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Buying In -- The Secret Dialogue Between What We Buy and Who We Are (Book Review)

Dale Zevenbergen

Dordt College, dale.zevenbergen@dordt.edu

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percent)” (513). The authors find that with substantial consistency, people acknowledge the legitimacy of one another’s beliefs, thereby building bridges of mutual acceptance. As a result, “Interreligious mixing, mingling, and marrying have kept America’s religious melting pot from boiling over” (548).

It is evident that religion has greatly affected politics in our time and doubtless will continue to do so. But the authors cannot say how. The two related issues, abortion and homosexuality, have had polarizing effects both religiously and politically. Yet, both are declining in polarity and each in its own way. There is a growing consensus, including among young people, that an abortion “right” is not absolute and ought not to be broad, that regulation and limits are acceptable, and that abortion should be discouraged but not banned (406–414). Meanwhile, homosexual lifestyles are less and less controversial to the young, and civil unions, even marriages within that group, are increasingly acceptable. If these issues provide declining political traction to either political party in the future, the distinctive partisan impact of the “Religious Right” upon elections is likely to decline.

While it is not the authors’ purpose to give direction to Evangelicals, we can derive a sense in which America’s shifting political tectonics may be a good thing for the Christian message. The liberalizing trend in society toward acceptance of homosexuality will erode its potency as partisan issue. (Some will recall with me when divorce could sink a political candidate.) Legal permission for abortion has narrowed. If bright-line restrictions in such matters are no longer winning issues for Republican partisans, the change will loosen the ties between Evangelicals and the Republican

political party. Meanwhile the contemporary Nones, though unconnected to churches, “do not seem to have discarded all religious beliefs and predilections.” They are not “atheists” or “agnostics.” Only five individuals out of 3108 survey respondents applied those terms to themselves. To the contrary, 47 percent of the Nones affirmed that they were “absolutely sure of God’s existence” (104). They are “spiritual, not religious.... They reject conventional religious affiliations, while not entirely giving up of their religious feelings” (126). These observations testify about a field white for harvest. Turned off by the political dogmatism of the Christian Right, as the issues that mobilize that Right fade, the message of God’s love for all sinners will engage many of the Nones. The Evangelical church has a message about forgiveness and salvation in Christ. The inclusiveness of that message has been obscured by conspicuous political voices that benefitted from agitating and mobilizing the “Christian Right.”

Putnam and Campbell have not given us a how-to book for Christian Evangelicals to carry out the Great Commission. It is a cool, dispassionate, and broadly gauged analysis about the intersection of political and religious attitudes and practices in contemporary American life. However, it does uncover how diligently practicing Christians can become cats’ paws for hard-eyed political practitioners keen to sloganeer their way into political office opportunities. Nevertheless, the high task of kingdom building continues to challenge our Reformed community to articulate and promote God-given norms for the America of our day. Certainly the political arena offers a worthy calling for our best talents and creativity.

Walker, Rob. *Buying In— The Secret Dialogue Between What We Buy and Who We Are*. New York: Random House, 2008. 261 pages. ISBN: 978-1-4000-6391-8. Reviewed by Dale Zevenbergen, Instructor of Business Administration and Special Gifts Officer at Dordt College.

Why do we buy what we buy? Why are branding and advertising efforts so effective when most of us say we’re not affected by them? Are consumers today really in control as is commonly bemoaned by marketing experts? The answers to these questions (and many more) are addressed in *Buying In*. Rob Walker has been observing American consumer culture for years and writing about it in columns in *Slate*, *Fortune*, *GQ*, and others. He currently writes a column for the *New York Times Magazine* called “Consumed.” Rob’s column and his websites [www.](http://www.marketing.com)

marketing.com and www.robwalker.net, as well as *Buying In*, have been very helpful resources for me as I explore the world of marketing and advertising with students here at Dordt College.

The audience for Walker’s column, blogs, and book appear to be anyone interested in modern marketing and consumer behavior—from marketing professionals and entrepreneurs to students and teachers of marketing, and really to anyone interested in ethical issues surrounding marketing and consumption. Introducing

the term “marketing,” Walker claims that marketing has become murky and the line between what can be and what cannot be marketing has become blurry. The book centers on the theme that not only are consumers impacted by marketing and branding efforts, but they actually participate in them. Walker shows that there is a “dialogue” between products and consumers, contrary to the idea of a unilateral message that is thrown from marketer to consumer:

I use the word dialogue because what I’m thinking about is not a one-way process. It’s not simply about the intrinsic elements of the product. It’s not just about what a product is made of or what it’s supposed to do. Nor is it just about a brand image that is invented by experts and foisted on the masses, who swallow it whole. Any product or brand that catches on in the marketplace does so because of us: because enough of us decided that it had value or meaning and chose to participate. Because of the dialogue between consumer and consumed. (xii)

Marketing experts today proclaim that advertising is dead and that the consumer is in control. Since the availability of information is so great and technology is so useful in avoiding promotional efforts, they say, consumers are immune to promotional and branding messages. While I agree that information availability has greatly empowered the consumer, and advertising messages are easily identifiable and avoidable with technological advances (beginning with the remote control), it seems questionable that “immunity” is an accurate way to describe the modern consumer’s relationship with advertising. Even though much of the field of marketing subscribes to this “the consumer is in control” mantra, Walker’s work helps dispel this notion:

So what would constitute proof that the consumer is “boss” and “in control” in some way that’s new and unprecedented? Lower credit card balances? A conspicuous absence of logoed apparel on city streets and in malls? A disappearance of consumer fads, trends, and crazes? A decreasing amount of advertising? Shrinking landfills? Bigger and more effective boycotts of unhealthy and ethically suspect products? Increased savings rates? Maybe—but of course none of this is happening. (xvi)

Apparently, advertising still works.

Walker also delves into psychology and cultural-

anthropology topics in relation to consumer buying behavior. He explores the human tendency to rationalize behavior and to avoid cognitive dissonance. He also provides a thorough discussion of our tendency to want to be seen as individuals yet belong to a bigger cause, to feel like a part of something bigger than ourselves, creating a tension Walker calls the “Desire Code” (22). Such forces influence buying.

Walker works through dozens of examples and stories of companies that are creatively involving consumers in marketing efforts. His effort in identifying and interviewing the people involved in these fascinating stories is quite impressive, and his research is thorough. He chronicles the transition in advertising from thirty-second messages blasted out on three major networks to the word-of-mouth and social-media dynamics alive today. Several ideas from *Buying In* have been beneficial to me in teaching marketing. One is the idea of the “Pretty Good” problem, in which today’s manufacturing technologies have led to the situation where most products are pretty good. The functionality, consistent quality, and features of most modern products generally meet consumer expectations. As a result, organizations have great difficulty truly differentiating their product from all the others like it that are also pretty good and therefore have to attach branding ideas and feelings to their product in order to make it appear special to the consumer (8ff). He also thoroughly explains the dynamics of modern branding. Conventional marketing wisdom says that marketers at big companies decide what a brand image will be and then simply tell us as consumers what it is and how we should think and feel about it. This traditional concept totally misses the project-ability of brands, meaning how consumers shape and build brand images themselves—quite willingly actually. A great example in the book relates to the Hello Kitty character, a product of the Japanese firm Sanrio. I had not noticed it before, but the Hello Kitty character has no mouth. The company did this on purpose so that consumers would project their own meaning and feelings onto the character, making it that much more personal (15ff). “Hello Kitty’s blank, cryptic simplicity is among her great strengths, standing for nothing, she is waiting to be interpreted, and this is precisely how an ambiguous—and let’s be frank: meaningless—symbol comes to stand for nostalgia to one person, fashionability to another, camp to a third, vague subversiveness to a fourth” (17).

After weaving the book with example after example,

Walker concludes with a bit of a challenge to us as consumers. He discusses consumerism and materialism and challenges readers to be aware of these and to think through their own buying behavior. We do have power as consumers—power to buy something, and not to buy something. “We vote with our dollars” I tell my students, meaning that when we buy something, we are effectively voting for that company, and when we simply choose not to make that purchase, we also make our vote known. Walker, whom I would call a critic of the commercial persuasion industry, summarizes his challenge:

Maybe this is where “consumer control” begins. If we tell ourselves we are “immune” to marketing and brands simply by virtue of living in the clicky world of the twenty-first century, it’s that much easier to slip into rational thinking as we confront the increasingly murky line between commercial persuasion and everyday life. But the significance of the material things and symbols that mean the most has always flowed from us to the object, not the other way around. If we know that meaning and value are things we give symbols, not things we get from them, the dynamic changes—even in the distracting context of consumer culture. (260)

As I mentioned, I found *Buying In* to be a valuable resource in my marketing classes, and I highly recommend it. The fascinating examples through which he guides us help support the theme of the book, which challenges contemporary marketing wisdom that consumers are in control and immune to commercial persuasion, proving that consumers are actually quite interested and involved in brand messages, often choosing to participate in them! One notion that struck me as I read the book is how people so desire to find their identity in something—a product, a brand, a team, a television show, a cause, a feeling, a relationship, or many other parts of God’s complex creation, instead of simply finding their identity in the Creator and how He sees us through the death and resurrection of his Son. This book affirms for me once again the need for Reformed Christians to be passionate about joining God in His work of bringing Shalom to all areas of life, including business, marketing, advertising—and “marketing.” Many of our students will have the opportunity to bring transformation to these fields in their future work opportunities, but we all as consumers have the opportunity to be thoughtful about how we make purchase decisions and how we participate in our consumption-oriented culture.