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Consumerism as a moral attitude

Defining consumerism through the works of Pope Francis, Cornel West, and William T. Cavanaugh

Fredrik Portin 

In this theoretical and explorative essay, from an analysis of Pope Francis', Cornel West's, and William T. Cavanaugh's works, it is argued that it is possible to construe a specific understanding of the concept of consumerism within the political theological discourse. From the analysis, consumerism is imagined as a fundamental attitude of remaining morally indifferent towards suffering. Accordingly, the proposed definition for consumerism is understood as the act of trivializing the good and remaining indifferent towards suffering. Furthermore, the article highlights how this definition of consumerism challenges the idea of consumerism as an "ersatz" religion, which is an understanding of consumerism that is often used within a Christian theological context.

Consumerism is considered a defining feature of contemporary life. However, there does not exist any consensus over how the term should be defined. Rather, different definitions are used depending on the context where it is used. Among theologians, however, consumerism is often understood as something that replaces religion in the life of the individual.

Within a Christian theological context, consumerism is often, functionally speaking, imagined as a form of "ersatz" religion. Those theologians that make such an assertion furthermore argue that the Christian tradition offers a superior path towards the construction of meaning than consumerism.¹ Therefore, some lament that people have fallen from their Christian heritage and replaced it with the consumption of goods – that they are "shopping for meaningful lives", as Bruce P. Rittenhouse put it.² Consumerism is thus understood as a replacement for religious traditions – the *weltanschauung* in a post-Christian context.³

Such an understanding is also evident among some social scientists,⁴ for whom consumerism is often understood as an, as Laura M Hartman argues, “identity-forming, meaning-making activity that rivals religious practice in its importance for humans’ sense of self and community”.⁵ Thus understood, consumerism becomes something more than the satisfaction of individual materialistic needs. Rather, it entails a formative practice that shapes the individual’s orientation in life and his or her fundamental outlook in life.⁶ Thus, in a “society of consumers”, as Zygmunt Bauman described it,⁷ even an individual’s religious aspirations are formed according to his or her desire to consume.⁸ Similarly, Benjamin R. Barber argues that the market has, through branding, created lifestyles that revolve around the brands you associate yourself with. These “branded lifestyles” accordingly function as “substitute identities” that replace traditional ethnic and cultural features in mainly Western societies. Brands have therefore also replaced religion as a primary path towards forming one’s identity.⁹

Although understanding consumerism as a substitute for religion is widespread, I will argue that this way of understanding consumerism compromises theologians’ critical engagement with consumer society, as it misunderstands the way that consumerism orients a person’s desires.

In this theoretical and explorative essay, I will develop a definition of consumerism by studying a specific application of the term that is discernible within the contemporary political theological discourse.¹⁰ Specifically, I will explore how Pope Francis, Cornel West, and William T. Cavanaugh make use of the concept of consumerism in their works.¹¹ Although their contexts are different and they address different theological and societal concerns, they have all developed political-theological perspectives and positions that make similar use of the concept of consumerism. It is, however, important to note that the focus for this essay is not to offer a complete account of Francis’, West’s and Cavanaugh’s theology and context (although it will be briefly highlighted). Instead, the purpose of analyzing their works on consumerism is to derive an original definition of consumerism, understood as a specific moral attitude.

In order to develop this definition, I will first highlight some initial perspectives with the works by Francis. Mainly, I will analyze how consumerism in his thinking is construed as a moral attitude that trivializes suffering. Second, I will derive additional theoretical perspectives from West’s works on consumerism, who, similarly to Francis, argues that consumerism is a form of moral deficiency. Furthermore, from his thinking, I highlight that consumerism is, as the “ersatz religion”-understanding of

consumerism maintains, a form of spirituality, but that it is nihilistic in essence. Building on Francis and West, I then analyse the works on consumerism by Cavanaugh, who offers a more in depth systematic theological analysis on consumerism. He argues that consumerism as a practice has no goal – no *telos*. As such, it is not able to offer the consumerist a path to anything ultimate. Finally, I will define consumerism by combining the findings from the analysis of Francis', West's and Cavanaugh's works.

As will become evident throughout this essay, it can be argued that consumerism as a moral attitude is interrelated to the understanding of consumerism as an ersatz religion. Francis, West and Cavanaugh, too, imply this connection, as they all, like many other political theologians since especially the 1990s, have criticized the growing influence of “post-modern individualism” that allegedly relativizes the Christian tradition and invalidates the truth claims of the Church.¹² However, although there are some similarities, I will argue that consumerism as a moral attitude conflicts with the understanding of consumerism as an ersatz religion, as it obstructs any endeavour towards anything ultimate. Therefore, I will not only define consumerism as a moral attitude in this essay. It will also offer theoretical perspectives that can advance the understanding of consumerism within both the social sciences and theological discourse.

Pope Francis: consumerism as an attitude that trivializes suffering

Since he was elected as supreme pontiff in 2013, Pope Francis has continually engaged himself in pressing political issues. One is climate change, which undoubtedly constitutes one of the most significant challenges of our time. The rising temperatures have the potential of forcing people into mass migration, starvation, and potentially even wars. Some areas will be more affected than others, but it is becoming more apparent that this impending ecological disaster will, over time, affect all of humanity. Or as Naomi Klein puts it, climate change is “a civilizational wake-up call” whose message “[is] spoke in the language of fires, floods, droughts, and extinctions”.¹³

In light of the challenges climate change has given rise to, Francis presents an eco-theology in his papal encyclical *Laudato Si'* (2015). In the encyclical, Francis argues that climate change is mainly the result of the production of goods and their consumption, in that humans produce and consume more and more goods that contribute to the spread of

greenhouse gases. However, he also suggests that consumption exacerbates climate change by fostering a specific attitude towards everything and everyone – consumerism.

Francis' premise in the encyclical is that the Western lifestyle is characterized by a form of "practical relativism". According to him, Western societies encourage individuals to think and behave as if they have the sovereign right to control their own destinies and pursue their own desires. Thus, anything that does not conform to the individual's personal preferences is relativized: "When human beings place themselves at the centre, they give absolute priority to immediate convenience, and all else becomes relative".¹⁴

Francis emphasizes that such relativism has dire moral consequences, as it, according to him, alienates the individual from those conceptions of the good that can guide his or her actions virtuously. Individual aspiration is accordingly given priority over the pursuit of the common good, and everything and everyone thus becomes subordinate to the individual's desires.¹⁵ One regrettable consequence is that the individual becomes detached from the issue of climate change, as he or she will not necessarily see any intrinsic value in working to relieve nature's "suffering": "Men and women of our postmodern world run the risk of rampant individualism, and many problems of society are connected with today's self-centred culture of instant gratification".¹⁶

From the perspective of this practical relativism, it is understandable if the individual is not willing to acknowledge that he or she has any responsibility for nature's wellbeing, as such an acknowledgement would challenge the pursuit of satisfying individual interests. Interestingly, according to Francis's reasoning, the same point also becomes relevant concerning other forms of suffering.

Francis argues that the suffering of the poor is linked to nature's suffering, and that a solution to the climate crisis will involve a reassessment of the situation of the poor: "[We] have to realize that a true ecological approach *always* becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*".¹⁷ He stresses that it is primarily the poor who are forced to suffer because of climate change (and other natural disasters) in the form of drought, extreme weather conditions, floods, pollution of drinking water, and so forth. However, even though the poor are the ones that are the most affected by climate change, the attempts to minimize its consequences have rarely benefitted them:¹⁸ "Frequently, we find beautiful and carefully manicured green spaces in so-called 'safer' areas of cities, but not in the more hidden areas where the

disposable of society live".¹⁹ The height of contempt for the poor, according to Francis, is when the well-to-do argue that the poor are the problem in dealing with climate change – when they, for example, argue that the most significant challenge for mitigating climate change is uncontrolled population growth.²⁰

The poor are thus not only excluded from benefitting from the solutions to combat climate change. They are also blamed for the rising temperatures. Such an attitude can only emerge, according to Francis' thinking, if the concerns of the poor can be trivialized. It is precisely in describing this attitude – an attitude that trivializes suffering – that Francis develops the concept of consumerism.

In the works of Francis, consumerism is conceptually understood as an attitude that allows the individual to avoid moral commitment – that allows the individual to "take advantage of another, to treat others as mere objects".²¹ Francis also argues that the consumerist is someone who, generally speaking, expresses a form of detachment towards the concerns of the world, especially as it pertains to suffering: "[If] we no longer speak the language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship with the world, our attitude will be that of masters, consumers, ruthless exploiters, unable to set limits on their immediate needs".²² As he emphasizes in the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), consumerism is consequently "the desolation and anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart, the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures, and a blunted conscience".²³

Thus, consumerism expresses an attitude in mainly western societies, where the individual displays an unwillingness to engage in the concerns of those who suffer: "This is the way human beings contrive to feed their self-destructive vices: trying not to see [the ones that suffer], trying not to acknowledge them, delaying the important decisions and pretending that nothing will happen".²⁴ This attitude is tempting, as it, according to Francis, does not require the individual to make any changes to his or her way of life. Instead he or she can continue to pursue the objects of his or her desires freely, while also denying having any part in solving the challenge of climate change or the plight of the poor: "[You can] deny doing anything wrong because distractions constantly dull our consciousness of just how limited and finite our world really is".²⁵

Consequently, in Francis' works, consumerism does not only describe the desire to consume. Consumerism is also an expression of a fundamental attitude that makes it possible to trivialize suffering. Accordingly, Francis argues that consumerism is a form of moral deficiency. This point is further emphasized by Francis when he argues that the

consumerist tends to avoid confronting suffering, as such a confrontation would make moral demands on his or her life. For according to Francis' reasoning, you cannot continue to consume freely if the suffering of the world or the poor demand that you act:

The culture of comfort ... makes us insensitive to the cries of other people, makes us live in soap bubbles which, however lovely, are insubstantial; they offer a fleeting and empty illusion which results in indifference to others; indeed, it even leads to the globalization of indifference.²⁶

Cornel West makes similar claims about consumerism as Francis, arguing that it enables the well-to-do to avoid their obligations towards those who suffer. However, unlike Francis, he also describes consumerism as the only feasible attitude that a suffering people can have, thus highlighting how consumerism also permeates the attitudes of the ones that suffer. West will furthermore provide some conceptual foundations for challenging the understanding of consumerism as a religion, by arguing that consumerism is nihilistic in essence.

Cornel West: consumerism as a nihilistic defeat of utopian energies

Although being a well-renowned professor within philosophy and African-American studies, Cornel West is best known for being an often controversial public intellectual in the United States of America. His intellectual and cultural roots are in Martin Luther King Jr's social movement and the African-American Christian community, and his academic deeds can primarily be understood as an attempt to give voice to and highlight the suffering that segregation policies in America have caused, especially as it pertains to the African-American community. Therefore, a large part of his political works is expressed as critical engagement, often highlighting how politicians and the economic elite in America contribute to suffering.²⁷

A recurring topic in West's works is the belief that America needs public "prophets" that actively challenge greed, hatred, and fear.²⁸ A source of inspiration for his thinking on prophecy derives from a reading of the Old Testament. He argues that central in the thinking of, among others, Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, Jeremiah, and Habakkuk is that they made justice and compassion the critical feature of the Jewish

tradition. When they prophesized, they accordingly challenged those worldly powers that wanted to enslave and marginalize an already suffering people. Therefore, their prophetic voices were an “indictment of those who worship the idol of human power”.²⁹ From that reading, West argues that the purpose of prophecy is to challenge structural-hierarchical conditions that maintain injustice so that those who hear the prophets can attain the courage to challenge these conditions. For this reason, West believes that democratic societies have a valuable lesson to learn from the Jewish prophetic tradition, as it makes suffering and its mitigation vital in vibrant and just democracies.³⁰

West believes that America is in desperate need of prophetic leaders, as American culture, according to him, has been fully allocated to the market. West argues that a dominant feature in American history is the prioritizing of big business interests. Instead of developing social programs that reduce poverty, American politicians and the general public have adapted the American society – its economy, politics and culture – in order to allow for higher profits for large corporations.³¹ Due to this prioritizing, the act of consumption has been encouraged, thus becoming an essential cultural feature in America. American culture, accordingly, is a culture of consumption, which “promotes addiction to stimulation. A culture obsessed with bodily stimulation. A culture obsessed with consuming as the only way of preserving some vitality of a self”.³²

The consequence of a culture of consumption is the development of what West describes as “market morality”. While West emphasizes that the market can play an essential role in how a society organizes its financial interests, it risks corrupting society if it is allowed to enter every sphere of society. When market logic thus influences morality, “money-making, buying and selling, or hedonistic self-indulgence [will be] at the centre of one’s behaviour”.³³ Consequently, market morality entails that the individual’s preferences and needs become the crucial standard for individual moral commitment.

This development is problematic for two reasons. First, market morality decreases prophetic commitment to those who suffer, as the potential prophets’ satisfaction, not those who suffer, become a priority. Second, market morality increases the decay of the cultural and traditional institutions that, instead of market morality, prioritize non-market virtues like love and justice.³⁴ The reasons why these institutions are decaying are several, but one reason is that, instead of challenging market morality, they have embraced it.

This trend is, according to West, evident within most churches in America. Although the prophetic tradition has been advanced in

America by the Christian tradition,³⁵ many of the churches in America have lost their prophetic wakefulness and are therefore not able to speak truth to power. Instead, Christians are allowed and even encouraged to live comfortable middle-class lives that do not require anything from them except an internalized and spiritualized relationship with God. Religion thus becomes “but one more stimulant in a culture addicted to stimulation”.³⁶ Instead of being a prophetic voice in society, many churches consequently embrace market morality and use it for their purposes. There occurs, to use a phrase popularized by the theologian John Drane, a “McDonaldization of the Church”.³⁷ West consequently argues: “The funky gospel of Jesus can become so Americanized that it is reduced to marketplace spirituality, prosperity gospel, and Chamber of Commerce religion”.³⁸

According to West, this is a hard blow to the work of justice, as people lose venues where they can learn to embrace those nonmarket virtues that enable resistance to suffering. Above all, young people who struggle in a “culturally, economically and socially hostile environment” lose arenas for hope that enable them to “navigate through the terrors and traumas of death and disease and despair and dread and disappointment”.³⁹ The absence of hope, West argues, distinguishes many African-American communities in America, as African-Americans often experience a lack of opportunity for upward mobility. Without hope for the future, these people may, therefore, fall victim to nihilism – a “spiritual impoverishment” that gains its potency from the assumption that one’s current suffering will never be eased.⁴⁰ West further explains that “[the] frightening result [of nihilism] is a numbing detachment from others and a self-destructive disposition toward the world. Life without meaning, hope, and love breeds a cold-hearted, mean-spirited outlook that destroys both the individual and others”.⁴¹

In order to revitalize these arenas for hope, West argues that the middle-class needs to engage in their renewal. Historically, the middle-class – in the beginning mainly consisting of small-business owners, teachers, ministers, doctors, and lawyers – has been essential in the African-American struggle, as they used their resources, capacities and organizational skills to create and maintain human rights groups, universities, news outlets, and religious institutions.⁴² However, West argues that the contemporary African-American middle class has been seduced by consumerism.

West argues that the African-American community is imagined through the experience of suffering – historically through slavery and Jim Crow policies, and currently through unemployment, police

brutality, and drug abuse. However, the African-American middle class is trying to distance itself from this experience through consumerism: "The black middle class in the United States has become drunk with the wine of the world".⁴³ Simply put, instead of living their lives in solidarity with those who suffer, they go shopping. According to West, consumerism thus passivizes the well-to-do. It is a way of distracting yourself from all that suffering – a means of staying politically unengaged. As West points out, "all that materialism ... is nothing but the paraphernalia of suffering, an attempt to distance yourself from the suffering".⁴⁴

Furthermore, in a situation where there are no institutions for hope and where the well-to-do are distancing themselves from one's concerns, West reasons that there is often no other refuge for those who suffer than consumerism. Consumerism acts as a "market-driven [cycle] of therapeutic release",⁴⁵ thus giving the individual a temporary break from his or her misery. Among other things, that is a reason why those suffering from nihilism often use drugs, as they offer those who suffer an intense form of pleasure. Drugs, accordingly, become the most concrete expression of a culture obsessed with pleasure.⁴⁶ The will to consume and thus to satisfy individual before communal needs, therefore exacerbate nihilism by undermining community, links to history and tradition, and relationships.⁴⁷

Accordingly, at the same time as the market passivizes those institutions and persons that could resist and challenge market morality, it also offers a solution to hopelessness – consumerism. West summarizes:

This cultural consumption, this hedonism and consumerism, this narcissism and privatism, concerned only about one's private project, has thoroughly shaped our young people ... And what it has produced is the decomposition of black civil society – the shattered families and the shattered neighbourhoods.⁴⁸

What West accordingly highlights is how consumerism is not only something that affects the well-to-do. Instead, it is an attitude that affects every segment of society, even those who need it to be challenged the most.⁴⁹

As both those who suffer, the well-to-do, and institutions are passivized by consumerism, new prophetic voices will need to emerge that challenge the hegemonic position of the consumer market in American culture. This, on the other hand, will be challenging. In order for prophets to be successful, they, like Martin Luther King Jr., need support from social movements and institution. However, as the culture of

consumption has caused a decline in the establishment and maintenance of prophetic social movements and institutions, there are fewer such movements and institutions left. For that reason, prophetic leaders, if they appear, will often be severely criticized and ostracized, as few are left that are willing to defend them. However, as West maintains, prophetic speech is not characterized by a comfortable existence in which one can remain unengaged in the presence of suffering. Instead, it is characterized by actively seeking to confront people and structures that enable suffering. It is also characterized by the willingness to sacrifice one's entire life, especially the comfortable existence that one has acquired by obtaining a certain level of prosperity.⁵⁰

Thus, in West's works, just like in Francis' works, consumerism expresses an emphasis on one's personal needs before the suffering of others. Consumerism makes the individual turn his or her eyes away from suffering and shun his or her prophetic responsibility. Consumerism is, therefore, according to West's thinking, a fundamental expression of the lack of commitment to a new vision of a just society. He writes:

[The] culture of consumption [is] the eclipse of utopian energies in the West; that is, the eclipse of the very conditions for the possibility of prophetic vision and progressive practice, and specifically the collapse of morality and lack of concern for ethical values.⁵¹

The consumerist attitude is consequently not only a detriment to the plight of those who suffer. It is also a path to moral bankruptcy:

This disgraceful numbing of the senses, dulling of the mind, and confining of life to an eternal present – with a lack of connection to the past and no vision for a different future – is an insidious form of soul murder.⁵²

Interestingly, by understanding the consumerist attitude as a form of "soul murder", West implies that consumerism concerns spirituality. West's thinking can accordingly serve as an argument for understanding consumerism as a religion. However, it is also important to highlight that consumerism does not offer the soul any fulfilment, according to West. Consumerism is instead a way of "murdering" the soul by numbing the senses, dulling the mind, and confining life to an eternal present. Therefore, West can argue that the Church has embraced consumerism, while he simultaneously understands the religion of the Church as Christian. Accordingly, what has changed is not the religion of the Church, but

the moral commitment towards those who suffer. Thus, as consumerism cannot offer the soul any nourishment, only murder it, consumerism is, functionally speaking, *nihilistic* in essence.

As I will show, William T. Cavanaugh also argues that consumerism is a form of spirituality. However, Cavanaugh's reasoning offers a more sophisticated theoretical perspective on consumerism than Francis and West. By examining Cavanaugh's thinking, the implicit understanding of consumerism in Francis' and West's works is accordingly developed further. Furthermore, Cavanaugh's theoretical approach also offers the clearest basis for criticizing the understanding of consumerism as a religion.

*William T. Cavanaugh: consumerism as a non-teleological
practice*

In much of his political-theological thinking, William T. Cavanaugh critically analyzes the more or less unchallenged position liberalism as a political philosophy enjoys in Western societies. One area of contention in his critique of liberalism is that it, according to him, assists in the establishment of the consumer market. This is problematic, as it, among other things, creates conditions of production that are incompatible with Christian conceptions of the good. However, he is also critical of the consumer market because it, according to him, fosters a consumerist attitude, according to which objects of consumption cease to have any value outside the act of consuming them.⁵³

Liberalism can be understood in many different ways depending on which context is discussed. However, as many political theorists have argued, a fundamental principle within liberalism is that individuals should be free to realize their desires.⁵⁴ Individual consumption is consequently often understood to be compatible with such an endeavour, since it is by consuming things, experiences, information, and so forth that individual desires are said to be satisfied. However, this liberally sanctioned consumption has, according to Cavanaugh's reasoning, led to a notion of freedom that lacks any comprehensive conception of the good. Similarly to pope Francis' idea of practical relativism within Western societies, Cavanaugh argues that there is no agreed-upon common goal – no conception of the good – that the individual is expected to pursue. Instead, the individual is tasked with defining the good for him- or herself: "There is no common *telos* or 'sacred canopy' above the diversity of desires, only an 'empty shrine' or 'wasteland'

where common goals used to stand".⁵⁵ Furthermore, as a consequence of such a concept of freedom, there is, according to Cavanaugh, an ethical requirement in liberal societies to allow the individual to realize his or her desires.⁵⁶

Referencing Augustine, Cavanaugh argues that the lack of a shared conception of the good is in direct conflict with a Christian conception of freedom: "freedom is not simply a negative freedom *from*, but a freedom *for*, a capacity to achieve certain worthwhile goals".⁵⁷ Striving to achieve such worthwhile goals was, according to Augustine, directly linked to human desires. However, because of sin, humanity's desire was directed away from God, who for Augustine represented the ultimate expression of the good.⁵⁸ For that reason, Cavanaugh explains, Augustine highlighted the need for Christian communities, as they directed humanity's desires correctly by fostering the proper virtues.⁵⁹ Accordingly, consumerism becomes an essential subject for theology, as it is a fundamental way in which people learn to orient themselves in and understand the world – a way of directing one's desires:⁶⁰ "For many people, consumerism is a type of spirituality, even if they do not recognize it as such". The reason it is a kind of spirituality is that consumerism is "a way of pursuing meaning and identity, a way of connecting with other people".⁶¹

If consumerism is a form of spirituality, as Cavanaugh argues, could it then be understood as a religion?

How religion should be defined is an even more contentious question than how to define consumerism. However, in light of the perspectives highlighted in this essay, I would argue that religion in its most basic expression could be understood as a form of meaning-making,⁶² and therefore is centred on "the organization of life around the depth dimensions of experience".⁶³

As a form of meaning-making, religion serves the person in pursuing that which he or she perceives as *ultimate*. Accordingly, the minimalist definition that I propose is compatible with the definition of religion offered by Paul Tillich, who argued that religion is "the state of being grasped by an *ultimate concern*, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary, and a concern that in itself provides the answer to the question of the *meaning* of our existence".⁶⁴ Although the ultimate concern of the individual often pertains to the belief in a deity, mainly God, Tillich argues that religion, understood as a concern with the ultimate, is also evident among "non-theistic religions" (i.e. Buddhism) and "secular quasi-religions" (i.e. civil religion). For that reason, it is

reasonable to understand consumerism a form of spirituality, as Cavanaugh maintains, or as a quasi-religion, according to Tillich's reasoning.

This minimal definition of religion is certainly not unproblematic. It does, on the other hand, conform to the understanding of religion that is generally assumed when discussing consumerism as an ersatz religion, as I described above. If religion concerns the ultimate and accordingly is a form of meaning-making, and if consumerism is a way of pursuing meaning, then consumerism can consequently be understood as a religion. Accordingly, from a theological perspective, consumerism can be idolatrous, in that it directs the person away from God and replaces the person's Christian belief and life with the consumption of goods, thus functioning as an ersatz religion. However, according to the logic of consumerism, there is never any meaning to be had through consumerism.

According to Cavanaugh's reasoning, consumerism is unique in how it as a practice directs a person's desire. Unlike other religions, ideologies, and philosophies that direct his or her desire towards an ultimate concern – a *telos* – consumerism challenges the teleological nature of human desire. According to the logic of consumerism, humanity's desire is no longer directed towards *anything* ultimate, only nothingness:

[It] is a matter of wanting without any idea why we want what we want. To desire with no good other than desire itself is to desire arbitrarily. To desire with no *telos*, no connection to the objective end of desire, is to desire nothing and to become nothing.⁶⁵

Cavanaugh's understanding of consumerism challenges the notion of consumerism as an ersatz religion by making the argument that it challenges the very pursuit of the ultimate – it does not offer any goals beyond the immediate consumption of goods. Accordingly, all the conceptions of the good that is created through consumerism are volatile and have no lasting value. Instead of a person actively developing such virtues that direct him or her towards a *telos*, the consumer is characterized by a restlessness in attaining the goods of his or her desire. For as soon as the individual with a consumerist attitude has consumed anything, his or her desire has already been directed towards the next desirable object. Hence, goods are no longer to be used, only to be consumed. Consumerism, therefore, also entails that the individual maintains a certain distance to the objects he or she desires, because their function is not to last, only to be discarded.⁶⁶ For a consumerist, desire is therefore

always *in via*, as he or she is never able or willing to attach him- or herself to anything ultimate.⁶⁷ Cavanaugh writes:

Detachment, not attachment, characterizes a consumer economy; consumers must continually be dissatisfied with their possessions so that the wheels of production continue to move. It is not buying, however, but shopping that captures the heart of consumerism. Dissatisfaction and satisfaction cease to be opposites because pleasure is not in the object but in desire itself.⁶⁸

According to the logic of consumerism, whenever you consume material goods, your desire is immediately directed towards the next desirable object. The good is thus always trivialized – the ultimate is always kept at an arm’s length. Thus, according to the reasoning advanced in this article, consumerism can at best be understood as an “implicit religion”, to use the concept developed by the sociologist Edward Bailey.⁶⁹ Accordingly, consumerism can, functionally speaking, be understood as a cultural phenomenon which shares some similarities with faith-based traditions. However, consumerism does not advance the individual endeavour towards meaning. As the only meaning that can be attained is fleeting, we can with Cornel West argue that consumerism is *nihilistic* in essence – it is “an insidious form of soul murder”.

Finally, if consumerism is not a religion, then how should it be understood according to Cavanaugh. Here his thinking aligns with Francis and West by arguing that consumerism has a direct consequence for individual political and ethical commitment. For the consumerist, work for the common good becomes secondary to his or her desire to satisfy his or her personal and fleeting preferences. Furthermore, to the extent that the consumerist express ethical positions, it is not bound to any demands for action. Instead of ethical commitment, Cavanaugh argues that you, therefore, get “ethical sentimentality” – an exaggerated and self-indulgent tenderness, sadness, or nostalgia that does not require political or ethical engagement.⁷⁰ Consequently, consumeristic sentimentality, to quote the theologian Vincent J. Miller, “becomes a substitute for concrete political solidarity, or to put it another way, a fundamentally different act – consumption – is substituted for political action”.⁷¹

Consumerism as a moral attitude

In this theoretical and explorative essay, from an analysis of the works of pope Francis, Cornel West, and William T. Cavanaugh, I have argued that

consumerism can be defined as a moral attitude. Such a definition challenges the idea of consumerism as a kind of ersatz religion – an understanding of consumerism that has been advanced by both theologians and social scientists.

Francis' works offered some initial perspectives, mainly by highlighting consumerism as an attitude that trivializes suffering. According to Francis, consumerism is a way of distancing yourself from suffering by promoting indifference towards suffering. Similarly, West argues that consumerism is a form of moral deficiency, as it obstructs institutions' work for justice and passivizes the well-to-do. Also, consumerism is perceived as the only refuge that hopeless people in America have. Consumerism is thus all-consuming and ever-present in a consumerist culture, and will therefore mark an essential attitude within societies among all people living in a consumerist society. Furthermore, as consumerism is a form of soul murder, it is nihilistic in essence. Finally, Cavanaugh offers a systematic theological perspective on consumerism and argues that it has no goal – no *telos*. As consumerism promotes detachment instead of attachment, it is not able to offer the consumerist a path to anything ultimate. Consequently, in relation to the minimalist definition of religion that I have used in this essay, consumerism cannot be considered to be a religion.

I would accordingly argue that it is possible to construe another definition of consumerism from the presented analysis, where consumerism is understood as a fundamental attitude towards the good. Although Francis, West and Cavanaugh make use of the concept in different ways, they all portray consumerism as an attitude that passivizes moral commitment. Instead of a person directing his or her life towards the betterment of their own lives or the lives of others, his or her desires are aimed at the trivial and volatile. While none of them would argue that people today have no vision of the good – such moral relativism is more or less impossible to imagine – they argue that consumerism makes it possible for the individual to disregard these visions.

If this understanding of consumerism were summarized into a definition, I would accordingly argue that it would be the following: *Consumerism is a moral attitude that trivializes the good and enables indifference towards suffering*. Furthermore, following the theoretical perspectives examined above, I would argue that consumerism is the result of the prioritization of personal preference, and is a moral attitude that affects every person across the economic, social, political, and cultural spectrum.

The purpose of this article has been theoretical and explorative, and I have therefore not presented any empirical material that supports the thesis underlying the definition – that consumerism fosters an attitude that makes the individual indifferent towards suffering.⁷² The definition should therefore be understood as part of an initial effort to further understand and critically engage with the cultural hegemony of consumption and the “globalization of indifference”⁷³ that Western societies promote.

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Notes

1. For an overview, see Hartman, “Consumption”; Gauthier and Martikainen, “Ethos of Consumer Society”; Kurenlahti and Salonen, “Rethinking Consumerism,” 3.
2. See Rittenhouse, *Shopping for Meaningful Lives*.

3. See Sayers, *The Trouble with Paris*, 29–39.
4. In addition to this way of understanding consumerism, social scientists also use two other definitions. The first describes consumerism as a consumer protection movement. Second, consumerism is defined as a political ideology that surpasses other ideologies, such as communism and fascism. Miles, *Consumerism*, 5, 11–12; Aldridge, *Consumption*, 6.
5. Hartman, “Consumption,” 316.
6. Aldridge, *Consumption*, 6.
7. Bauman, *Consuming Life*, 52–3.
8. Miles, *Consumerism*, 1.
9. See Barber, *Consumed*, 166–212.
10. Political theology has a long history of development and has, therefore, taken many different expressions. See Phillips, *Political Theology*. For this article, with political theology, I understand contemporary theological discourses that deal with public issues from theoretical and narrative resources within theology, often with the focus on Christian practice.
11. While Pope Francis and Cavanaugh describe themselves as theologians, it is worth mentioning that West does not. Instead, he describes himself as a philosopher. West and Ritz, *Brother West*, 112–13. However, his political philosophical thinking cannot be separated from his engagement with and his solidarity to the Christian tradition. He also applies theological reasoning in his philosophical thinking and has held positions at theological departments, most notably at Union Theological Seminary in New York. I therefore argue that his works can be understood as part of the political-theological discourse.
12. Cf. Smith, *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism?*; Vanhoozer, “Preface.”
13. Klein, *This Changes Everything*, 25.
14. Francis, *Laudato Si’*, 90. See also Francis, 6–7; Francis, *Lumen Fidei*, 31–2, 63.
15. Francis, *Laudato Si’*, 25–6.
16. Francis, 120.
17. Francis, 35.
18. Francis, 20–1, 31–4.
19. Francis, 32.
20. Francis, 35–6.
21. Francis, 91.
22. Francis, 11.
23. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium, the Joy of the Gospel*, 3.
24. Francis, *Laudato Si’*, 43.
25. Francis, 41.
26. Francis, “Visit to Lampedusa.”
27. West, *Prophecy Deliverance!*, 131–47.
28. West, *Hope on a Tigh trope*, 1.
29. West, *Democracy Matters*, 114. Cf. Svenungsson, *Divining History*, 8–16.
30. West, *Democracy Matters*, 114–15.
31. West, *Prophetic Reflections*, 207–12.
32. West, *Prophetic Thought*, 16–17.
33. West, 17.
34. West, 17–18.
35. West, *Prophetic Fragments*, 3–12, 67.
36. West, x.
37. Drane, *McDonaldization of the Church*.

38. West, *Hope on a Tightrope*, 70.
39. West, *Prophetic Thought*, 16.
40. West, *Race Matters*, 22–3.
41. West, 23.
42. For a detailed account of the black institutions and the role of the black middle class in shaping them, see Committee on the Status of Black Americans, “Identity and Institutions.”
43. West, *Hope on a Tightrope*, 55.
44. West, *Race Matters*, 54–6; West, *Hope on a Tightrope*, 173–4.
45. West, *Keeping Faith*, 30.
46. See West, *Prophetic Thought*, 148; West, *Hope on a Tightrope*, 31.
47. West, *Hope on a Tightrope*, 31.
48. West, *Prophetic Reflections*, 213.
49. Cf. Barber, *Consumed*, 222–35.
50. West, *Hope on a Tightrope*, 9–15; West, *Democracy Matters*, 171–2.
51. West, *Prophetic Fragments*, 27.
52. West, *Democracy Matters*, 176.
53. Cf. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed*, vii.
54. See Heywood, *Politics*, 43–5.
55. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed*, 5.
56. Cavanaugh, 2.
57. Cavanaugh, 7–8.
58. As Saint Augustine confessed: “You stir man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you”. Augustine, *Confessions*, 1:1.
59. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed*, 7–9.
60. Cavanaugh, 35–6, 59–60.
61. Cavanaugh, 36.
62. Understanding religion as a system of “meaning-making” is often used within psychological research. See Park, “Religion.” Kenneth I. Pargament has similarly argued that religion is a process where persons “search for significance in ways related to the sacred”. Pargament, *Psychology of Religion*, 32. Italics removed.
63. King, “Religion,” 7695.
64. Tillich, *Christianity*, 4–5. My emphasis. See also *Systematic Theology*, 11–15. Similarly, the sociologist of religion Susan K. Fletcher has argued: “Religious beliefs offer an explanation for the fundamental meaning of life and have always been a viable source of meaning in individuals’ lives through positive beliefs, rituals, symbols, traditions, and support”. Fletcher, “Religion and Life Meaning.”
65. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed*, 14. Cavanaugh also writes: “[Consumerism] is the death of Christian eschatology. There can be no rupture with the status quo, no inbreaking kingdom of God, but only endless superficial novelty.” Cavanaugh, x, 93.
66. The philosopher Jock Young expressed a similar point when he wrote: “It is the workhorse of a consumerism which evokes self-realization and happiness, but which all too frequently conveys a feeling of hollowness, and never-ending extravagance, where commodities incessantly beguile and disappoint. Even the real thing seems a fake”. Young, *Vertigo of Late Modernity*, 3.
67. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed*, 34–5, 46–7. Similarly, the theologian Vincent J. Miller writes: “Since desire is sustained by being detached from particular objects, consumer

- anticipation wishes for everything and hopes for nothing". Miller, *Consuming Religion*, 132.
68. Cavanaugh, "Enchantment, Idolatry and Sacrament," 221.
69. Bailey, "Religion of Contemporary Society."
70. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed*, 50–1, 91.
71. Miller, *Consuming Religion*, 76.
72. It is worth noting that it has also been argued that consumerism can be seen as a way of staying politically engaged. "Political consumerism" is a response to the disenfranchisement and disillusionment with the established political system, where political action is taken by using consumerist methods to voice political opinions. The consumer can thus support those companies that are in line with one's own political and moral beliefs by buying their products and boycotting those who are not. Political consumerism is accordingly understood as a political and moral response to the perceived failure of the political system within the parameters of the marketplace. See Kyroglou and Henn, "Political Consumerism."
73. See Francis, "Visit to Lampedusa."

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