being the Messiah, and indeed this following after Christ must precede knowledge of him. The student does not receive saving information; the student is forced to make a choice: “The Savior of the world, our Lord Jesus Christ, did not come to the world in order to bring a doctrine; he never lectured . . . His teaching was really his life, his existence. If someone wanted to be his follower, his approach, as seen in the Gospel, was different from lecturing. To such a person he said something like this: Venture a decisive act; then we can begin.”³⁷ Only after the decisive act does one begin to learn what Christianity is. Then one becomes a student of Christ in earnest. Christ’s disciples are not just judged in their decision to follow him or not; once they have chosen to follow him, their lives are always under judgment. Christ does not judge, but his life does. His disciples “perceive that to associate with him amounts almost to being up for examination, because even though he says nothing his life tacitly examines theirs.”³⁸ Christ’s life judges the lives of the disciples; the disciples do not first judge Christ.

Proofs of the validity of Christian doctrine are misplaced and nothing more than symptoms of doubt. They seek to judge Christ, even if affirmatively. Instead one must first submit oneself to judgment by following Christ. Proofs do not precede Christ but follow him: “That is, when you have ventured the decisive act, you become heterogeneous with the life of this world, cannot have your life in it, come into collision with it. Then you will gradually be brought into such tension . . . that you cannot endure it without having recourse to me—and then we can begin.”³⁹ Once one follows Christ, one’s need for him becomes real, and this need, fulfilled in Christ, is the only proof. This

³⁷ Søren Kierkegaard, *Judge for Yourself!*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Kierkegaard's Writings 21 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 191.

³⁸ Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 245.

³⁹ Kierkegaard, *Judge for Yourself!*, 191.

“proof” is an existential one, not an objective, logical one, and as such, it cannot be communicated directly. It must be lived. This section has explored Kierkegaard’s indirect method and explained why this strategy is necessary in explicating Christianity, especially in a society that, like consumerism, is pervaded by illusion. The next section looks at some of the content of Kierkegaard’s teaching—how a human being created in the image of God is to live away from the crowd with concern only for one’s relation to God, free of comparison, struggling only with oneself. I will argue that this way of life, so at odds with consumerism, is key to understanding and developing a meaningful identity.

The Lesson: What It Means to Be a Human Being before God

Christianity refuses the comparisons of the world in order to affirm the glory of each human being. When Jesus says that the lily of the field does not worry about its clothing but is dressed more beautifully than Solomon, he does not mean that the flower is more beautiful than a human being, but rather that the flower is more beautiful than the clothes beneath which the human being hides. Kierkegaard writes: “In exactly the same sense as the lily is a lily, absolutely in the same sense, this person, despite all his worries as a human being, is a human being, and exactly in the same sense as the lily, without working and spinning, is more beautiful than Solomon’s glory; exactly in the same sense, this person, without working, without spinning, without any meritoriousness, is more glorious than Solomon’s glory by being a human being.”⁴⁰ Consumerism teaches people to outdo one another, to make themselves more beautiful by any means necessary. Solomon’s clothing is not as beautiful as that of the lily, but in truth the lily has no

⁴⁰ Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, 165.

clothing. The clothes with which vanity is concerned must be disregarded. Human beings should not compare their garments to anyone else's. "No, if a human being is going to compare himself to the lily, he has to say: All that I am by being a human being—that is my clothing. I am responsible for none of it, but glorious it is."⁴¹ The idea that each human being is glorious is absent in contemporary society. Only high achievers, prodigious consumers, and beautiful models are glorious. All others must aspire to this glory for if they already possessed it, they would have no need to seek their glory through consumption. Thus the glory of each human being is completely denied by the relentless assault of advertising, and while liberalism acknowledges the humanity and rights of each person, this notion is typically connected only to the oppressed Others whose perceived inferiority demand this reminder, and thus it is rarely thought in connection with the majority of American consumers. Furthermore, the locus of certain negative freedoms is a far cry from the gloriousness of which Kierkegaard speaks.

In constant contact with others and with the diversity of the world, the human being becomes lost in comparison and forgets what it is simply to be a human being; distracted by what is different about each one, the human being forgets what all have in common. But in the field with those teachers, the lilies, the student is the only human being and thus is able to learn from a flower what other human beings had prevented the student from seeing—what it is to be a human being. The student learns from the lilies "to be contented with being a human being and not to be worried about diversity among human beings." By the world's standards, to be a human being is something taken for granted, and it is only what one is in addition to this that matters, that distinguishes one. But by Christian standards, it is this being human, which all have in common, that truly

⁴¹ Ibid., 191-92.

matters. To be human is above, not below, the diversities of humanity. It is the glory of all human beings equally.⁴² The lily is beautiful without worrying about its clothing. It is naturally clothed more beautifully than Solomon in all his riches. But the human being is naturally clothed even more beautifully than the lily, for the human being is created in God's image: "Must it not be glorious to be clothed in this way!"⁴³ Consumerism persuades people that they are not made in the image of God but that they must be remade in the image of the beautiful model. The image of God is concealed beneath layers of clothes and makeup designed to make one better than one's fellow human beings. God, of course, is spirit, and so God's image is one of invisibility. This image is the spirit of the human being and is the human being's invisible glory. The lily cannot resemble God because the lily's glory is visible, and nothing can visibly resemble the invisible. Likewise, none of the products sold in consumer society can resemble God, but people nonetheless try to make themselves more illustrious through them. In doing so, they learn to focus exclusively on the visible and lose the ability to "see" their own hidden glory and the glory of their fellow human beings.

In the world, people lose themselves in the crowd, but Christianity does not acknowledge this mass of humanity and is concerned with each person individually. Kierkegaard claims that God does not focus on the crowd but desires instead the individual. God deals only with the individual, unconcerned about whether the individual is distinguished or wretched.⁴⁴ This individual, however, is often drowning in a sea of people and must be rescued from it. Kierkegaard opens his devotional discourses on the

⁴² Ibid., 165-71.

⁴³ Ibid., 192.

⁴⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing: Spiritual Preparation for the Office of Confession*, trans. Douglas V. Steere (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1948), 185.

lily and the bird with a prayer. It begins: “Father in heaven, what we in company with people, especially in a crowd of people, come to know with difficulty, and what we, if we have come to know it somewhere else, so easily forget in company with people, especially in a crowd of people—what it is to be a human being and what religiously is the requirement for being a human being—would that we might learn it or, if it is forgotten, that we might learn it again from the lily and the bird.”⁴⁵ These teachers are invoked because they leave one alone with one’s humanity. The crowd, on the other hand, blinds one to oneself.⁴⁶

Christianity separates the individual from the crowd through the concept of sin. Sin is despair, and it is always before God. For Christianity, “the opposite of sin is not virtue but faith.”⁴⁷ God is a God of order, not confusion, and so God wants each human being to be aware of being an individual. When people “run together in what Aristotle calls the animal category—the crowd—then this abstraction, instead of being less than nothing, even less than the most insignificant individual human being, comes to be regarded as being something—then it does not take long before the abstraction becomes God.” This is the unchristian understanding of the god-man: people become lost in the crowd and make of the crowd a divinity. But Christianity protects itself from the crowd by beginning “with the teaching about sin.” Sin, though common to all people, does not bring people together; it separates them. Offense too is related to the individual, and “here everything that heaven and earth can muster regarding the possibility of offense (God alone has control of that) is concentrated—and this is Christianity. Then Christianity says to each individual: You shall believe—that is, either you shall be

⁴⁵ Kierkegaard, *Without Authority*, 3.

⁴⁶ Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, 39.

⁴⁷ Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, 82.

offended or you shall believe. Not one word more; there is nothing more to add.”⁴⁸ Of course because faith is the opposite of sin, this offense is ultimately not another means of separating the individual but the same for it is sin. Once separated, the self is directly before God and thereby “takes on a new quality and qualification.” It becomes “the theological self;” it is a “self whose criteria is God.” Through this transformation, “an infinite accent falls on the self” for the self’s criterion defines it, and here the criterion is God. “In fact, the greater the conception of God, the more self there is; the more self, the greater the conception of God.”⁴⁹ The consumer’s criterion is of course the model, and thus the consumer has less self.

By worldly standards, the mass movement is most impressive; the job that requires thousands of workers is awe-inspiring. But according to Kierkegaard that which requires numbers to become significant is in truth insignificant and the greater the number the smaller the significance. The importance and the number are inversely related. Thus, the more important, the smaller the number, and “for the most important of all, that which sets heaven and earth in motion, only one man is needed, and a need for more becomes a subtraction.”⁵⁰ Abraham, the prototype of the religious person, does not join up with a mass of people but dares to leave the others behind, and so too does every religious person have to forsake all contemporaries even while remaining among them “but isolated, *alien* to them.” To be in exile in this way is the religious person’s characteristic suffering.⁵¹ Before God, there is no other way. One cannot arrive with others to speak and listen to God, and “the most ruinous evasion of all is to be hidden in

⁴⁸ Ibid., 117-22.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 79-80.

⁵⁰ Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, 3:2999.

⁵¹ Ibid., 4:4650.

the crowd in an attempt to escape God's supervision of him as an individual."⁵² One may escape God in the crowd, but in so doing one has escaped oneself and has lost the very purpose of one's life.

While the crowd's law of existence is "like the others," the Christian law is just the opposite. Kierkegaard states it plainly: "[I]nvolve yourself with God first; not with 'the others' first."⁵³ This simple law directs one away from the crowd while making comparison unnecessary. According to Kierkegaard, righteousness does not require that one be better than others. Great talent and special abilities are not required; on the contrary, righteousness simply requires more of such extraordinary people. But righteousness certainly does not require obscurity either. No one is too lowly or too powerful to practice or to fail to practice righteousness.⁵⁴ Thus one cannot excuse oneself by way of comparison. One compares oneself only to God, and before God, all are equally lowly, an equality rarely mentioned or even imagined in the American democracy despite the "Christian" rhetoric that often fills it. First, one must be alone, and then one learns that proper worship of God is "to think highly of God and lowly of yourself."⁵⁵

Earnestly before God, one stops comparing not simply because one is alone, away from the crowds of comparison, but because one remembers only God. The apostles are reconciled with God and are ready to be sacrificed for the truth. They are "so exclusively concerned with their relation to God that on that account they have entirely forgotten their relation to people. They do not actually struggle with people; what people do to

⁵² Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing*, 185.

⁵³ Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, 2:2066.

⁵⁴ Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, 210-11.

⁵⁵ Kierkegaard, *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*, 31-32.

them is actually of no concern to them, or at most only as an occasion to examine the God-relationship in which alone, totally absorbed, they have their lives.” The apostle must suffer, but does not suffer from struggling with people.⁵⁶ They need no longer stand alone among the lilies of the field for they are always alone before God. In the world, a person is what the world calls that person by way of comparison, but before God, one is only oneself. Kierkegaard writes of one who is lowly by worldly standards, who has been taught by the world that he is lowly but who does not lose himself in this knowledge. Instead he holds and thereby becomes himself. “He is like someone who has two names, one for all the others, another for his nearest and dearest ones; in the world, in his association with the others, he is the lowly person. He does not pretend to be anything else, and neither is he taken to be anything else, but before God he is himself.” In the world, one must wait to learn who one is at each moment from others, but the Christian does not wait; such a one hurries to be before God, happy to be only oneself. What one is in the world depends on one’s relationship to the crowd, but before God, one is oneself, independent of the crowd.⁵⁷

God mercifully deigns to involve Godself with every individual human being. If a human being spurns this grace, preferring instead to be lost in the crowd, this is according to Kierkegaard “high treason against God. The mass of mimickers are guilty of high treason. The punishment is to be ignored by God.”⁵⁸ This punishment is in fact chosen, it seems. Contentment, on the other hand, is the reward for those who choose to live before God. They are content with being human beings—those humble creatures who cannot support themselves any more than they could create themselves. They know

⁵⁶ Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, 335.

⁵⁷ Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, 40.

⁵⁸ Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, 2:2066.

“that the heavenly Father feeds” them, whether they are rich or poor and are thus free of the worry about making a living. Those who choose to live without God and be godlike in their self-sufficiency, however, have this worry. Those who have saved enough money to last their whole lives may seem free of this worry, but Kierkegaard writes: “To be dependent on one’s treasure—that is dependence and hard and heavy slavery; to be dependent on God, completely dependent—that is independence.”⁵⁹ The poor Christian does not have an earthly treasure, but this lack becomes a blessing: “The poor Christian’s wealth is precisely to exist for the God who certainly did not once and for all give him earthly wealth—oh, no, who every day gives him the daily bread. Every day! Yes, every day the poor Christian has occasion to become aware of his benefactor, to pray and to give thanks.”⁶⁰ Lack of earthly treasure makes it easier to see one’s dependence on God and gives one constant reason for thanksgiving. The rich, on the other hand, are weighed down by their wealth. God has no gravity, however, so the person who is dependent upon God is light.⁶¹

Dependent upon God, one is free from comparison and thereby enabled to become oneself. Before God, the struggle is always only with oneself: “When impatience, like a rebel, wants to attack God, the consciousness of guilt attacks the rebel; that is, the attacker ends up fighting with himself. God’s omnipotence and holiness do not mean that he can be victorious over everyone, that he is the strongest, for this is still a comparison; but it means, and this bars any comparison, that no one can manage to fight with him.”⁶² There is no one left with whom to compete or compare. Thus, when

⁵⁹ Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, 177, 181.

⁶⁰ Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, 16.

⁶¹ Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, 182.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 286.

through indirect communication Kierkegaard attempts to leave his readers alone with God, they are not able to fight against the author or against God but are left to struggle with themselves. This is the only way that one can be oneself. Kierkegaard writes: “The person who is not before God is not himself either, which one can be only by being in the one who is in himself.”⁶³ To base one’s identity on the crowd, on the world of comparisons, is to build one’s foundation on shifting sands for comparisons are of course relative, and the crowd is always changing. God is eternal. While one becomes oneself in God’s presence, one also becomes nothing for one is without standards and comparisons, and thus, from the world’s perspective, becoming involved with God is foolishness.⁶⁴

The only comparison that Kierkegaard condones is one made with God, and it is always an inverse comparison. The human resembles God inversely for one does “not reach the possibility of comparison by the ladder of direct likeness: great, greater, greatest; it is possible only inversely. Neither does a human being come closer and closer to God by lifting up his head higher and higher, but inversely by casting himself down ever more deeply in worship. The broken heart that condemns itself cannot have, seeks in vain to find, an expression that is strong enough to describe its guilt, its wretchedness, its defilement—God is even greater in showing mercy!”⁶⁵ The comparison is not: God is holier than I am or God is more merciful than I am. These are direct comparisons. Rather, the comparison is: God’s mercy is greater than my guilt—this is the inverse relation.

⁶³ Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, 40.

⁶⁴ Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, 2:1353.

⁶⁵ Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, 292.

Another inverse relation can be found by examining the ways human beings strive to be like God: “To worship is not to rule, and yet worship is what makes the human being resemble God, and to be able truly to worship is the excellence of the invisible glory above all creation. The pagan was not aware of God and therefore sought likeness in ruling.” The consumer seeks to be godlike by exercising earthly power; this is not, however, a relation to the eternal but to the crowd. One is still comparing oneself with others and as it were imagining a God who is greater than people. But no such direct scale of comparison is possible between God and the human. In the strange relationship between God and the human being, one becomes like God by acknowledging the great divide that separates one from God: “The human being and God do not resemble each other directly but inversely; only when God has infinitely become the eternal and omnipresent object of worship and the human being always a worshiper, only then do they resemble each other. If human beings want to resemble God by ruling, they have forgotten God; then God has departed and they are playing the rulers in God’s absence. This was paganism; this was human life in the absence of God.”⁶⁶

Before God, one is always the lowly person. One always has more to do before God, and so one cannot become self-important. Kierkegaard writes: “Before infinity’s requirement even your greatest effort is but child’s play, by means of which you will not be able to become self-important, since you learn to understand how infinitely much more is required of you.”⁶⁷ The Christian is further driven toward human lowliness by the life of the one they seek to imitate. The belief that this lowly one was also God means that lowliness is exalted. The Christian “believes that God has walked in

⁶⁶ Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, 193.

⁶⁷ Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 185.

lowliness on earth and in this way has judged all such worldly power and might to be nothing. He believes that just as no one enters into the kingdom of heaven without becoming *like* a child again, so no one comes to Christ except *as* a lowly person, as someone who by himself and by what he is by himself is nothing.” There is no other way to enter into relation with Christ or Christianity but as the lowly one because “for Christ there is only lowliness [J]ust as surely as no healthy person has ever been or can ever be saved by Christ, so also no eminent person as such can be saved by him but only as a lowly person. No one can become or be a Christian except in the character of or as a lowly person.” One may or may not be elevated according to human standards (though it is easier for the lowly one to be lowly before God as well), but one must come to Christ as the lowly one. In the Christian sense, worldly eminence is not eminence at all, but is merely an illusion. The eternal is what is real, and thus “[t]rue loftiness is Christian loftiness, but in true Christian loftiness no one is higher than others.”⁶⁸ So yet again, comparison is forestalled. While this section has focused on the individual’s existence before God and free of human comparison, the next section will show how Kierkegaard teaches Christians to act in the world with others. They do not live in isolation but are commanded to love the neighbor.

The Lesson: Compassion and the Imitation of Christ

Unlike preferential love, love of the neighbor does not involve itself with worldly comparison. According to Kierkegaard, this love is distinctive in two things: its object, which is the neighbor, and its source, which is a command. “It is in fact Christian love that discovers and knows that the neighbor exists and, what is the same thing, that

⁶⁸ Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, 52-54.

everyone is the neighbor. If it were not a duty to love, the concept 'neighbor' would not exist either; but only when one loves the neighbor, only then is the selfishness in preferential love rooted out and the equality of the eternal preserved."⁶⁹ The neighbor, therefore, is every human being; however, one does not encounter every human being but individual human beings. So who is the neighbor that one is commanded to love? Kierkegaard answers, "[T]he neighbor is the person who is nearer to you than anyone else." Of course, the neighbor is nearer or closer not in a preferential sense, such as when one says, "I am closer to my sister than to anyone else." The neighbor is the person at hand. Kierkegaard adds: "The concept 'neighbor' is actually the redoubling of your own self; 'the neighbor' is what thinkers call 'the other.'"⁷⁰

Other kinds of love, like erotic love or friendship, are defined by their object, but with love of neighbor the emphasis is on love for there is nothing to recommend the neighbor except the command. Because the neighbor is "unconditionally every human being, all dissimilarities are indeed removed from the object, and therefore this love is recognizable precisely for this, that its object is without any of the more precise specifications of dissimilarity, which means that this love is recognizable only by love." The neighbor is not loved because of certain characteristics for the neighbor is without distinguishing characteristics. The poet may celebrate the beloved of erotic love as unique, as above all others in beauty and goodness, but in neighbor love, the object cannot be celebrated for the object is characterized precisely by not being higher or unique: "He is your neighbor on the basis of equality with you before God, but

⁶⁹ Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 44.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

unconditionally every person has this equality and has it unconditionally.”⁷¹ Because all are equal before God, all must be loved equally if one is to live before God. Preferential love is thus forbidden for it loves some above others: “[T]he object of both erotic love and of friendship has preference’s name, ‘the beloved,’ ‘the friend,’ who is loved in contrast to the whole world. The Christian doctrine, on the contrary, is to love the neighbor, to love the whole human race, all people, even the enemy, and not to make exceptions, neither of preference nor of aversion.” Indeed the very concept of loving the enemy is itself paradoxical within a preferential understanding of love. Kierkegaard says preferential love stands and falls on the contingency of its object. The commanded love, on the other hand, “stands and falls with the Law of eternity—but then, of course, it never falls. Such love is not dependent on this or that; it is dependent only on that alone which liberates—therefore it is eternally independent.”⁷² It is independent of all the changing criteria upon which human comparison is made and of the changing human beings themselves. This love is not predicated on the object being more or less in relation to anyone else but is rather based on the object’s humanity.

This Christian love demands compassion, that is, the willingness to suffer with the neighbor, and suffering plays a prominent role in Christianity more broadly. What to the world seems like something to be avoided nearly at any price is for the Christian an undeniable necessity. Christian compassion can be therapeutic, especially for the giver. Kierkegaard writes of the power that worry can give a person and the seeming impregnability of this worry that no comfort can ease. He asks then if there is nothing to be done. “Certainly there is. In that case one tries to prompt the worried one to enter into

⁷¹ Ibid., 66, 60.

⁷² Ibid., 19, 39.

someone else's suffering, and the person who is himself unwilling to accept comfort from another person is often willing to share in another's cares, to become worried with someone else and on behalf of someone else. In this way the struggle is forgotten. While the worried one sadly suffers with another, his mind is set at ease."⁷³ Here Kierkegaard alludes to another indirect strategy: the worrier, who refuses to receive comfort directly, is comforted when referred to another worrier. In compassion, one receives the comfort one tries to give.

Suffering also creates the possibility for real learning. Kierkegaard suggests that one who is turned outward can very well come to learn much without ever relating to the eternal. But even with all this knowledge, one may remain a riddle to oneself. He adds: "Suffering, on the other hand, turns a person *inward*."⁷⁴ This is not to say that one becomes selfish or unconcerned with others. One is only unconcerned with how one measures up against the others. Far from being selfish, one learns to suffer with others as Christ did. Christ was far from narcissistic: "Ah, if it were wisdom—as we are all too prone to think it—that everyone is closest to himself, then Christ's life was foolish, since his life was such sacrifice that it seemed as if he were the closest to everyone else but the furthest from himself."⁷⁵ There seems to be some tension between the last two passages cited, but in fact the one who is focused outwardly is also the one who assumes that one is closest to oneself. One is outwardly focused in this way by worrying about oneself in relation to the others.⁷⁶ On the other hand, Christ was inwardly focused because of his

⁷³ Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, 201-02.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 256.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 232.

⁷⁶ Tim Kasser says that his research indicates "that when consumption, possessions, and money become our primary aims, we become less concerned with fully understanding others' subjective experience, feelings, and desires. Instead, others become objects and thus lose value as people" (68-69). Thus while materialists

willingness to suffer with others.⁷⁷ Christians are called to follow Christ's example of suffering, but there is one kind of suffering from which they are spared. The crucified robber who defends and appeals to Jesus grasps "that suffering as guilty is an alleviation in comparison with the pain of the death suffered on the cross standing in the middle. Through comparison with this suffering, the penitent robber finds comfort and relief in the thought that he is suffering as guilty. Why? Because then the suffering is not at all involved with the troubled question of doubt's anxiety about whether God is love."⁷⁸ In this case, comparison is acceptable and even beneficial as one is comforted by the worry from which one is exempt. By comparing oneself to Christ in this way, one compares oneself inversely to God for one becomes aware of one's guilt before God.

Christianity paradoxically avoids worldly comparison by demanding comparison with Christ. The Christian is commanded to follow Christ. Kierkegaard contrasts worldly glory with Christian joy. He asks: "Is it so glorious to dine on silver when others starve, to live in palaces when so many are homeless, to be the scholar no ordinary person can become, to have a name in the sense that excludes thousands and thousands—is that so glorious! If this, the envious [*misundelig*] diversity of *mortal life*, were supreme, would it not be inhuman, and would not life be unbearable for the fortunate!" Christians, who must be compassionate and loving, would not merely feel guilty about the suffering that makes their glory possible; rather, their compassion for the sufferers would make

may indeed be obsessed with what their neighbor possesses and constantly compare themselves to others, they do not attend to others in a compassionate manner, but in a competitive and jealous one.

⁷⁷ Kathryn Tanner argues that self-giving need not involve "the impoverishment of ourselves. Though we are not ourselves as an exclusive possession, though we are not only our own, neither are we dispossessed in giving to others—self-evacuated, given away." See "Economies of Grace," in *Having: Property and Possession in Religious and Social Life*, ed. William Schweiker and Charles Mathewes (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 381. Christians do not lose themselves in the compassionate giving of themselves. Instead, through this giving, they become themselves.

⁷⁸ Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, 272.

such glory intolerable. Worldly glory comes at the price of another's misery. It is based upon nothing other than comparison with those who are or have less. Christian joy, on the other hand, is available to all equally. Kierkegaard says that following Christ is the only true joy. The highest joy is "to be able to become the highest; and this supreme joy cannot be made more confident, more blessed, more secure than it is by means of the joyful thought, *heaven's merciful [miskundelig] thought*: that this every human being can do."⁷⁹

Whether one is rich or poor, powerful or lowly, brilliant or unintelligent, the joy of following Christ is available to all, and one person's having this joy in no way precludes anyone else from having it too, whereas one person's fame, wealth, or power depends upon others lacking these things. This joy, which Kierkegaard calls the only one, is the very heart of Christianity: "What is Christianity? It is the doctrine of and the instructions for being like Christ."⁸⁰ Christianity shows human beings what they are supposed to be through this command to imitate. Anti-Climacus writes: "Out of love, God become man. He says: Here you see what it is to be a human being. . . . As man he takes the form of a lowly servant; he shows what it is to be an unimportant man so that no man will feel himself excluded or think that it is human status and popularity with men that bring a person closer to God. No, he is the insignificant man. Look this way, he says, and know for certain what it is to be a human being, but take care, for I am also God—blessed is he who takes no offense at me."⁸¹

⁷⁹ Ibid., 226. James Twitchell draws his own puzzling comparison between the example of the martyr and the model of worldly glory, suggesting that depictions of saints and martyrs are like those of models in ads. Both are portrayed "undergoing the most exciting experiences in the service of what we are being invited to join." See *Adcult USA*, 131-32. Of course, this analysis overlooks one small difference: the martyrs are murdered—an exciting experience perhaps but one quite unlike those promoted in advertising.

⁸⁰ Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, 2:1842.

⁸¹ Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, 127-28.

Christianity is thus not simply belief in or admiration of Christ but is the imitation of Christ. Kierkegaard says that admiration is valid when one is prevented from being like that which is admired by conditions beyond one's control though one might want to be like the admired one. Kierkegaard then corrects himself, noting that if one wants to be but cannot be like the other, one must be careful for admiration is likely to become envy.⁸² In the case of Christian suffering, however, admiration is a dodge against imitation. One is certainly not envious of the suffering but rather fears it. This is the Christian demand: "Everyone must be measured by the prototype, by the ideal Christ wants admirers no more now than he did then, to say nothing of drivellers; he wants only disciples."⁸³ One is measured not by worldly comparisons but by comparison with Christ. Kierkegaard says that Christ did not become human to be admired. He is the Way and asks for imitators. Wishing to serve Christ in humble admiration is a lie for the Way must be taken up. The Christian does of course admire Christ but does not stop there: "An imitator *is* or strives *to be* what he admires, and an admirer keeps himself personally detached, consciously or unconsciously does not discover that what is admired involves a claim upon him, to be or at least to strive to be what is admired."⁸⁴

In Christendom, the case is very different. The prototype becomes the Redeemer. He is not looked to with respect to imitation but is instead admired for his good works. People do not wish to do what he did but wish to have seen what he did. Kierkegaard says that this is "just as upside down" as looking to a prototype of generosity with the desire, not to be generous oneself, but to be the beneficiary of the prototype's

⁸² Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 241.

⁸³ Kierkegaard, *Judge for Yourself!*, 198-99.

⁸⁴ Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 233, 241.

munificence.⁸⁵ In the Middle Ages, Christians who imitated Christ through renunciation and asceticism came to be regarded as extraordinary Christians. This concept, according to Kierkegaard, destroys the meaning of Christianity. There could be no notion of a meritorious or extraordinary Christian life if imitation were the requirement.⁸⁶ Imitation is the requirement, but it is rejected in favor of admiration and meaningless mimicry. Everyone abandoned the god-man before his execution; not one remained faithful to him. Afterwards, millions come to walk where he may once have stepped. But this is not imitation. Kierkegaard explains, “The only thing that Christ, the apostle, every truth-witness desires is: imitation—the only thing the human race has no pleasure in or taste for. No, take away the dangers—so that we can begin to play. Then the battalions of the human race perform (how nauseating!) amazing feats of mimicry. Instead of the imitation of Christ, then come the holy monkey tricks (how nauseating!), under the guidance and command of (how nauseating!) oath-bound pastors, who serve as sergeants, lieutenants, etc., ordained men, who therefore have the special assistance of a Holy Spirit for this earnestness.”⁸⁷

Christianity is not a doctrine to be proved scientifically or philosophically but is a belief and a life to be proved existentially through imitation. To try to justify it with reason is thus actually a desperate attempt to overcome doubt: “The demonstration of Christianity really lies in *imitation*. This was taken away. Then the need for ‘reasons’ was felt, but these reasons, or that there are reasons, are already a kind of doubt—and

⁸⁵ Kierkegaard, *The Moment and Late Writings*, 182.

⁸⁶ Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, 2:1914.

⁸⁷ Kierkegaard, *The Moment and Late Writings*, 316-17.

thus doubt arose and lived on reasons.”⁸⁸ Anti-Climacus says that the effort to give reasons for belief not only fails and supports doubt but also violates the very essence of Christianity: “[I]f all Christianity turns on this, that it *must* be believed and not comprehended, that *either* it must be believed *or* one must be scandalized and offended by it—is it then so praiseworthy to want to comprehend? Is it such great merit or is it not rather insolence or thoughtlessness to want to comprehend that which does not want to be comprehended?” While others may praise those who pretend to understand Christianity, he writes: “I consider it an outright ethical task, perhaps requiring not a little self-denial in these very speculative times, when all ‘the others’ are busy comprehending, to admit that one is neither able nor obliged to comprehend it. Precisely this is no doubt what our age, what Christendom needs: a little Socratic ignorance with respect to Christianity.”⁸⁹

Doubt can only be overcome through imitation, and thus in Christendom there is no faith, but only doubt. Because people seek to avoid or have forgotten imitation, they seek to overcome their doubt with reasons. Kierkegaard declares that Christendom is unaware “that *imitation* is the only force that, like a police force, can break up the mob of doubts and clear the area and compel one, if one does not want to be an *imitator*, at least to go home and hold one’s tongue.”⁹⁰ Kierkegaard discusses the Ascension of Christ and suggests that those whose lives bear the marks of imitation, who forsake all to follow Christ, and who are persecuted (and persecution is sure to follow imitation) do not doubt. They do not doubt the Ascension because they need it to endure their lives. Their need is their proof. On the other hand, one who has never suffered for the truth, whether wealthy

⁸⁸ Søren Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Kierkegaard's Writings 21 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 68.

⁸⁹ Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, 98-99.

⁹⁰ Kierkegaard, *Judge for Yourself!*, 190-91.

and idle or always busy in the world, has no need for the Ascension, and thus has no possible reason to believe it.⁹¹ It is difficult to imagine what need good consumers in this society would have for the Ascension. While the disciples are not of this world and so must believe in another world, consumers are so thoroughly of this world as to be unable to imagine a heaven unless it be one filled with endless consumer goods, readily accessible to them. Heaven without such goods, one filled *only* with the beatific vision, would surely be a bore. Ascendancy is to be found in attaining the next status symbol—in rising to the level of one’s consumer models.

Christianity does not thereby glorify suffering, but it does glorify the truth, and the truth is persecuted in this world. Kierkegaard asks, “What is the Christianity of the New Testament? It is the suffering truth. In this mediocre, wretched, sinful, evil, ungodly world the truth must suffer—this is Christianity’s doctrine—Christianity is the suffering truth because it is the truth and is in this world.”⁹² Its founder suffered his whole life and requires but one thing: imitation. The imitation of Christ and the inevitable sharing in Christ’s suffering lead the Christian student beyond the field where the lilies grow and the air where the birds fly. If one lives as the lily and the bird, one learns always to think what God thinks and do what God wills. The bird never does anything that God has not willed the bird to do. This life when lived by a human being is no doubt an incomparably pious one and indeed one that is not seen among human beings. But even if it were carried out, it would still not be a Christian life for it is really

⁹¹ Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination*, 67-69. Gordon Marino explains that truth is not a matter of correct ideas but of commitment and passion: “The truth is a way, a movement with direction, a self-directed struggle to live up to an ideal. According to Kierkegaard’s unobjective criterion, truth is not a property of ideas but of the individual’s commitment to them.” See *Kierkegaard in the Present Day* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2001), 29-30.

⁹² Kierkegaard, *The Moment and Late Writings*, 321.

the instantiation of perfect Jewish piety. In Christianity, the decisive thing is to suffer in imitation of Christ.⁹³ The follower of Christ does not look any longer to the bird of the air or the lily of the field. The bird and the lily are the first step by which one learns not to compare oneself with other, but which one learns to be a human being before God. In following Christ, one becomes a Christian.

This imitator looks to Christ and in fact, “often sees the prototype. Every time he totally forgets his poverty, his lowliness, his being disdained, forgets it in faith’s joy over the glory of this prototype—and then he himself looks more or less like the prototype.”⁹⁴ The imitator is transformed into that which he imitates. Faith and doubt no longer seem to be relevant. When one lives the life of Christ, one cannot doubt it. But imitation comes first: the disciples do not imitate Christ because of their faith; they have faith because they imitate Christ. Consumers, on the other hand, have faith in their models and so then choose to imitate them, and this imitation can only weaken their faith. They first feel metaphysical desire for their models, imagining them to possess whatever the consumers feel themselves to be lacking. But when they imitate these models, they learn that such a strategy has failed to transform them into the beings they want to be—the being the imagined their models to be.

Anti-Climacus suggests that the offensiveness of Christian imitation lies ultimately not in the suffering required but in the loftiness implied. People are not offended by Christianity because it is too rigorous or dark but because “it is too high, because its goal is not man’s goal, because it wants to make man into something so extraordinary that he cannot grasp the thought.” Christianity teaches that every single

⁹³ Kierkegaard, *Judge for Yourself!*, 187.

⁹⁴ Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, 43.

individual human being exists before God. The person who would be proud of having once spoken with the king “may speak with God any time he wants to, assured of being heard by him—in short, this person is invited to live on the most intimate terms with God! Furthermore, for this person’s sake, also for this very person’s sake, God comes to the world, allows himself to be born, to suffer, to die.” Anti-Climacus says, “[I]f there is anything to lose one’s mind over, this is it! Everyone lacking the humble courage to dare to believe this is offended. But why is he offended? Because it is too high for him, because his mind cannot grasp it, because he cannot attain bold confidence in the face of it and therefore must get rid of it, pass it off as a bagatelle, nonsense, and folly, for it seems as if it would choke him.”⁹⁵ Self-consciousness is here intensified through the knowledge of Christ and through being “a self directly before Christ.” Such a self is “intensified by the inordinate concession from God, intensified by the inordinate accent that falls upon it because God allowed himself to be born, become man, suffer, and die also for the sake of this self. As stated previously, the greater the conception of God, the more self; so it holds true here: the greater the conception of Christ, the more self. Qualitatively a self is what its criterion is. That Christ is the criterion is the expression, attested by God, for the staggering reality that a self has, for only in Christ is it true that God is man’s goal and criterion.”⁹⁶

Conclusion

With Christ as their model, Christians have God as their goal and criterion and thus have the most self imaginable. Consumers, on the other hand, have advertising

⁹⁵ Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, 83-86.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 113-14.

models as their goals and criteria. Of course such models are not the highest, but they are actually destructive because they encourage endless comparisons and refuse to leave consumers alone before God. Consumers are led to believe that they can only be something of worth by being like their models and thereby better than others. They can never be allowed to believe that their greatest glory is to be found in simply being human for then they would become bad consumers. They can never learn that the way of being like God is to humble themselves for then they would never strive to be like the models of advertising. In this society, Kierkegaard's message about being alone before God and following Christ is essential to healing identities damaged by consumerism. Furthermore, his indirect method shows how such a message might be delivered in a society that does not even understand its need.

Kierkegaard's use of indirect communication enables him to present Christianity to Christendom. By presenting his work as that of non-Christian pseudonymous authors, he avoids presenting the reader with an insulting comparison. He leaves his reader alone, just as those great teachers, the lily and the bird, do with their students. The lily and the bird are recommended as teachers because they do not invite the comparisons of the crowd and because they are silent, leaving their students by themselves, listening for the voice of God. Kierkegaard believes that comparisons are the cause of worry and discontent and that they prevent one from relating to God. Christianity itself avoids worldly comparisons by commanding each individual to relate to God and to imitate Christ rather than one another. Christianity is not a doctrine that can be communicated directly but rather demands a choice. That Jesus is the Christ cannot be communicated directly or proved logically; one comes to know it only after one chooses to follow him.

The role of the teacher is to bring one to the point of making this choice, and for that the indirect method is required. In this choosing, the choosers do not weigh options but are rather weighed themselves. If they choose to follow him, they will come to have faith, and in their relation to Christ they will become selves whose criteria is God, and thus an infinite accent will come to fall on these selves. On the other hand, the criterion of the consumer is the advertising model, who promotes an illusion and thus generates imitators without any real selves.

CHAPTER VII

In this chapter, I turn to Girard's analysis of novelistic and Christian conversions and suggest how these conversions may be seen as salvific alternatives to consumerism. Chapter 5 diagnosed consumerism as a product of pride and suggested with Augustine that recognizing God as the only source of one's existence and identity is the remedy to this pride. Chapter 6 advocated Christ as the sole model for human action and suggested following Christ as a salvific alternative to lives led in emulation of consumer models. In both cases, the Christian is extricated from a web of comparisons and from endlessly striving after a flawed and impossible goal—to be one's own source of self by outdoing others. In this chapter, I will make use of Girard's writings to show that all human beings fail to achieve this goal. Just as according to Augustine no human being should feel superior to others because of talents, accomplishments, or possessions, so according to Girard no human being should feel inferior to others or judge oneself in the name of some false model.

The great novelists realize that those for whom they had felt metaphysical desire are really no different from themselves. While this is an elevating move, it is at first quite difficult and humbling for one must admit that one's desires have not been one's own. Consumers must give up the desires manufactured for them, must renounce efforts to outdo their peers, and at the same time must stop judging themselves in the name of the advertising model. People cannot choose whether to desire mimetically or not, but they can choose their models, and real freedom consists in choosing a divine over a human model. Christianity does not seek to do away with desire in general or even

mimetic, triangular desire. Desire is not bad, but the way of desiring that is proper to human beings is lost in consumerism (though not exclusively in consumerism for it is lost whenever mimetic rivalry and metaphysical desire are generated) and must be recreated. Christianity acknowledges the human being as a desiring being and even as a being that learns to desire by imitating the desires of others. It does not seek to overturn this way of desiring but places Jesus Christ rather than friend, peer, or professional advertising model in the role of model of desire. Thus there is still a mimetic triangle operative, but Christ replaces inadequate models, and the objects of desire shift from consumer goods to God and the well-being of the neighbor. People must choose a divine model and relate to others in love rather than in competition or imitation.

Conversion: Recognizing the Model

Consumer society is one of constant, dizzying, and meaningless change. Like weather vanes, Proust's characters turn in the winds of their desires but are not thereby converted; they change according to data about the mediator or perhaps to a change in mediator, but their ways of desiring remain constant. Real change would entail no longer shifting with desires.¹ Proust's own conversion makes possible the writing of his masterpiece. He sees what the character Marcel could not see when looking at the "little band": the self-sufficiency with which the character endows the members of the group is not real; these girls are like he is. Their imagined divine autonomy and self-love has no reality in itself. In order to represent desire, he must be on the outside looking in² for once inside the desired sphere, its illusion is exposed. There is no difference between his

¹ Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 238.

² Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, 388, 398.

secret and that of the others. Proust knew that by describing his youth, he would also be describing all youths. The novelist can only write if he first sees his mediator as a person like himself. Dostoyevsky stops seeing himself as superhuman or as subhuman. Flaubert, after first conceiving of Emma as the despicable other, realizes: “Mme Bovary, c’est moi!” Great novels spring from obsessions transcended. The writer’s self-examination merges with the morbid attention paid to the mediator.³ The persecutors are not gods or demons but people eager to hide their own suffering and humiliation. The ability to go beyond metaphysical desire is the fruit of interior struggle, and the novels bear the traces of that struggle.⁴

What Girard calls a novelistic conversion consists in recognizing not just the model’s similarity to oneself but also the role the model has played up until the point of conversion. This understanding is not always salvific, however. In many of Shakespeare’s later works, the greater awareness of the heroes only aggravates their condition.⁵ One must overcome the pride that makes this revelation so painful. Proust’s narrator describes his disappointment when he sees the acclaimed actress Berma perform. Later, he comes to view the performance more favorably, based upon the opinion of a friend of his father and a newspaper review. If Proust had written the Berma scene while still under the sway of borrowed desire, he would have made the opinion of the others his narrator’s own spontaneous opinion. Instead, after the truth of the past is resurrected through conversion, Proust shows the influence of others on Marcel’s view, sacrificing his pride to this revelation.⁶ Similarly, the consumer’s story of herself does not include

³ Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 298-300.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 188-91.

⁵ Girard, *A Theater of Envy*, 85.

⁶ Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 37-38.

the influence her models have on her. She claims to have arrived at her desires for certain products all on her own. One believes in the spontaneity of one's own desire. The need for conversion in consumer society is seen in part by the common insistence of individuals that advertising does not influence them. To admit that one is the slave of mimetic desire is humbling but often salutary. The novelistic world is filled with people possessed by this sickness rooted in pride. When the hero faces the dreaded death of pride, it is a kind of salvation—a conversion that brings new relationships with others and with oneself.⁷

When the prideful desire to be unique and spontaneous proves impossible to satisfy, the result is disappointment and even self-hatred and despair. Judas and Peter are guilty of the same pride though it is manifested in opposite ways. Judas takes sole responsibility for Jesus' death and kills himself, whereas Peter says that he will never betray Jesus even if everyone else does.⁸ The idea of original sin disrupts this pride, setting all human beings on the same footing, suggesting all to be equally guilty of mimetic desire.⁹ This idea can be a very liberating one for it is pride, not the idea of

⁷ Ibid., 307, 294.

⁸ Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, 247-48.

⁹ Alison develops this idea, arguing that people reject the possibility of non-rivalrous desire because it reveals the futility of "trying to found and bring about identity." This aversion to the truth is part of original sin. On their own natural ability, people cannot move from rivalistic to nonrivalistic desire because rivalistic desire automatically interprets everything in terms of itself (193). In describing the fall of Adam and Eve, Alison says that the fruit became desirable only when it "was seen as a way of appropriating what was proper to someone else." They were tempted "to become like God." Through this fall, desire became appropriative, and relationality with the other became rivalistic. "The other (whether human or divine) could be perceived only as a threat or rival. The immediate result of the appropriation was that good and evil became defined not according to God, but according to appropriation, which means that the self was not accepted as given, but had to be appropriated by forging itself over against some other considered as evil. The beginning of the forging of an identity 'over against' is the self-expulsion from the paradise of receiving the self gratuitously" (246). Alison claims that the function of the doctrine of original sin "is to keep alive the beam in my eye. We can go even further: God keeps alive the beam in my eye by making that beam a living Cross, a beam on which there hangs a murdered victim" (261). Here original sin accomplishes a goal that Kierkegaard insists upon for the Christian—realizing that one is always guilty before God. Similar too is the discussion in Chapter 5 of Augustine's belief that the saints are not able to overcome sin entirely so that they will not fall into pride.

original sin, that makes one believe oneself the guiltiest of all people. The recognition of original sin is a medicine against the pride that desires uniqueness.¹⁰ This pride is at the heart of consumer society, where advertising constantly tells individuals that they must be special; when their purchases (that all the others are also making) fail to yield this uniqueness, consumers feel lowly and blame themselves, taking on the guilt associated with the failure. Consumerism teaches that one is either uniquely great or uniquely loathsome, and it fosters desire by persuading consumers that to become uniquely great, they must buy the things the great ones already have. The tenth commandment forbids this envy. It differs from the other commandments because it prohibits a desire rather than an action. Desiring that which one's neighbor desires is, according to Girard, the original sin, and though it is universally held, it is so at odds with people's conceptions of themselves and so humiliating to them that it is most often ignored.¹¹ People can admit all kinds of terribly depraved actions, but admitting that their desires are not their own is more difficult. There can be a form of pride in the former for one can see power in one's rebellion and sin (as Augustine saw in the stealing of the pears), but the latter is shameful and humiliating.

The Gospels speak of the mimetic model as *skandalon*. It is never a material object but a person—a model who works against and becomes a source of fascination for the disciple. This is the opposite of Christian love.¹² Though the consumer's model does not block the subject's path to the object (as I argued in Chapter 3), this model is nonetheless a source of fascination that works against the subject's best interest. Jesus relates scandals to Satan when he rebukes Peter for reacting negatively to his first

¹⁰ Girard, *A Theater of Envy*, 325-26.

¹¹ Girard, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, 7-9.

¹² Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, 416.

prediction of the Passion. “Disappointed by what he takes to be the excessive resignation of Jesus, the disciple tries to breathe into him his own desire, his own worldly ambition. Peter invites Jesus, in short, to take Peter himself as the model of his desire.”¹³ This is of course just what the professional model invites the consumer to do. Jesus shows the appropriate response—telling the would-be model to get behind him and recognizing the model’s temptation as the work of Satan (that is, of mimeticism). Peter wants to possess Jesus, but Jesus rejects this overture and rebukes Peter for it.¹⁴ Christian consumers must learn to reject the temptations of their would-be models and to speak out forcefully against the tempters who would lend people desires and possess them. The Church should not make peace with the tempters, and it should not expect only exceptional Christians to reject them.

Mimetic contagion results in a loss of differentiation. Peter, after the cock crows, and Paul, after he is blinded on the road to Damascus, come to realize that they had been possessed by the will of the crowd.¹⁵ Girard sees in the possessed man at Gerasa an example of the loss of differentiation. When the citizens of Gerasa find out that Jesus has healed the man, they plead with him to leave the region. Girard claims that compared to people today, “the people of Gerasa are honest and sympathetic. They do not yet behave like imperious users of the consumer society. They admit that it is difficult for them to live without scapegoats and demons.”¹⁶ According to Girard, the Gospels always subvert talk of demons and Satan. Satan, as he functions in the Gospels, might be said to be mimetic desire incarnate except for the fact that mimetic desire, by definition, is

¹³ Girard, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, 33.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 126.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 191.

¹⁶ Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 168, 192.

disincarnate. It eliminates the substance of all that it infects.¹⁷ The devil has no foundation and no being at all. Thus he must live as a parasite on others. He is completely mimetic and thus “*nonexistent as an individual self.*” The possessed subjects do not realize their situation for they are controlled by mimetic contagion, within which there is no real subject. Satan is thus the prince of the world, but he has no real being. Jesus calls the religious leaders sons of the devil. In speaking of the sons of the devil and the sons of God, he is speaking of a desire that is based upon imitation of either the devil or God. Without these models, human desire cannot exist.¹⁸ Jean-Michel Oughourlian suggests and Girard agrees that the “real human subject can only come out of the rule of the Kingdom; apart from this rule, there is never anything but mimetism and the ‘interdividual.’ Until this happens, the only subject is the mimetic structure.”¹⁹ God and Satan are the supreme models. Their opposition is one between the model who never becomes an obstacle or rival because of a desire free from greed and competition and the model whose greed has immediate and terrible repercussions for all imitators.²⁰ Unlike Girard, this dissertation argues that the most immediate and terrible consequences are not rivalry and violence but metaphysical desire and the inability to form identity free from

¹⁷ Ibid., 166.

¹⁸ Girard, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, 42, 69, 40.

¹⁹ Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, 199. Elsewhere, Oughourlian explains that Descartes’ *cogito* “signifies right from the start that the ‘I’ is a unique and irreducible identity, a claim that . . . is contradicted by the facts” (113). He says: “Since desire is mimetic, there is no truly independent human self; there is never any self except in relation to an other.” While memory serves to inscribe desire and record the formation of the self, it is forgetfulness that makes the present self possible. One forgets other possible selves and that desire originates mimetically—that it is born in the other (230-31). “In order for mimetic desire to constitute a self, it must also forget its mimetic origin and affirm itself as autonomous and spontaneous. This very affirmation is what constitutes the self of desire with its individuality” (233). Alison agrees, stating that the self is constituted by the desire of another “mimetically transposed” and maintains its existence thanks to “forgetfulness” (31-32). Erikson admits that the traditional psychoanalytic method “cannot quite grasp identity because it has not developed terms to conceptualize the environment.” See *Identity, Youth, and Crisis*, 24. Thus it fails to acknowledge the role of the model’s desire and does not recognize the “interdividual” at all. Subjects often forget the role of the model in order to develop a sense of autonomy, and psychoanalysis may be the systematic and disciplined societal aid in this forgetting.

²⁰ Girard, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, 40.

the manipulations and possessions of others who cannot have one's independent and beneficent growth as their sole motive. In this section, I have discussed the importance of recognizing one's human models as really no different than oneself and as unworthy of one's devotion. But this revelation is insufficient for one cannot live without models altogether. Thus one must find a worthy model to replace all the inadequate ones.

Conversion: Turning toward a Different Kind of Model

Jesus of course imitates the one he calls "Father." He does what Peter fails to do, and even when all others have fallen away, he refuses to betray the Word of God: he continues to imitate only God, who makes the sun shine upon all without distinction. It is this absolute adherence to the Word that makes Christ the Incarnation of the Word.²¹ James Alison explains this unique quality of Jesus, arguing that it is impossible to have a clearer indication of an "interdividual" psychology than Jesus' avowal of his total dependence on the Father. "The Other, the Father, is absolutely constitutive of who he is. Yet, because there is no appropriation of identity over against the Other who forms him, the complete dependence on the Other rather than being a limitation or a source of diminishment is exactly what enables the creative flow of life bringing about life to be made manifest and, being made manifest, to be made actual." His interlocutors cannot believe because their glory comes from one another rather than from God. Their identities are based on mimetic rivalries, and so "they are unable to have their identities formed by peaceful mimesis of and from God."²² Jesus invites his followers to imitate his desire, but unlike the romantic or consumer ideal he does not claim to have a desire

²¹ Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, 206.

²² Alison, 198-99.

all his own. He does not insist on his spontaneity or brag that he follows only his own desires. Rather he desires only to be the image of God and thus devotes himself exclusively to imitating the Father. He calls his disciples to imitate this imitation.²³ If they do so, they too will be sons of God.

Alison suggests that the doctrine of the Incarnation is meant in part to show “that here is a human we can imitate fully, have our relationality completely transformed in his following, such that we too are able to become sons of the Father in a dependent, but not in a limited way.”²⁴ Jesus is both Son of Man and Son of God because he alone achieves humanity in its perfected form—oneness with God. All that is required is for one to love one’s enemies. This non-violence when manifested in God may seem irrelevant, but its character changes radically when it is brought into this world and given form in the life of a particular human being who in turn is presented as a model for human relations.²⁵ Jesus and his Father are the best models because they do not desire greedily or egoistically.²⁶ Far from the individualistic ideal of today, the Christian is not supposed to “find herself” or become her “true self.” She does not, however, refuse these ideals as a result of losing herself in her model (as much Christian theology indicates) *but rather because her model refused them first*. From her refusal, it cannot be concluded that the Christian must “lose herself” for among all her possessions, there is no evidence that the consumer ever possessed herself in the first place. She is, however, called upon to give up the illusion of such a possession.

²³ Girard, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, 13.

²⁴ Alison, 55.

²⁵ Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, 215-16, 269.

²⁶ Girard, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, 14.

Alison points to a similar ambiguity surrounding human freedom. All human desiring and willing is shaped by the other who precedes the will's formation. "The insistence on the autonomy of the human will is part of the self-deception of the 'self' that is acting out of denial of the alterity which forms it. The more strongly that alterity, the heteronomous nature of desire, is denied, the more completely we fool ourselves as to our independence in what we want and how we choose." Thus Allison concludes, "the only real concept of freedom is theological, made possible by the irruption of a different sort of Other into the other-which-forms-us and the setting free of our freedom."²⁷ The Christian need not sacrifice her self, her will, or her freedom, but she should confess that she has no self, will, or freedom of her own independently of God. As Alison points out, this is in part the meaning of justification by faith, which is "precisely the reception of a social belonging that is completely removed from any sense of self-justification. In one sense it is no justification at all, because it is an identity received as given. The an-ecclisial hypostasis is that which is permanently locked in the necessity for self-justification, which means a constant comparison of self with others, deriving identity over against the other." Giving up on the notion of self-justification and self-caused identity allows one to receive justification and identity from God. Alison says that in 1 John 3.2, "identity is something given as part of a becoming that cannot be grasped, but only received in patience. Identity is eschatological, not foundational." Founded on the rock, that is, on Christ, one's desires are undistorted so that one need no longer justify oneself over against any other. Alison names Paul as an example of a person who lives in

²⁷ Alison, 40-41.

the spirit and so does not derive his identity from what others think because he knows that his “identity is purely given by the Lord.”²⁸

Jesus calls Christians to imitate his desire to imitate the Father. He himself tries only to resemble God as closely as possible.²⁹ He does not, like nearly every advertising model, portray himself as an original. Humans cannot choose not to imitate, but they can choose their models, and true freedom is found in the choice between a human and a divine model.³⁰ The turn toward God is also a journey into the self just as, conversely, the turning in of pride is a dispersal among others.³¹ Pride results in futile attempts at self-securing through comparisons with others; the turn toward God leaves one free from comparison—alone with the source of one’s being. God and the Son of God are the only models who, if their disciples imitate them as little children, will never be transformed into fascinating rivals.³² There is no double bind or envy here. Jesus does not speak in terms of prohibitions but in terms of models and imitation, thereby drawing out the consequences of the tenth commandment. He does not seek imitators in order to glorify himself but to turn his followers away from mimetic rivalries. The only remedy against bad mimesis is good mimesis.³³ Non-Christians may think that Christians have to renounce their natural autonomy, but actually by imitating Jesus his disciples learn that their previous aspirations to autonomy have always lead them to bow down before individuals whom they cannot imitate without falling into the trap of rivalries. In Chapter Five, Augustine was cited for his explanation of how human beings possessed all of

²⁸ Ibid., 169-70. 177.

²⁹ Girard, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, 13.

³⁰ Alison sums up this Girardian interindividual psychology by saying, “‘being-constituted-by-another’ is simply part of being human, the key question being what sort of relationship to which other” (283).

³¹ Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 58-59.

³² Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, 430.

³³ Girard, *To Double Business Bound*, 105.

creation but lost everything in their effort to have something all their own. The same dynamic is at work here: through God, human beings possessed their own selves, but in their desire to be self-caused, they lost their selves (to various models—first of all the serpent). When people follow other models, they risk a loss of difference and identity. They become the pawns of mimetic desire, and thus, as Jesus indicates in his prayer on the cross, they do not know what they are doing.³⁴ Because Jesus has no acquisitive desire, whoever takes him as a model will not meet any obstacles, and thus it is said that his yoke is easy and his burden is light.³⁵ For those who imitate Christ and the Father, the Kingdom has already come.³⁶ Though Christ calls his disciples to a life of poverty, suffering, and martyrdom, their burden is light, and they live joyfully in God’s kingdom. In contrast, while the advertising models promise nothing but comfort, pleasure, and self-glorification, they can give only desire, dissatisfaction, and slavery.

To follow Christ, the Christian must love the neighbor. In this way the disciple avoids violent mimesis.³⁷ One must love the other as oneself if one is to avoid idolizing and hating the other. It is not the golden calf but the other that now seduces human beings.³⁸ According to Girard, “Judeo-Christianity conceives of its own ascendancy at the individual level, not as a shamanistic, ecstatic possession, but rather as a depossession” that is defined “in the context of the relationship to an other who can only become a neighbor insofar as he ceases to be that sacred and profane idol that desiring *mimesis* seems to make of him.”³⁹ The command to love is a prohibition not only against

³⁴ Girard, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, 13-15, 40.

³⁵ Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, 430.

³⁶ Girard, *Job: The Victim of His People*, 158.

³⁷ Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, 215.

³⁸ Girard, *Resurrection from the Underground*, 129.

³⁹ Girard, *To Double Business Bound*, 45.

hatred of and violence toward the other, but also against idolization of the other and hatred of self. It suggests a remedy against the prideful self-love Augustine addresses but also against the judgments by which people condemn themselves in the names of their models—judgments with which Kierkegaard deals in his discussion of comparison. One must confess that one is neither better nor worse than others.⁴⁰ Carl Rogers observes that self-acceptance makes meaningful change possible: “[T]he curious paradox is that when I accept myself as I am, then I change. . . . [W]e cannot change, we cannot move away from what we are, until we thoroughly *accept* what we are. Then change seems to come about almost unnoticed.”⁴¹ Proust too seems to bear out this observation for his narrator Marcel is neither better than the “little band” for his profound intelligence and artistic sensitivity nor worse for his lack of self-assurance before these girls. The realization that they and other models are like him allows him finally to change—to become the author he has aspired to be.

The Christian is resurrected into a new life, free of mimetic contagion and rivalry. Jesus is not recognized at first after his resurrection, but this is not due to his having less visibility or less reality. On the contrary, his “resurrection is too real for a perception dimmed by the false transfigurations of mimetic idolatry.”⁴² In the resurrection, the Holy Spirit triumphs over mimetic violence and takes command of everything. The disciples do not regain possession of themselves; rather, the Holy Spirit possesses them. The resurrection is the emergence of a power superior to violent contagion and one not based

⁴⁰ Alison claims that without these comparisons, brotherly love replaces victimization: “Freedom, instead of being freedom from the constraints of the group, becomes freedom brought into being by gratuitous dependence on the group. As the person concerned learns not to derive his or her identity over against the other, so the existential rôles of victim and hero collapse into the one unique rôle of brother” (169).

⁴¹ Rogers, 17.

⁴² Girard, *A Theater of Envy*, 342.

on deception and hallucination. It does not deceive the disciples; on the contrary, it empowers them to recognize what they could not otherwise recognize. It leads them to reproach themselves for their flight into mimesis in the preceding days.⁴³ It must awaken Christians in consumer culture to the same reality for they have taken flight into the mimesis promoted by advertising and in so doing have more than three times denied knowing the one who called them away from such mimesis.

Conclusion

Girard's mimetic theory suggests that human freedom is not to be found in any individual spontaneous desire but rather in one's choice of models. If this is so, then consumerism seems to deprive people of their freedom. They may perhaps be able to choose from countless models just as they choose from countless products, but these models, like the products, do not present real, meaningful choices. Girard occasionally discusses mimetic contagion in terms of possession, and this comparison seems particularly apt in the case of consumer mimesis for the consumer is the victim of a strategy of feigned and anonymous desire, the influence of which the consumer refuses to admit. If these manifold models are like the demons that possess the consumer, then consumerism itself is the devil behind all these demons, and the devil hardly cares which of his minions succeeds on his behalf. Christ calls Christians away from the possession of consumerism. He presents all with a real choice: between human models and a divine model. Those who choose the latter admit that their desires are not their own. Though still imitators of a sort, they are for the first time honest about their situation, and for the first time their model wants what is best for them. Rather than hating or idolizing the

⁴³ Girard, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, 189.

other, they come to see the other as someone like themselves. They come to love their neighbor as themselves rather than coveting the neighbor's status symbols or imagined self-sufficiency. The endless cycle of competition and consumption has come to an end as they rest from pursuing their own glorification through the idolization of another and pursue instead the glorification of their God through whom they find their own empowerment.

CHAPTER VIII

This dissertation has explicated the view of identity propagated by consumerism. With the help of Girard, Kierkegaard, and Augustine, it has shown how trying to live according to this view of identity is debilitating and has proposed an alternative understanding of identity. Central to this Christian conception of identity is the idea that Jesus Christ is fully human. By this I do not merely mean that he is not half human and half divine but that he is the epitome, the exemplar of the human—he is in a sense more human than any human. Of course I am a member of the species, and this membership is not a matter of degrees, but there can be degrees of embodying that for which the human being is intended if indeed there is some human teleology. Christian theology claims that the human is created in the image of God but that humanity has fallen from its created nature. It is because Jesus was not fallen that he was most fully human. The rest of us fall short of the fully human because of our fallen natures. In this dissertation, I have tried to show that consumerism contributes to this fallenness as it further separates people from the good for which they were created and places obstacles in the way of their return to this good. Through consumerism, people become even less their “true” selves, their identities are dispersed, and they lose any meaningful sense of self. Before moving onto my constructive ecclesiological proposal in this chapter, I will summarize the development of this dissertation’s argument in the section that follows.

Being Human: The Christian and the Consumer

Girard is aware of the importance of models for all human beings. Models are so central to human development, education, desire, and action that the key to human freedom for Girard is found in the choice of models, and because all human models lead to dangerous rivalries and violence (because they are fallen), true freedom is only to be found in choosing a divine over a human model. In Chapter 3, I argued that consumerism is comprehensible only through the lens of mimetic desire. Consumerism, status symbols, and advertising could not exist without mimetic desire. Though mimetic contagion has become epidemic in consumerism, I also claimed that consumerism is actually able to avoid the rivalry and violence that Girard claims are sure to follow the spread of mimetic desire. I suggested instead that mimetic desire in consumer society leads to metaphysical desire, which in turn results in self-condemnation. Consumerism and its advertising bombard people with images and ideas presented as means by which viewers should measure and judge themselves. They compare themselves to their models and feel ugly, poor, insecure, and needy as a result. Measuring up to these standards is hopeless, but consumers continue to hope that by sharing the models' products they may also be able to share in the models' being—the models' divinity.

These comparisons that pervade consumer society were further elucidated with the help of Kierkegaard in Chapter 4. For Kierkegaard, comparison is dangerous because it leads one away from one's self and from one's relation to God. Identity becomes confused and one's very being is diffused among the crowd. Consumerism leads to despair, a refusal to be oneself. Kierkegaard discusses three forms of despair, and I explained how consumerism leads to each of the three but to nothing else. The first form

is a lack of awareness that one even has a self, and it is promoted by the constant distractions of consumerism. The second form is not willing to be oneself, and it is this form that is central to consumerism because advertising convinces people that they must constantly transform themselves to be more like their models. These consumers do not will to be themselves; they will to be their models (just as in Girard's discussion of metaphysical desire, the subject is really less interested in having the desired object than in being the model). I argued that the third form of despair is reserved for the models themselves or the elite consumers. They may will to be themselves, but they imagine themselves to be self-caused. They believe the lies that are spread about them by advertisers to encourage others to emulate them. The only state that is not a form of despair is faith, and consumerism does not promote this way of being. Faith entails believing in the lowly Messiah and accepting him as one's model. Faith entails living before God free of the debilitating comparisons upon which consumerism depends. Of course, one is still falling short of one's model, but in this case one is commanded not to judge others and to believe that one is forgiven even as one forgives. This is not the message of consumerism in which one's success depends upon others being judged negatively. Furthermore, consumers fail to live up to their models because they are not attractive enough, smart enough, or rich enough. They want to be these things but are unable. Christians fail to live up to their model because they are not humble enough. They could follow the way of their model, but they prefer not to.

Pride, which is the basis of consumers' desires to follow their models and which continually challenges and tests those who would follow Christ, is the root of all sin according to Augustine. In Chapter 5, I explained how consumers, like all sinners,

proudly desire something of their own independently of God and, even more, want to be responsible for their own being like God and like they imagine their models to be (as explained in Chapter 3). Pride is the cause of all sin, and sin pulls the self in many directions, so that the self loses its integrity just as the consumer's desire is pulled in manifold directions by an endless parade of products and advertisements. The consumer's identity, like the sinner's, is scattered and split apart. Consumerism teaches that people must form their own identities through competition and consumption. As one tries to prove one's worth by beating out others and by consuming more goods, one is really just further divided. Christians in consumer society should give up this goal of self-creation, rethink their roles in society, and allow God to continue to create their identities. True identity is given by God's grace. The Holy Spirit orders one's loves so that one is no longer divided. With the Holy Spirit, one relates compassionately to the world and thus grows in relation with others, with the Holy Spirit, and with oneself. No longer divided by worthless trinkets and poor models, one instead acts out of one's love shaped by the Holy Spirit. True freedom is found not by endless choice but by submission to God. Through the love of God, which is itself the gift of grace, one knows this freedom for the first time, and one is recreated by God in the image of God for which one was always intended.

One falls further from God by failing to attend to God. Advertising models are debilitating because they encourage endless comparisons, thereby preventing their followers from being alone before God. In Chapter 6, I showed that advertising models teach that consumers must be like them if they are to be worth anything; they must, like the models, be better than all those other failed consumers. If they believed with

Kierkegaard that a person's greatest glory is in simply being human or that one can be like God only by humbling oneself, then they would be bad consumers. Christianity forbids worldly comparisons, commanding each individual to relate to God and to imitate Christ rather than one another. Christianity demands a choice. One comes to know Jesus as the Christ only by following him, and then one relates to Christ and thus becomes a self whose criteria is God. The consumer's criterion, on the other hand, is the advertising model, who promotes an illusion and thus produces imitators without real selves. The teacher can only bring one to the point of making the choice to follow Christ, and Kierkegaard says that this work requires indirect communication. The third section of this chapter will present an interpretation of the Eucharist, which I believe is but one example of indirect communication as the Church practices it. Indirect communication is essential in consumer society because its ethos is so pervasive that people are unaware of a problem, much less an alternative. They are full of illusions, and these can only be removed using indirect communication.

Girard discusses mimetic contagion in terms of possession, and in Chapter 7, I compared consumer mimesis to possession. Consumers are filled with contrived, disembodied desires, and they refuse to acknowledge the influence of these desires on their own desires and actions. I extended this analogy by comparing the countless consumer models to demons and consumerism to the devil overseeing them all. This devil laughs at the apparent conflicts between advertisers and the supposed freedom exercised by consumers in choosing between them. Why would the devil care which of his minions succeeds on his behalf? Real freedom is found in choosing a divine model over all these human ones. Then one can admit that one's desires are not and never were

one's own. Then one has a model who wants only what is best for everyone. Christians come to recognize that everyone, even the envied model, is like they are. Christians love their neighbors, no longer desiring what the neighbors have. They realize that neither their neighbors nor the consumer models are any more self-sufficient than they are. They no longer try to prove their identity through competition and consumption. They give up the endless and futile pursuit of individual glory, which they had ironically pursued through the idolization of others. Instead they glorify God, which paradoxically allows them to find their own empowerment for the first time.

While arguing throughout that identity must be worked out in relation to others, not in isolation, this dissertation has nonetheless primarily addressed the healing of identity through an understanding of conversion that focuses on the individual. The remainder of this chapter will discuss the role of the Church in the conversion of individuals and the need for the Church to offer a counter-practice to the predominant practice propagated by consumer society. That predominant practice and the understanding of identity that it promotes were examined in Chapter 2. All the intervening chapters presented a Christian critique of and alternative to that understanding of identity. This chapter looks at more practical implications of this understanding of identity and of consumer society. Because consumerism is so pervasive in this society and so antithetical to the Christian understanding of identity, the Church should actively oppose this ethos. Rather than accepting the consumer mentality as already triumphant and presenting the Christian message as in some way connected to or running parallel with it, the Church should take a militant stand against consumerism. It must help its members to stand united in opposition to this all-pervasive ethos, for

isolated individuals cannot hope to reorient their desires and sense of identity in a world that constantly tells them they are wrong. They must be part of a community that shares and fosters their values and beliefs. The Church cannot be this community and continue to condone consumerism by its silence. It cannot teach Christianity as a mere supplement to consumerist thinking. It cannot serve as a mere therapeutic aid to help people maintain their sanity in a chaotic and meaningless consumerist world. It must challenge consumerist thinking and offer a different world in which its members can find a home.

The Sacralization of Consumerism, the Commercialization of Christianity

In order to fight against the temptations of consumer products and the notion of identity fostered by advertising, individuals must have support. Barry Schwartz contrasts the public attitudes toward drugs with those toward (other) consumer goods, suggesting that shopping is “almost sacred in the United States,” more like “the national sport” than a social problem. “Overcoming or avoiding thing addiction in the face of almost univocal public pressure in the opposite direction is a very difficult task; it may be an impossible one.”¹ The Church has in its better moments played a leading role in helping those with drug addictions and in its worse moments has judgmentally condemned drug-users; it does neither with consumer addiction, and yet this addiction may pose a greater problem for Christian life. Paul Heelas points out that consumerism has led to an understanding of the individual as having authority even over religious matters, so that “people are increasingly treating religion as providing commodities—acting with self-informed authority to choose those components of the religious sphere which best suit

¹ Schwartz, 161-62.

their own particular consumer requirements.”² Obviously, faith that is assembled out of component parts that are shopped for and chosen is not a faith that calls one to radical change. Rather, a call for radical change is likely to be dismissed with the response—“That is not for me.”

Christians in consumer society are often less concerned about what their faith requires of them and more concerned about what it can do for them. Wade Clark Roof argues that consumerism caters “to a proliferation of whims and desires.” Advertising replaces the older models of virtue with young sex symbols and successful executives. “Not surprisingly, ‘How can I feel good about myself?’ emerged as a far more pressing question to many Americans than ‘How can I be saved?’ That shift of questions offers clues not just to a fundamental change in religious identities, but to the construction and stylization of spiritual concerns of an individual living within a self-focused, therapeutic culture.”³ Perhaps the two questions should not be seen as counterpoints, however. The centrality of the question “how can I be saved?” may well be viewed as a precursor to the other question and even as the source of the problem Clark diagnoses, for it, like the other question, is individual- and end-oriented. This dissertation has argued that the central questions for Christians should be: how can I be what God wants me to be, how can I follow Christ, how am I to love my neighbor? These questions are more immediate and less self-serving than “how can I be saved?”

Rodney Clapp suggests that capitalism “has domesticated Christianity by privatizing it, by sundering Christian practice from Christian convictions and

² Paul Heelas, “The Limits of Consumption and the Post-Modern ‘Religion’ of the New Age,” in *The Authority of the Consumer*, ed. Russell Keat, Nigel Whiteley and Nicholas Abercrombie (London: Routledge, 1994), 102.

³ Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999), 67.

consequently reducing those thick, powerful convictions to ‘mere belief,’ a matter of personal choice and preference on level with hobbies or entertainment options or spectator sports.”⁴ Thus Christianity becomes something with which to align oneself—as one might with those who support the Democratic party, with fans of Van Gogh, Bob Dylan, or the San Antonio Spurs, or with consumers of Tommy Hilfiger or Ralph Lauren. These all function as identity markers of a kind but only in lieu of the more authentic sense of identity that the previous chapters have argued is the goal of real Christian commitment. Roof says that in the discourse of “subjectivist expansionism,” an individualized understanding of identity prevails in which one is supposed to find an authentic self not in any external source but within oneself.⁵ As has already been argued extensively, such a search is doomed to fail and typically does not even get off the ground in consumer society for it leads to a self-focus that paradoxically and at once leads one to external models and goals.

Even churches closely tied to tradition and indeed even tradition itself fall prey to this individualized notion of religion and identity. Spirituality and religion are often contrasted rather than being seen as intimately and necessarily connected. Even Roman Catholic identity is now more often thought of not as being part of an inherited tradition but “as a self-constructed process of choosing among religious-spiritual options. This individualist religious identity construction is undertaken in conjunction with perceived spiritual needs.” Catholicism thus becomes “not so much a binding community of discipleship as a cultural tool kit of symbolic religion/spiritual wares from which it is

⁴ Clapp, *Border Crossings*, 95.

⁵ Roof, 66.

possible to construct a personal religious identity.”⁶ A survey of young Catholics revealed that the majority thought that each “individual’s conscience is the final authority about good and bad.”⁷ Questions concerning how this conscience is formed and how it can be sharpened or dulled are presumably better left unconsidered. In the same survey, the majority felt that individuals should arrive at their “own religious beliefs independent of any churches.”⁸ A Gallup Poll in the late 1970s showed that 80 percent of the population held that view.⁹ Such a conception would have been unimaginable and incomprehensible to Christians of an earlier era. Clapp says that in fact this conception is precisely the opposite of the traditional Christian viewpoint. It is only in a “capitalistically disciplined Christianity” that corporate worship could be thought of as secondary to individual faith, as a tool for giving an occasional boost to the more important private worship. This worship expresses the individual’s “experience and privately tailored belief. Such worship and spirituality is, of course, eminently agreeable to capitalism’s ethos, which favors the endless multiplication of individual choice.”¹⁰

Obviously a religion tailored to the private beliefs of individuals and running parallel to the prevailing ethos cannot serve as an effective challenge to the status quo. Susan White suggests that the survival of Christian worship depends upon whether it will be seen as a countercultural force or as conforming to contemporary expectations.¹¹ Jeremy R. Carrette and Richard King argue that it is precisely the inability to mount a serious challenge or critique that makes religion in the United States a celebrated and

⁶ Dean R. Hoge, William D. Dinges, Mary Johnson, and Juan L. Gonzales, Jr., *Young Adult Catholics: Religion in the Culture of Choice* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 15-16, 226.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Heelas, 111.

¹⁰ Clapp, *Border Crossings*, 97.

¹¹ Susan J. White, *Christian Worship and Technological Change* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 120.

welcome institution, unlike religion in a place like Iran, which is seen as threatening in the West.¹² Archimedes said that if he had a place to stand he could move the earth; so long as the Church is just one more consumer choice, it cannot provide a place to stand from which the consumer world can be moved.

Private spirituality is thought to be a way of saving a “transcendent dimension in a materialist and rationalist culture gone mad. In reality, however, such privatized spiritualities operate as a form of thought-control that supports the ideology of late capitalism.” This spirituality can at times promote ethical values but does so while “perpetuating a form of ethical myopia that turns our attention away from social injustice. It does this by turning the social ethic of religion into a private reality for self-comfort and self-consumption.”¹³ Any religion that is acceptable to capitalism is a religion that ultimately promotes its underlying values. Capitalist spirituality increases private consumer addiction, offering “personalized packages of meaning and social accommodation rather than recipes for social change and identification with others.”¹⁴ When Christianity does not stand in opposition to consumer society, it is easily folded into the capitalist worldview. It becomes a means not of challenging an unjust and debilitating system but, like psychoanalysis, of alleviating the pain caused by the system and thus ultimately of supporting that system.

As Christianity is incorporated into the capitalist system, it loses its identity. Alongside the problem of identity in consumer society discussed throughout the entire dissertation lies the problem of the church’s identity in this society. This dissertation suggests that the two problems share a common solution. The church’s loss of

¹² Carrette and King, 67.

¹³ Ibid., 68.

¹⁴ Ibid., 83.

confidence in its identity is one of its greatest obstacles to renewal.¹⁵ According to Michael Budde and Robert Brimlow, the Church has been transformed “into a caricature of its best self,” which they call, “Christianity Incorporated.” It is “a church that has bent to capitalism and economic power so long that its own practices and beliefs become shaped by the corporate form and spirit.” The powers that be in consumer society are like the “Roman emperors who turned to Christianity as a salve for crises of internal order and legitimacy.” They “want a religion that cares without critique and praises without prophetic denunciation. They want chaplaincy.”¹⁶ Budde and Brimlow conclude: “The intriguing question is not whether capitalist culture will continue to shape hearts and imaginations more thoroughly than the Way of the Cross, but whether the churches will produce people able to tell the difference between the two.”¹⁷ The Church may not be able to stem the tide of consumerism, but it can at least present itself as an alternative. For Douglas Meeks, the transformation of the Church “depends on its rediscovery of its own *oikos* nature. A church that does not take seriously its character as the ‘household of God’ will form its members only partially, which means that it will actually aid them in adapting to the predominantly defined *oikos* of the society.”¹⁸ Both conservative and liberal commentators have noted the contrast between traditional Christianity and consumerism for while the latter promotes instantaneous gratification through indulgence, the former “considers fulfillment to be part of an ongoing struggle, perfected in the end only as sheer gift.”¹⁹

¹⁵ Colin Greene, “Consumerism and the Spirit of the Age,” in *Christ and Consumerism: Critical Reflections on the Spirit of Our Age*, ed. Craig G. Bartholomew and Thorsten Moritz (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000), 15.

¹⁶ Budde and Brimlow, 24.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹⁸ Meeks, 36.

¹⁹ Webber and Clapp, 30.

Unfortunately the Church has abdicated any authority to speak to the consumer. Over the last half century, it has grown silent, allowing “materialism and greed to become the litany in worship. Consequently, faith has been limited from having any bearing on the Christian as consumer.”²⁰ The Christian is addressed as worker, spouse, parent, friend, and benefactor, but not as consumer. This silence reinforces consumerism, and the economic system depends upon this reinforcement. As long as it maintains some independence from the surrounding system, the Church’s “capitalist allegiance must be won anew rather than assumed as an eternal constant. What dynamic religious groups legitimize, they can also—under certain circumstances—delegitimize.”²¹ Historically, religion has offered “compelling alternative visions to the authorized order.”²²

The Church should teach a way of giving and receiving and of developing identity counter to those presented in consumer society. Michael Budde suggests that, in light of the billions spent annually by businesses on advertising, the Church needs to “become something of a ‘vision’ or ‘perceptions’ clinic capable of removing cultural blinders and letting the radical Jesus shine through in all His entrancing, dangerous glory.”²³ Part of the required re-education involves teaching people of the very need for re-education and discipleship. The Church must teach that it is merely an illusion of the present society that individuals “can create themselves and be their own law unto themselves.”²⁴

According to James Alison, the doctrine of original sin reveals that the human capacity to

²⁰ Clifford A. Jones, Sr., “How a Christian African-American Reflects on Stewardship in a Consumer-Oriented Society” in *The Consuming Passion: Christianity & the Consumer Culture*, ed. Rodney Clapp (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 166.

²¹ Michael L. Budde, *The Two Churches: Catholicism & Capitalism in the World-System* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), 2.

²² Robert Orsi, “Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion,” in *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*, ed. David D. Hall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 15.

²³ Budde, *The (Magic) Kingdom of God*, 131.

²⁴ Clapp, *Border Crossings*, 100.

receive gratuitously “was damaged in the fall: not our capacity to *receive*, because we have to receive in order to exist, but our capacity to receive *gratuitously*, which is the only way in which we can share in divine life, because that life can never be other than gratuitous.”²⁵ The Church then must begin by teaching Christians that they are fallen in this way and must help them to understand what sin is and how it can and cannot be overcome. Alison writes: “Jesus is not talking about some sort of wicked desire locked into the solitude of an individual person which must somehow be exorcised. He is talking about a deformation of relationality such that we are scandalized by each other and give scandal to each other. This can be shown by the remedy: freedom is to be found by not allowing oneself to be caused to stumble by the evil done to one: one must not resist evil, one must go the second mile. There is only one way not to be locked into the scandals of this world, and that is by learning to forgive, which means not allowing oneself to be defined by the evil done.”²⁶ This section has suggested why the Church needs to be a place of alternative identity development in consumer society and how obstacles are currently in the way of its fulfilling this role. The next section will begin to suggest how it might overcome these obstacles.

Life as Sacrament, Life as Sacrifice, Life as Art

The Church should function as a place where a counter-practice occurs through Christian worship. I will explore the significance of the sacraments generally and the Eucharist in particular as examples of Christian practices that stand in opposition to consumerism and embody a different understanding of what it is to be human. In the

²⁵ Alison, 46.

²⁶ Ibid., 143-44.

pages that follow, I will first give a general account of the sacraments that borrows from Aquinas' discussion and then offer an interpretation of the Eucharist (and derivatively of the Incarnation and the Crucifixion) that borrows terminology and motifs from Georges Bataille's analysis of sacrifice and Martin Heidegger's discussion of the work of art. I will argue that these thinkers' writings about sacrifice and art may be employed to elucidate Eucharistic worship and the living out of Christian ideals in a consumer society.

Sacraments are central to the life of the Church. Augustine says that there could be no religious society of any kind "without some sacrament or visible symbol to serve as a bond of union."²⁷ In his influential and thorough treatment of the sacraments, Thomas Aquinas claims that they are necessary for salvation. Because of human nature, people must be led by corporeal and sensible things toward spiritual and intelligible things. Providence provides according to each being's condition and so provides humanity "with means of salvation, in the shape of corporeal and sensible signs that are called sacraments." Because human beings subjected themselves to corporeal things through sin, they cannot apply themselves directly to "spiritual things without a veil."²⁸ Consumers sinfully subject themselves to consumer goods and thus stand in need of such a sacramental veil. The Roman Catholic Church has instituted seven sacraments: baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, penance, extreme unction, matrimony, and holy orders. Through them, the Christian is "incorporated with Christ."²⁹ This is a Christian understanding of identity development: one becomes oneself by becoming one with Christ. The Christian becomes herself by becoming united with Christ.

²⁷ Augustine, *c. Faust.* 19.11.

²⁸ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* III.61.1, reply.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, III.62.1, reply. Later, Aquinas cites Pope Julius who suggested that the wine signifies Christ's blood and the water, the people. Thus the mingling of the two signifies that through the Eucharist the people are made one with Christ. See III.74.6, reply.

The sacraments serve as instruments of grace for fallen humanity, and they provide a kind of individuation within community free from the stifling confines of consumer comparison and mimesis. In the Church one marks and shares the occasions of personal development and incorporation into community, not by sacrificing to the public gods of consumption, but by partaking of the sacraments. Matrimony and holy orders mark lifelong commitments that involve not only monumental personal choices, but also relationship to the community through propagation and spiritual nurturing. Baptism, confirmation, and extreme unction mark passages into new stages of life as a part of the faith community. Penance and the Eucharist are ongoing sacraments that enact one's constantly evolving relationship with God as well as one's confession to and reconciliation with the Church. Through these sacraments, one struggles to become oneself before God and the community.

Of the seven sacraments, The Angelic Doctor says that absolutely speaking the Eucharist is the greatest because it “contains Christ Himself substantially” and because “all the other sacraments seem to be ordained to this one as to their end.”³⁰ It is significant as Sacrifice commemorating the Passion and as Communion bringing about ecclesiastical unity, and also as a means of salvation in the future. Aquinas argues that the sacraments “derive their power specially from Christ's Passion.”³¹ He argues that because salvation depends upon faith in the Passion, it is necessary “that there should be at all times among men something to show forth our Lord's Passion.”³² My interpretation of the Eucharist below will certainly follow this suggestion of the Passion's centrality, will include analysis of the sacrificial and communitarian aspects of the Eucharist, and

³⁰ Ibid., III.65.3, reply.

³¹ Ibid., III.62.5, reply.

³² Ibid., III.73.4-5, reply.

will also provide a new explanation for the importance of always having some sensible object present “to show forth the Lord’s passion.”

Bataille develops a theory of religion centered upon sacrifice. He says that agricultural produce and livestock are things, as are the people who tend these products. “The farmer is not a man: he is the plow of the one who eats the bread. At the limit, the act of the eater himself is already agricultural labor, to which he furnishes the energy.” Sacrifice of the first fruits or of a head of livestock is thus meant to remove, not only the plant or the animal, but also “the farmer and the stock raiser, from the world of things.” Sacrifice destroys the thing in the victim. It “destroys an object’s real ties of subordination; it draws the victim out of the world of utility and restores it to that of unintelligible caprice.” The object sacrificed is “rescued from all utility.”³³ It becomes what it always was but what was concealed behind its usefulness, behind the role it had been assigned. Likewise, the farmer and stock raiser become what they always already were—human beings. Their simple humanity had been concealed behind the roles they had played. I have argued (especially in the two chapters devoted to Kierkegaard) that this simple humanity is each person’s greatest glory and that this glory is concealed in consumer society. With Bataille’s and Heidegger’s help, I hope to clarify this idea and relate it to the Eucharist.

Bataille’s discussion of sacrifice is related to Martin Heidegger’s analysis of the work of art, to which I will now turn in hopes of further explicating these difficult ideas. Writing of Van Gogh’s paintings of a pair of peasant woman’s shoes, Heidegger says that the “equipmentality of equipment first genuinely arrives at its appearance through the

³³ Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 42-43, 49.

work and only in the work.”³⁴ The equipment and even its equipmental function were in some sense invisible. The peasant woman did not *see* her shoes or think about them. They served her well and thus required no thought or attention. Likewise one might rephrase Bataille’s argument to say that it is only through the sacrifice (rather than the work of art) that the serviceability or even the edibility of the crops or animal first genuinely arrives. Their utility is seen when they are rescued from their utility. Heidegger argues that equipment is “determined by usefulness and serviceability,” and so its matter “is used, and used up. It disappears into usefulness.” Similarly, the matter of the animal and the crops disappears in common consumption. Heidegger continues: “The material is all the better and more suitable the less it resists perishing in the equipmental being of the equipment. By contrast the temple-work, in setting up a world, does not cause the material to disappear, but rather causes it to come forth for the very first time and to come into the Open of the work’s world.”³⁵

Likewise, the sacrificing of the crops and livestock in the temple does not cause the material to disappear but causes it to appear for the first time even as it is consumed in the fire. If Bataille is correct, the farmer too and even the consumers are removed from the world of objects, no longer disappearing into usefulness. When the Eucharist is sacrificed, the person’s reappearance is more directly represented. The bread and wine are brought forth not only as the fruit of the earth, but also as the body and blood of Christ. Here the one who was fully human is consumed so that his matter, his corporeality, may appear to the Christian for the first time. Just as the cow reappears after being lost behind its function as beef, so too does the human reappear after being

³⁴ Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper, 1971), 36.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 46.

lost behind the countless roles people have invented for themselves and for each other. The individual Jesus is perhaps also rescued from his utility in the sacrifice of the Eucharist: all of the dubious ends for which Christians might employ him are sacrificed so that Jesus might appear in all his unassimilable corporeality. I do not wish to reduce the Eucharist to one single dynamic, but I do want to suggest that part of what is happening in the Eucharist is that all the functions Jesus serves in the Church are being sacrificed so that all that is left is the human being—*Ecce homo*.

Furthermore, the Christians who participate in the sacrament are sharing in Christ's life—are drinking of his cup. Thus they too emerge from their ordinary utility, from the world of things. They are called to be sacrificed with Christ—to pick up their cross and carry it. All the ordinary criteria of comparison and evaluation are laid aside, as the rich and the poor, the powerful and the lowly, sit at a common table. Here is revealed what it means to be human, to be children of God. Heidegger says that if one tries to grasp the heaviness of a stone by placing it on a balance, one merely brings “the heaviness into the form of a calculated weight. This perhaps very precise determination of the stone remains a number, but the weight's” heaviness has escaped capture. In the same way, when color, which “wants only to shine,” is analyzed by measuring its wavelengths, the color, the wanting to shine, is gone. “It shows itself only when it remains undisclosed and unexplained.”³⁶ In everyday life, the human person is placed on the balance of career, consumption, and comparisons of all kinds, but the human person is concealed behind, not revealed by, such measurements.

The human being appears and is allowed to *be* what it is only when rescued from its utility, roles, and comparisons. Heidegger writes: “That which is can only be, as a

³⁶ Ibid., 47.

being, if it stands within and stands out within what is lighted in this clearing. Only this clearing grants and guarantees to us humans a passage to those beings that we ourselves are not, and access to the being that we ourselves are. Thanks to this clearing, beings are unconcealed in certain changing degrees. And yet a being can be *concealed*, too, only within the sphere of what is lighted.”³⁷ While Heidegger would obviously find many faults with how I am using his words, does not the Christian have a very specific notion of what it is that lights this sphere? Is it not the light that came into the world but which people rejected in favor of the darkness?³⁸ Is it not he who said, “I am the light of the world; anyone who follows me will not be walking in the dark, but will have the light of life” and who then condemned the Pharisees for judging by human standards?³⁹ But the way the dynamic of sacrifice has been discussed in this section, it would seem that any human sacrifice would do and a “real” one, a new one perhaps better than a remembrance, recapitulation, or repetition. Of course, this competing sacrifice victimizes the innocent and fails to discern what kind of death the participants are called to in the Eucharist.

Aquinas believes that bread and wine are fitting because just as the Church is made up of many believers so too is bread composed of many grains, and wine, of many grapes. He concedes that the “flesh of slaughtered animals represents the Passion more forcibly,” but nonetheless maintains that the bread and wine are more suitable for common use and for representing Church unity.⁴⁰ In contrast, I believe that the flesh of slaughtered animals represents the Passion too closely and forcibly thereby occluding its

³⁷ Ibid., 53.

³⁸ John 3.19.

³⁹ John 8.12, 8.15.

⁴⁰ Aquinas, III.74.1, reply and ad.1.

true meaning. When the Priest says, “This is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world,” he is gesturing toward the bread and wine. Were he to hold aloft a piece of meat, it might appear to the eyes of all quite like the flesh of a murdered human being, but this sight would be seen by the physical eyes. Aquinas notes that the presence of Christ’s body and blood in the Eucharist “cannot be detected by sense, nor understanding, but by faith alone, which rests upon Divine authority.” Faith is of things unseen: just as Christ shows “His Godhead invisibly, so also in this sacrament He shows us His flesh in an invisible manner.”⁴¹ Christ’s body in the Eucharist is not perceptible by sense or imagination but only by faith.⁴²

Here the Eucharist is a continuation of Christ’s incognito about which Kierkegaard writes frequently. First, God conceals Godself in the flesh of a lowly servant who is ridiculed and eventually executed. Then that very flesh in which God concealed Godself is itself concealed in the bread of the Eucharist. From a Girardian perspective, the bread and wine are also superior to the flesh of a slaughtered animal precisely because of their distance from human sacrifice and ritual violence. Jesus’ gruesome murder at the hands of those possessed by mimetic contagion is not to be repeated, and it is not to be attributed to and celebrated as some strange economy instituted by the one Jesus calls “Father.” Rather the Eucharist reminds Christians that the sacrificial victim is innocent, thus discouraging them from scapegoating others in the future. It serves to remind them that because of their heterogeneity to this world, they too risk suffering their model’s fate.

But perhaps even more importantly, new sacrifices would fail to signify the truly

⁴¹ Ibid., III.75.1, reply.

⁴² Ibid., III.76.7, reply.

human because a particular kind of victim is required. Bataille argues: “[O]ne sacrifices *what is useful*; one does not sacrifice luxurious objects. There could be no sacrifice if the offering were destroyed beforehand. Now, depriving the labor of manufacture of its usefulness at the outset, luxury has already *destroyed* that labor; it has dissipated it in vainglory; in the very moment, it has lost it for good. To sacrifice a luxury object would be to sacrifice the same object twice.”⁴³ The status symbols of consumer society, therefore, do not make good sacrifices for the labor that produced them has already been sacrificed to the gods of consumption. In parallel fashion, consumers have already sacrificed themselves to the production and consumption of these “goods.” They cannot be sacrificed in any meaningful sense for they have disappeared into their everyday usefulness and have already been used up. Christ must thus first embody what it is to be a human being; he must become useless, so to speak, so that the human can appear for the first time. The giving of all one’s possessions is not the sacrifice properly speaking; it is but the first step to becoming human. In Mark’s Gospel, when Jesus visits Nazareth and teaches in the temple, people wonder where he received his wisdom and power. They know Jesus as a carpenter, as Mary’s son. Jesus is amazed at their lack of faith. He says that a prophet is hated only in his own land.⁴⁴ To the Nazarenes, Jesus the human is occluded behind the many roles they associate with him. Jesus must be fully human to be the proper sacrifice. Indeed, he is human in a way that no other human is. Only as such, can he sacrifice his humanity in order to show what humanity is, to allow true humanity to appear for the first time. So long as Christians are tied to consumerism, they cannot follow their model down the path of self-sacrifice for they are all already useless like the

⁴³ Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, 49-50.

⁴⁴ Mark 6.2-6.

consumer products they love.

Nonetheless when Christians fully participate in the sacrament of the Eucharist they come to the table shedding all the comparisons by which they are weighed in everyday life in order to share in Christ's sacrifice. Of course one may well compare one's clothing to a fellow participant rather than standing naked before the stripped and beaten Lord; one may admire the beauty of a fellow participant's body rather than keeping one's eyes focused on the incomparable beauty of the broken body one is about to receive; but these are failures to participate in the essence of the occasion. Bataille says that one must sacrifice beings that might have been spirit but have become things and so must "be restored to the immanence whence they come, to the vague sphere of lost intimacy."⁴⁵ This dissertation has argued that human beings in consumer society are precisely such things—having lost their spirit and become things without intimate connections to the world and their fellow human beings. Of course, the Christian recognizes that all human beings are spirit and that all are intimately connected to God who created them as spirit and who is Spirit. But there is a difference between the non-Christian and the Christian that must be emphasized. To draw out this difference, I will refer to a helpful distinction Heidegger makes between equipment and the work of art. Both are produced, but the work is "created so that its createdness is part of the created work." Heidegger continues:

To be sure, "that" it is made is a property also of all equipment that is available and in use. But this "that" does not become prominent in the equipment; it disappears in usefulness. The more handy a piece of equipment is, the more inconspicuous it remains that, for example, such a hammer is and the more exclusively does the equipment keep itself in its equipmentality. In general, of everything present to us, we can note that it *is*; but this also, if it is noted at all, is noted only soon to fall into oblivion, as is the wont of everything commonplace.

⁴⁵ Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, 50.

And what is more commonplace than this, that a being is? In a work, by contrast, this fact, that it *is* as a work, is just what is unusual. The event of its being created does not simply reverberate through the work; rather, the work casts before itself the eventful fact that the work is as this work, and it has constantly this fact about itself.⁴⁶

In my analogy, the Christian is like the work, whereas the non-Christian consumer is like equipment.

Human beings, however, are not created in two different ways. But through Christ, all can be recreated. All have lost their capacity simply to be what they are—to be human beings created in the image of God. Their createdness—the stamp of their Creator—“disappears into usefulness.” The more successful a person is, the more inconspicuous it remains that such a person *is*, and the more does such a one remain hidden in her seemingly useful roles and behind her apparently useful goods. Of course it is obvious enough that every human being *is*, but this fact like all that is commonplace and obvious is soon forgotten. In the sacrificial Christian life, however, the event of this human’s createdness constantly reverberates, and this life casts before itself the eventful fact that the life is as this life, and it has constantly this fact about itself. Bataille writes: “Sacrifice restores to the sacred world that which servile use has degraded, rendered profane. Servile use has made a *thing* (an *object*) of that which, in a deep sense, is of the same nature as the *subject*, is in a relation of intimate participation with the subject.” He suggests that religion is the struggle to detach “from the *real* order, from the poverty of *things*,” and to restore “the *divine order*.”⁴⁷ People in consumer society use themselves and each other as they do their things and are thereby degraded. Christianity seeks to restore the divine order, allowing people to see themselves, others, and all of creation as

⁴⁶ Heidegger, 65.

⁴⁷ Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, 55, 57.

God does. The Christian life is the living out of this restoration. Heidegger says that art is “*the becoming and happening of truth*,”⁴⁸ and in this sense it can be said that the truly Christian life is the practice of art.

Of course this artful living is comprised not just in the taking of the Eucharist but in the way that Christians follow the example of the spilt blood of which the Eucharist reminds them. Craig Gay says that the Christian “path of genuine self-transcendence, of authentic heroism, of possibilities, lies in giving one’s self away for the sake of one’s neighbor. It is the way of the cross.” Christians are not encouraged to consume as much as possible but to understand their lives as gracious gifts from God. They must be thankful for this gift and express their gratitude by giving themselves generously away in love for the neighbor.⁴⁹ Here the truly human is sacrificially given, and through this sacrifice the individual’s humanity appears for the first time. In true Christian munificence, the helper does not give to the needy from a position of superiority or power. Rather the Christian sees only the humanity of the other, the humanity that is just like her own; thus she can truly help the other without condescension and love the other as she loves herself. She loves herself and her neighbor for their humanity, that is, as children of God made in the image of God. But she does love herself. She does not give of herself out of self-hatred or self-punishment. Nor does she give of herself so that she can feel good about herself or in order to convince herself or others that she is better than they are. She gives of herself because she receives herself as a gift and feels no choice but to share this gift with her fellow creatures. The Christian is like a small child who is given money by her mother to spend on her family at Christmas. Hopefully, the child

⁴⁸ Heidegger, 71.

⁴⁹ Gay, “Sensualists without Heart,” 38-39.

gives her gifts with great joy and is happy to give the members of her family presents that they seem to appreciate, but the child has no reason to feel condescension to those who are receiving her gifts or to feel that she is better than others who were not given money with which to buy gifts.

Identity in the Church

Of course the Christian who lives in the United States in the early part of the 21st century will find it impossible to extricate herself from consumerism entirely. She will continue to buy the goods that life requires in the consumer capitalist marketplace. She may well feel it best to buy her produce from local farms, to forego meat, to drive a hybrid car or own no car at all, and to live without many luxuries that have come to be seen as necessities in this society. However, she will not take any of these decisions or the sum of these decisions to constitute her identity. She will imitate Christ, desiring what he desires. She will not condemn herself in the name of some consumer model but will ask forgiveness from her model, whom she imitates not so that she may participate in his divinity but because she loves him. She will not compare herself to others or her belongings to their belongings. She will merely note that they share the same humanity and thus should share the things they happen to have. When she prays, "Give us this day our daily bread," she will understand that if she has a loaf of bread in her kitchen, God has already answered this prayer for her and her neighbors and that it is her responsibility to distribute the gift. Indeed responsibility may be too weak a word for if she prayed sincerely, how can she even feel that she has a choice whether to share or not when God has given her the capacity to fulfill her own prayer? The miracle of the loaves and fishes

is repeated constantly, but rather than first sharing this miracle, people typically begin by gathering their surplus into baskets.

The call to compassion is not a call to cry for those who starve but a call to feed them. The suffering then might arise from the Christian having to give up some of her bread as well as the very notion of it being exclusively *her* bread. But most fundamentally it would involve opening her ears to hear the cries of those who suffer and recognizing their call upon her. The Church should not flinch from stating that this call is given to all Christians, not just some class of extraordinary Christians. They help others not because it is right or because they want to be thought good but because they must. Simone Weil says that the Christian has to love necessity. In this case, one is not really acting but being passive. The “slave is in a sense a model.” When the slave carries out the master’s order to help someone in need, it is the master who is commended for generosity, not the slave. The slave is merely obedient, is merely doing what must be done. “Good which is done in this way, almost in spite of ourselves, almost shamefacedly and apologetically, is pure. The truly good can never come from human effort, but must come from outside the self.”⁵⁰ Perhaps obedience to the Church can itself provide the individual with a kind of necessity for the Christian learns to desire and to pray within the Church. In Augustinian terms, the Christian does what she desires, and this, through grace, is the good. Through the infusion of the Holy Spirit, the person acts in charity, which properly orders the individual’s desires and loves. Necessity is the compulsion of one’s desires that have been remolded to correspond to the divine will.

⁵⁰ Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Craufurd (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1947), 38-41.

This dissertation is not advocating a change in liturgy or even primarily a greater focus on service to the sick and indigent. The Church has a long history of helping those in need, and it is surely not the task of theology, much less a dissertation, to develop new sacraments. However, there is a strong need for the Church to make its traditional teachings about the sacraments and service to the poor clear to its members and even to those in the larger society. The Church should stand out from the consumer society and unflinchingly announce that it opposes this society's values and its understanding of identity. It should present itself not as another choice within consumer society but as something outside this world of endless choice. It must tell people, not that they must choose this or that church, but that they are chosen. The Church should not present its message in a way that implicitly endorses commercialism either. Content is at times secondary to questions of genre and style. When there is an emergency, a message is broadcast on television; this message is not packaged like a commercial for it must stand out.

The most important change the Church can make is in the area of theological education. The sacraments do not need to change, but the Church needs to instruct its members about the sacraments in a way that it often fails to do. The catechism should be presented as an alternative framework for seeing the world and for organizing one's life. The sacraments should be taught as milestones in and signs of commitment and recommitment to a life lived in opposition to consumerism. While the Church itself may not bestow identity on its members, it is the context in which its members are "in(ter)dividualized." The Church should be the place where Christians come to understand themselves and their identities and where the defining moments of their

identity development are celebrated. It should be the place where they come to understand their desires and their relationships and how these are to be shaped by the relationship that founds their identity—their relationship with God.

The Church should make clear that identity cannot be earned or purchased; it can only be given. To look for the source of identity in some possession, accomplishment, or trait (as is the norm in consumer society), is to look among particular items of difference for a common, universal organizing principle. Such a principle can come only from above, not from below. An other must bestow it; the agent concerned cannot orchestrate it for such orchestration would simply be one among other actions in need of organization. Just as Sartre argues that there can never be perfect self-consciousness because the true self is always the subject not the object of consciousness (that is, the self is the self that is conscious of, not the self of which it is conscious), so too is it impossible for true self-identity to be generated by the self. The self-given identity would always fail to incorporate the very act of identity bestowal. There would be not one but two: the self that has just been given an identity and the self that has just given the identity.

The Christian who receives identity as a gift from God and lives out of this identity by imitating Christ is not in Sartrean bad faith. She does not claim that she was not herself when she performed some action. She either thanks God for allowing her to perform this action or asks God for forgiveness for this action. In the first case, she recognizes that she did perform the action even though she gives God credit for it. In the second case, she admits that she performed the action, acknowledging that she has fallen short of her model. She does not thereby lose her identity or leave her actions in the lurch. She is honest about herself and humbly accepts her model's forgiveness so that

she may once again receive her identity from him. Thus she does not deny her facticity. Neither does she deny her transcendence. The person described by Sartre who believes that he truly knows himself by labeling himself a waiter is in bad faith because he has confused himself with his role. The Christian does not label herself according to any of her roles. Of course, she is “a Christian,” but this is not just a role. She is acutely aware of how she escapes her actions—how she does what she does not want to do and does not do what she wants to do. More importantly, she knows that she is the daughter of God, and this makes her more than the sum of her actions, no matter how great they may be. She knows that she transcends her actions for her identity, the very source of her desires and actions, is itself given from God. Each time she asks for forgiveness, she is reminded of her facticity, and each time she receives forgiveness, she is reminded of her transcendence. She is her actions, but she is also something more. The Christian is more concerned with her inward life than with the success of her outward actions or with the ways others may choose to evaluate her. Moral responsibility lies with inward actions. The Christian must be concerned with what she is, not with how she seems. Kierkegaard suggests that those who are more concerned about how they are perceived than what they are in truth will, when tried by life, become slaves to their fellow human beings. What one *really* is remains available only to oneself and to God.

The Christian makes herself transparent before God. Of course, no one can hide from God, but the Christian willingly reveals herself. She wants to live her life before God. An arrogant person may dismiss failures or foibles as unrepresentative, and an insecure person may insist that a great or generous action is “not really like me at all.” But such self-assessments are not necessarily trustworthy and seem to depend upon some

self-conception without clear foundation that is prior to such actions. Some might claim that an action performed often without great deliberation is characteristic, but the deliberations themselves are part of identity, and the Christian understands that she must deliberate over herself, calling herself to account before God. She confesses her bad thoughts and deeds as her own and asks that she be healed of the deprivations that cause and are caused by these thoughts and deeds; she prays for a healing of her self, that her identity be made whole. She thanks God for her good thoughts and deeds, realizing that they come from her self in some way, but that this self comes from God; she prays that God continue to gift her in this way for she knows that she cannot continue on her own strength. She understands that all are guilty before God and that each is, in some sense, responsible for the sins of everyone.⁵¹ She also understands that her good actions depend upon the support of the Church of which she is but a member, and not just of its head, Christ. Likewise, she confesses her sins to the Church for she sins not just against the head but the body, and she understands that she and her actions can become stumbling blocks for others. Her identity is not something over against the others but is formed in relation to them and functions only in connection to them. The Church itself is an entity, and its parts cannot survive dissection. Here the desires of all are shaped by all but no longer in a detrimental and adversarial way. Here the “interdividual” flourishes and does not demand to be recognized independently. She does not claim in pride to be her own cause or to act on her own individual desires.

Identity is not necessarily compromised in imitation of the other; the self develops and emerges only in relation to and negotiation with the model, but neither does the self

⁵¹ See Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Everyman's Library, 1992), 289.

become itself only to the degree that it succeeds in following its model. Otherwise, for each model, there would be but one self with embodiments wherever there were imitators. Failure in imitation must then in some way be what defines the self. All fail to imitate Christ, and it is this, in part, that makes all Christians different. Each has different gifts and areas of weakness. The Christian must, therefore, confess but also accept her failures. Christ asked that his cup be taken from him but then prays that the Father's will be done.⁵² Paul pleaded with the Lord that the thorn in his flesh be removed, but the Lord answered him that God's grace is enough for God's power is made perfect in weakness. Paul concludes: "It is then, about my weakness that I am happiest of all to boast, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me; and that is why I am glad of weaknesses, insults, constraints, persecutions and distress for Christ's sake. For it is when I am weak that I am strong."⁵³ The Christian should ask to be healed from her sinfulness but should accept herself despite this sinfulness even as she accepts others despite their sinfulness. Indeed perhaps the previous sentence understates the case with its use of the word "despite." If compassion is God's, Christ's, and the Christian's mode of engagement with the world, then "despite" is the wrong word entirely. Would God love a person *despite* the person's failure to live fully in God's joy? Does a good parent love a child *despite* the child's illness? On the contrary, this illness, this weakness, this failure is likely to evoke compassion more forcefully than the healthy, strong, and successful child. Thus the Christian should love herself and others in part *because* of their sinfulness. Still she prays that she and the others be healed, and she looks to an ultimate healing that never arrives in this world.

⁵² Mark 14.36, Matthew 26.39, Luke 22.42.

⁵³ 2 Corinthians 12.7-10.

Eschatological Identity

The Christian imagines that in this world to come she will be healed and there will be no hunger. The hungry will not cry to her for God will satisfy all hungers. Because identity is received and is always evolving, the Christian imagines her identity in terms of the future—in terms of teleology. She does not look to the past or the present or even precisely the future to find her identity, but to the eschaton. The human being's teleology is to be one with God even as the Father is one with the Son. The human being is not, however, identical to this eschatological self in this life, but faith is able to see the two as one—is able to see oneself in this imagined self that is one with God. Here the Christian “solution” to the identity problem creates a new problem. Atheists may have difficulty resolving the question of identity, but they do not have to make sense of any eschatological self. They may seek to understand how one is the same person across time, but they need not ask how one can be the same person outside of time. I am suggesting that the Christian response to the identity problem developed in this dissertation requires an answer to this question and demands that the theologian explore eschatological issues. In this section, I will argue that the eschatological self is essential for a Christian understanding of identity, and I will offer an eschatological vision that seeks to make sense of the human being's identity with this eschatological self.

Hell on this model would seem to be the dissolution of self—the complete loss of identity. However, I have also claimed that the Christian is called to compassion even for one's enemies, and I believe that this call makes the idea of hell untenable. Never-ending torture not only seems to belie the concept of a compassionate God, but also destroys the idea of a heaven for the saints. The saints of a god who demands sacrifices might well

look upon those suffering in hell with pleasure, admiring the power of their god, but the saints of a god who demands justice and compassion could not fail to be tortured by the torments of those in hell. They would long to ease the suffering of those in hell and would implore their god to show the damned mercy. They might offer to share in the suffering of the damned if it would ease their burdens. That shared suffering, like the suffering of hell itself, would be the absence of God, and thus their desire to do God's will (for them to love their enemies) would lead them to separation from God. But this was the paradoxical work of Christ Jesus and him alone. The saints are called to follow him, but not there.

But heaven too seems to result in the complete loss of identity for I am not the beatified self I imagine occupying paradise. We are not equal or the same. How can a deeper understanding and feeling of identity come out of a concept that seems to undermine all continuity of the self? To answer this question I feel it necessary to appeal to the concept of purgatory. Many Christians oppose such a notion because it seems to contradict the idea of Jesus Christ as the necessary and completely sufficient sacrifice for humanity's sins. If one must suffer in purgatory before being admitted to heaven, it seems that Christ is not sufficient, and that one must earn salvation through suffering. When I speak of purgatory, however, I am not imagining a place or time in which I pay for my sins with suffering. The theology I have advocated in this dissertation would have to maintain that all are redeemed through God's love as manifested in Christ, not through God's punitive justice or any human suffering. The pains of the purgatory I am here conceiving do not satisfy God or justice; they are more akin to the pain of surgery.

The notion that sins or earthly attachments must be removed before a person may enter into paradise is problematic. A merciful God forgives sins, and surely before the majesty of this God all earthly attachments must seem of no consequence. Perhaps it could be argued that one cannot see God's glory until freed from the earthly attachments that blind humanity. But in what sort of process can one imagine these attachments being removed? It could just as well be imagined that whether one has unhealthy attachments to money or drugs or consumer goods or any earthly thing, one will have no recourse for satisfying such desires, and so one will be purified of such attachments, more or less, at once. If it is helpful to imagine a period of painful "detoxification" one may imagine it. But the greater work for which a kind of purgatory is required is the healing of the brokenness that caused or was caused by these attachments and the formation of an identity that was always stunted by these attachments and by the models from whom they were learned.

A process, as opposed to a sudden conversion or miraculous healing, is required to preserve identity, and this requirement must be defended on existential and personal grounds. If I were to die suddenly this moment, it seems to me that one of two problems would prevent me from finding myself in heaven. First, still too much the way I am now, I would be prone to suffering sadness or anger from wounds received and guilt from wounds given. Secondly, too different from how I am now, I would fail to recognize myself. There would be some perfected person experiencing unending and total joy, but what would that have to do with me? It would be as if I had been consigned to oblivion, and this new person had taken my place, as if only the number of souls and not the souls themselves must remain constant. It could be suggested that my argument about God's

glory overcoming all earthly attachments might also apply here. The difference is that the things to which people are attached cease to exist and thus cease to be of concern. The ways in which our attachments have deformed and limited us are, however, of great significance to us and to the merciful God who loves us and wants to make us whole.

The process by which each person forms a true identity and the process by which a true community is formed is the same process. A process is required not only for the continuity of identity, but also for real spiritual healing to take place. Even if a sudden physical healing is beyond scientific credibility, it seems to be at least logically possible. Logically speaking, there is no reason that a broken bone could not be fused in an instant, though it is certainly impossible physically. A “fractured” spirit seems to present a different kind of problem. Even logically, there is an inherent problem with an instantaneous spiritual healing. How is the damage done to a psyche over time undone at once? How can a trauma suffered be simply and instantly erased? It seems that the impossibility of such a cure is demonstrated precisely by a kind of instant erasure that does occur in many trauma cases but which does nothing to heal the victim. The memory of such trauma is often completely repressed by the victim, but that does not mean that the trauma does not have a destructive effect on the victim’s life. An instant psychic healing would seem necessarily to be an ambiguous healing. The trauma victim represses what she or he cannot face; such repression helps the victim to survive the event, but it does not heal. Rather it causes a kind of break in identity and conceals the wound, thus making healing all the more difficult if not impossible. It forestalls the difficult healing process. Concealment prevents true healing. The truth, in all of its terrible particularity, must be revealed before reconciliation can take place.

Even that which does not lead to traumatic repression may still stand in need of remembrance. Marcel Proust's narrator describes a memory that comes to him as he bends over to take off his boots: "But scarcely had I touched the topmost button than my chest swelled, filled with an unknown, a divine presence, I was shaken with sobs, tears streamed from my eyes. The being who had come to my rescue, saving me from barrenness of spirit, was the same who, years before, in a moment of identical distress and loneliness, in a moment when I had nothing left of myself, had come in and had restored me to myself, for that being was myself and something more than me (the container that is greater than the contained and was bringing it to me)." He remembers his grandmother who has died and whom he has not yet grieved, and in a sense, he is remembering her for the first time: the grandmother he had been remembering was not the one he had known, indeed "had nothing in common with her save her name." Here, however, he "recaptured the living reality in a complete and involuntary recollection."⁵⁴

Many things can stand in the way of memory that in turn can stand in the way of healing and proper identity development. In the narrator's case, it is largely the role of habit rather than a trauma that prevents him from recapturing the living reality of his grandmother. And while he had been protected from grief, his protection was a barrenness of spirit that made feeling anything impossible. He describes this memory, though not a religious or eschatological moment, as a divine presence rescuing him and making of him something more than himself. What I am calling purgatory would be filled with these kinds of memories—teaching people to grieve, to love, to discover selves long buried under pains and losses that they were unable to face while living. The

⁵⁴ Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, vol. 4, *Sodom and Gomorrah*, trans. C.K. Moncrieff and Terence Terence Kilmartin (New York: The Modern Library, 1993), 210.

guilt they feel and assign to others must increase before it can be erased. Before they can forget, they must remember.

Given this aim, the remembering would need to be a collective enterprise in which all will “remember” not only their own lives but also those of others. Perhaps it seems odd to speak of remembering what one never knew. But this remembering is not a search for events in the past that one is having difficulty recalling, but rather the kind of involuntary memory of which Proust speaks. This kind of memory is not simply a recollection of information, but an often transformative experience of the past. Thus it would seem that one could in this sense “remember” just as well what happened to others as what happened to oneself. Distinguishing between experiencing in the first case and re-experiencing in the second case is unnecessary because, as the examples of the trauma victim and Proust’s narrator show, even one’s own memories are new experiences. The first step toward healing and reconciliation from an event is the memory of that event—all participants “remembering” the event from all sides. In this world memories are inadequate and time is short. While these limitations must be admitted, Christians must try to help others remember, giving victims time to recall and recount their stories, and they can hope that in the life to come God will bestow upon them more perfect memories and sufficient time. The memories would continue to multiply, victims and perpetrators learning and feeling what it was like to be the other person, experiencing the life that led each person to that event.

John De Gruchy suggests “that the critical step in the process of reconciliation is that of learning to put ourselves in the place of the ‘other’ who addresses us.” He talks of opening up a space between perpetrator and victim where confrontation and conversation

can take place and argues that this is the first step toward reconciliation. It allows one to see oneself and the other. More than this, they “exchange” places, but in so doing they do not destroy but rather expand their identities: “Reconciliation begins to become a reality when, without surrendering our identity, who we are, but opening up ourselves to the ‘other’, we enter into the space between, exchanging places with the other in a conversation that takes us beyond ourselves.”⁵⁵ John Milbank speaks of the recipient of forgiveness receiving “the intensified gift of identity with the giver, an identity of shared *character*, idiom, ethos or *tropos* which still respects independence of will – although the wills unite in a shared intention.” Indeed, the only solution for those who are quarreling is to “become one flesh, to forge one shared identity, one harmony.”⁵⁶

This is not to say that simply walking a mile in the other person’s shoes will lead to forgiveness and healing. But perhaps understanding the weakness and suffering of one’s perpetrator is a step toward forgiveness. Perhaps coming to see that there are finally no perpetrators and no victims but only people who are both will be a step toward repentance, forgiveness, and ultimately reconciliation. But the suffering of this purgatory would lie in what comes before this reconciliation—the unearthing of repressed traumas; the mourning, rage, or shame surrounding an event that the victim had been unwilling or unable to feel; and the anger, defensiveness, and guilt of the perpetrator who had never had to face the victim. This perhaps would be not just a kind of private hell but truly a war of all against all. It may seem that here this eschatological vision breaks down as a model for action in this life. Only because God would have given a greater capacity for and propensity toward compassion could this process take place and lead to any kind of

⁵⁵ John W. De Gruchy, *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 152, 149, 153.

⁵⁶ John Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (London: Routledge, 2003), 70.

positive resolution. Yet something similar in kind if not degree did work successfully in South Africa. Furthermore, this period of pain and anger should not be dismissed as something destructive or purely negative for De Gruchy argues that rage has a positive effect: “Listening to the rage of the victims of oppression is not only a necessary step in the process of preventing further outbreaks of violent fury, it is also a step in the process of recognizing that victims are not simply passive objects of oppression.”⁵⁷ He also suggests that hearing their outrage helps everyone better appreciate their gift of forgiveness.

This gift of forgiveness may seem like the opposite of justice, but it in fact presupposes justice. Critics of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa suggest that “justice was sacrificed on the altar of forgiveness and reconciliation.”⁵⁸ However, true forgiveness depends upon justice. In every act of forgiveness there is an implicit demand for justice that one has voluntarily relinquished. Without a sense of justice, one could not forgive, as De Gruchy suggests: “Only those who are truly angered by injustice can really begin to practice forgiveness or know what it means.” In this process, the victim is magnanimous and thus is in the position of power for the first time. De Gruchy explains: “In all this, there is a sense in which there is a ‘turning of the tables’ so that the power that once resided in the hands of the perpetrator is now in the hands of the victim. Forgiveness demonstrates that victims are no longer trapped in their ‘victimhood’, but have overcome evil that sought to destroy their humanity and make them victims.”⁵⁹ In this process of reconciliation, though all participate and all participants are integral to the process, it is nonetheless the case that the first shall be last

⁵⁷ De Gruchy, 170.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 147.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 169, 176-77.

and the last, first. According to Milbank, since “forgiveness is only inaugurated by the sovereign victim, this perfection of exchange as fusion is first granted to us in the idiomatic characterizing of victim as sovereign, sovereign as victim.”⁶⁰ Neither does this process fail to convict the guilty. While the victim precisely forfeits the right of conviction, the perpetrator faces real guilt. De Gruchy writes: “A genuine sense of guilt is something far more profound than any judicial declaration of guilt.”⁶¹

Heaven in this vision of things to come would not involve an ontological shift or a change of location like an elevation to a higher realm. Rather purgatory would become heaven when each had suffered with all and each had forgiven all. Heaven is a community that develops through the process of purgatory. All of life is redeemed by first having remembered and suffered through all that stood in need of redemption. Through compassion for one another, all can be both forgiven for their sins and healed of their wounds. When the process is complete, there will be but one body of believers sharing in their love for God and for each other. The love for each other will be as God’s love is now—not based on notions of merit but on the desire for the other to share in God’s love. This desire will be satisfied, and thus all will be joyful on behalf of each other, even as God rejoices over one repentant sinner. There will be nothing to disrupt this joy and unity for the work of memory, forgiveness, and reconciliation will have been completed so that no cause for anguish from the past will arise; and as all identities will rest in God, desires and compassion for one another will be perfected so that no cause of strife can arise out of the future. Perhaps talking in terms of past and future is itself a mistake for while some notion of time must be included in the process of purgatory so

⁶⁰ Milbank, 70.

⁶¹ De Gruchy, 197.

that real change might take place, when that process has been completed, the state of unity with each other and with God need not include time.

This understanding of life after death has numerous and obvious implications for life here and now. The hope for justice and healing in the life to come should motivate Christians to work for justice and healing now. If God has made people for compassion, then people must learn to see each other as fellow children of God rather than rivals for goods. If Jesus Christ is the model for the human life, then Christians must be willing to die for the good of others rather than killing for their own material desires. This eschatology gives hope to the poor and oppressed but also seeks to better their situation now by demanding compassion of the rich and powerful. It does promise them reconciliation in the world to come though it does not claim to understand precisely how or why they will come to forgive their oppressors (except that they will love as God loves and follow Jesus' example). It does not yield a kind of quietism, however, by demanding that the oppressed too quickly forgive their oppressors. It acknowledges that before such forgiveness can take place, a process of public remembering must first lead to real recognition of the violation that has taken place. It recognizes that the oppressed are often silenced, which is itself a form of oppression, and thus it demands that they be heard. The oppressed are not called upon to accept their lot and await heavenly compensation. They are called upon to speak the truth about their suffering and, in turn, to call their oppressors to repentance. They act for their own sake, for the sake of their oppressors, and, what is the same thing, for the sake of God's kingdom. Likewise, the oppressors are called to act now, not simply in order to alleviate the pain of the oppressed but for their own sake, as they cannot develop true identities so long as they are trapped

in consumerist desire. The belief that all of this work will be completed through God's will in God's time gives Christians hope to fight against seemingly impossible odds, but it also gives them a motivation to begin the work now.

Part of this work is of course not just reconciliation between people but between the pieces of fractured selves. As fractured selves, human beings are unable to "identify" completely with themselves or others in this world. Furthermore, they cannot even speak intelligently or intelligibly about their specific identities or the concept of identity generally. Where would one gain the perspective to comment on this? How could one ever know another person well enough to understand what constitutes that other's identity? Where could one stand to gain any leverage over the question of one's own identity? One can only say with much certainty what identity is not. One can recognize that one is not one's own cause and that no attribute or desire is stable or uniquely one's own. One can realize that identity can only be a sense or suspicion in this world, and one may hope that, when time ceases, one may gain the perspective necessary truly to know oneself. Until then, each person is on a winding path through a thick forest and cannot hope to rise above the path to understand its progress or the relation of its beginning to its middle to its end. One may gain clues from one's fellow travelers, but each person who calls one's name addresses someone different. Perhaps when God calls one's name in the life to come, the meaning of that name will become clear, but until then one's name, like one's self, will remain a cipher that is forever on the move, never allowing itself to be scrutinized.

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