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12-1-2015

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Recommended Citation

Schaap, Howard, "Endless Cycle of Want" (2015). *Faculty Work: Comprehensive List*. Paper 390.
http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work/390

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Endless Cycle of Want

Abstract

"Are any of our wants 'normal' and inherently human, or are they all created in us by the world of advertising and its wizard(s) behind the curtain(s)?"

Posting about the cycle of want and consumption from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/the-endless-cycle-of-want/>

Keywords

In All Things, Christmas, consumerism, materialism, advertising

Disciplines

Christianity

Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

The Endless Cycle of Want

 [all in allthings.org/the-endless-cycle-of-want/](http://allthings.org/the-endless-cycle-of-want/)

Howard Schaap

There you are, silent as a church before the TV while some wonderfully imaginative piece of advertising runs its thirty-second course; then, afterward, the room has changed, and something has been created that wasn't there before: you look over at your six-year-old who says, "I want that."

The freakiest thing to me about the endless cycle of want, symbolized by the spell commercials cast over children, is how deeply brave-new-world it all might be. Are any of our wants "normal" and inherently human, or are they all created in us by the world of advertising and its wizard(s) behind the curtain(s)?

Part of me wants to argue that it's perfectly okay that when we see something good we want it. We are, after all, physical creatures, and the material things we human beings dream up are really marvels, even much of the junk. Angels might be dying to look into wonders like the Rubik's Cube, for instance.

More to the point, I'm reminded of a scene in the book *Life of Pi*. After being stranded on a lifeboat with a tiger in the Pacific Ocean for many days, Pi comes upon packaged survival food and water in the boat's locker and exclaims, "Oh, the delight of the manufactured good, the man-made device, the created thing!" Of course, it's by *absence* that Pi comes to the real wonder of the things he finds — the tins of food, bottles of water, and simplest of tools. When Pi returns to civilization and turns on a tap, he weeps for the extravagance. It's in lacking these things that their goodness becomes real.

Pi's experiences may be an important antidote to the cycle of want. The wilderness excursion or the developing-world mission trip teach us something. They open our eyes to what we have, to what we need — and what we don't.

Then again, the cynic in me argues that even these "off the grid" experiences are often deeply affected by the cycle of want. A trip to the Boundary Waters or the Congo can be an excuse to get outfitted with luggage and gadgets and gear. Combine these experiences with the iPhone pictures we take along the way, and they can be just another type of trophy we hang on the wall.

William Cavanaugh argues in *Being Consumed* that our relationship to things is not really materialism but consumerism. We're not really attached to our things — which is materialism — but *detached* from them — which is consumerism: our Christmas presents need to quickly find their way to the landfill so that we can Black Friday shop again next year. Therefore, says Cavanaugh, we live "above" the things we buy, ultimately detached not only from the things themselves but also from the production process that makes those things and especially from the people who might depend on that process for a just livelihood.

A very interesting part of this detachment is the spiritual piece represented, ironically enough, by branding. Branding, as you'll recall, is the practice of searing a mark into the flesh of cattle to signify who those cattle belong to. Fortunately, in contemporary branding there is no searing into flesh; rather, symbols and the transcendent ideals associated with those symbols get seared into our psyches, signifying. . . who those psyches belong to. A swoosh (What even is a swoosh? The term is meaningless apart from the company). A U and an A. And, evocatively, an apple with a bite taken out of it.

In a culture of consumerism it's interesting to me that we find materialists — hoarders — so repulsive. I'm thinking about the show *Hoarders*, one of those reality TV car-wrecks you can't turn away from. Seems to

me we might equally film a show about chuckers, watch in horror as “normal” households throw out perfectly useful things, redecorate perfectly lovely houses, and fill up landfills.

For a world of consumers, the prophetic prayer of our time may be the confession that we’ve used people and loved things.

Of course, there are plenty of resources at our disposal for breaking free from the endless cycle of want. It’s a huge theme of literature. From Charles Dickens to Don DeLillo, literature will show you the underbelly of the endless cycle of want. This morning I can’t get Ben Franklin’s profound little nut out of my head: “waste not, want not.” Given, I think Franklin meant “want” a little differently than we do, more akin to “be in want” or in need. Still, I wonder if more care of what we do have would limit the power of “want.”

For children, J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* is hard to beat, the story of a smug little borderline-hoarder hobbit who has himself opened to the wider world and friendship and is thereby saved from greed. In many ways, Tolkien manages to affirm the good things of the world while clearly outlining the misuse of those things for power.

Practically for this Christmas shopping season, the fair trade movement has taught us much about buying differently — about how we *can* actually look down the line of production and consider the people affected along the way by our purchases. Ten Thousand Villages, for example, is a company that attempts to bridge the developing and developed worlds with handicrafts made at the local level.

As is so often the case, scripture gives the best insight into both the cycle of want and freedom from that cycle. Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth. You cannot serve two masters. I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.

However, the cycle of want and consumption takes its cues from appetite, from the cycle of hunger and food, an area where scripture also speaks profoundly. “Man shall not live by bread alone,” Christ rebuffs Satan, “but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.” Then, later, Christ says he is the bread of life. In communion and Eucharist, these two breads — the bread we need for body and the one we need for spirit — become one.

In this season of advent that overlaps so disturbingly and wonderfully with the season of consumption, this is also what the manger offers us: peace on earth and a vision of heaven; the consecration of gifts and the ultimate and lasting one.