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RE-ENGAGING RELIGIOUS
TEACHINGS ON CONSUMPTION

BY GARY GARDNER

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RE-ENGAGING RELIGIOUS TEACHINGS ON CONSUMPTION

BY GARY GARDNER

In his book *God's Politics*, evangelical minister Jim Wallis describes an episode from his seminary days when a fellow student took scissors and snipped out of an old Bible every verse that focused on poverty and wealth. The remaining text was tattered and fragile, reports Wallis; these economic themes occur in the Hebrew scriptures more often than any topic except idolatry, and in the Gospels account for as many as one in seven verses. The eviscerated Bible was an effective prop for his sermons. "I'd hold it up high above American congregations and say 'Brothers and sisters, this is our American Bible; it is full of holes,'" the empty spaces constituting the mute teachings that favor the poor and outline the economic obligations of the wealthy.

Recovering the lost economic teachings—not just of the Jewish and Christian traditions, but of many of the world's faiths—could be enormously valuable to a global economy faced with unprecedented ethical challenges. Mass consumerism in wealthy countries has already broken the ecological bank, with a crippled climate, extinct species, scalped forests, and drained or polluted rivers standing as red ink. Now billions of citizens of China and India demand a piece of the global consumption pie. How can the legitimate aspirations of emerging nations be met without further damaging the planet—while safeguarding opportunities for the world's poorest, especially in Africa, to stake *their* consumption claims?

Consumption is linked, of course, to both poverty and wealth: the poor underconsume, by definition, and the prosperous typically consume more than needed, often wastefully. Thus religious wisdom on poverty and wealth can be helpful in tackling the emerging ethical dilemma of global consumption. Restoring the forgotten wisdom buried in the sacred texts of the world's faith traditions could help to sketch out the principles for a new economics—principles that addresses the challenges of consumption and poverty simultaneously.

Indeed, the power of inspirational and challenging reli-

gious messages to mobilize believers is at work on the consumption question in pockets around the world, from Sri Lanka and Alabama to the finance ministries of major creditor nations. In each case, religious teachings (see sidebar, for example) are awakening adherents to the moral dimension of consumption (and its offspring, debt and inequality), in some cases with measurable impact. They are a reminder of the power inherent in the founding visions of many of the world's faiths.

Neither Poverty nor Wealth

Consider, for example, the power of "Buddhist economics" to turn western notions of consumption on their heads. From its starting position—the purpose of an economy—the Buddhist approach is distinctive. As explained in E.F. Schumacher's classic, *Small Is Beautiful*, whereas market economies are designed to produce the highest possible levels of production and consumption, Buddhist economics supports a different aim: to achieve enlightenment. This spiritual goal, in turn, requires freedom from desire, the source of all suffering, according to the Buddha. This is a tall order in societies of mass consumption, where advertisers conflate needs and desires and where acquisitiveness is a cultural norm. Thus the very attitude toward material goods is one of detachment, a sharp contrast to the frenzied grasping for stuff that often characterizes non-Buddhist societies.

Indeed, from the perspective of Buddhist economics, having and consuming makes sense only as a means to a well-rounded sense of well-being, in which material needs are met in moderation, and in which cultural, psychological, and spiritual needs are also addressed. Consumption as an end—chasing the most prestigious house or the latest cell phone—is irrational. In fact, in Buddhist thought the rational person aims to achieve the highest level of well-being with the *least* consumption, since consumption is merely a means to this higher end.

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Shining shoes,
Delhi, India.

In this view, collecting ever-greater quantities of stuff, generating mountains of refuse, and designing goods to wear out (all normal in consumerist economies) are absurd inefficiencies. The waste is huge, not just in terms of garbage generated, but because the outsized material dimension of a consumer's life does not deliver any greater degree of well-being. Indeed, evidence from high-consumption societies like the United States make it clear that when people overconsume food or sedentary leisure time, health is likely to suffer. And overwork in support of a high consumption lifestyle can leave little time for strong relationships, another necessary ingredient of well-being.

The consumption ethic of Buddhist economics appears to have taken strong root in Sri Lanka in a village-based development movement known as Sarvodaya Shramadana, now present in more than half of the country's 24,000 villages. Consumption in the Sarvodayan experience is shaped by the Sarvodayan vision of development, which is summarized in a list of 10 major human needs:

- a clean and beautiful environment
- a clean and adequate supply of water
- basic clothing
- a balanced diet
- a simple house to live in
- basic health care
- simple communications facilities
- basic energy requirements
- well-rounded education
- cultural and spiritual sustenance

The list yields a moderate but broadly based approach to consumption. Commodities are "basic," "simple," and "adequate," strongly communicating an ethic of sufficiency. And nonmaterial assets such as a clean environment, well-rounded education, and cultural and spiritual sustenance are on par with material ones, suggesting that material and spiritual dimensions are both necessary for full development. In short,

Selected Religious Perspectives on Consumption

HINDUISM: In case of obtaining anything in excess, one should not hoard it. One should abstain from acquisitiveness. *Acarangasutra 2.114-19*

CONFUCIANISM: Excess and deficiency are equally at fault. *Confucius, XI.15*

JUDAISM: Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? *Isaiah 55:2*

CHRISTIANITY: How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help? *1 John 3:17*

ISLAM: Eat and drink, but waste not by excess: He loves not the excessive. *Quran 7.31*

the list produces a materially narrower but spiritually broader understanding of healthy consumption than is found in societies of mass consumerism.

The list also implicitly suggests where to draw the line on consumption. If meeting the 10 needs essentially provides for a decent life, pursuit of desires from beyond the list is necessarily evidence of "greed, sloth, or ignorance," in the words of one Sarvodaya observer. Acceding to those desires would simply be a waste of resources.

The Sarvodayan consumption goals also open up development opportunities more broadly across society. Modest consumption saves resources for use by others, thereby extending the reach of potential development efforts. Indirectly, the list serves as a quick and easy way to identify the individuals or groups most in need of further development assistance. This assessment would be much more difficult task if the list were a long and virtually endless list of wants rather than a limited set of needs. The result is fulfillment of the Sarvodayan goal of "no poverty, no affluence."



Selling cigarettes,
Hainan Island, China.

Keep the Sabbath

In the Jewish and Christian traditions, consumption issues are rooted in the broader question of a person or society's obligations to the poor. "Sabbath economics" traces biblical economic thought back to the evolving understanding of the Sabbath in the Hebrew sacred texts. The analysis, radical by today's economic standards, has challenging implications for modern notions of consumption.

Theologians of Sabbath economics note that the biblical admonition to "keep the Sabbath" was more than a weekly religious observance for the ancient Israelites; it also signified their commitment to economic justice and ecological stewardship. Consider the story of the Israelites wandering in the desert after their liberation from slavery in Egypt. They are hungry, and complain to God about their plight. God responds by sending a daily shower of manna from heaven, an act of compassion that came with special instructions: the people were to gather only what they needed, no less and no more. Those who hoarded found that their stocks spoiled, while those who gathered only what they needed found that they, and the entire community, were adequately fed. On the Sabbath day, they were to rest, remember God's generosity to them, and reflect on the abundance that exists when people practice moderation.

Gradually the Sabbath concept took on more layers of economic meaning. In the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy, for example, the "Sabbath year" was introduced, when debts were to be forgiven, prisoners set free, and cropland allowed to lie fallow, offering the poor and the exhausted land a fresh start. Next, the Scriptures add the Jubilee year, which occurs every seventh Sabbath year, or every 49 years (seven being a symbol of perfection in the Jewish and Christian scriptures). This "super-Sabbath" year entails all of the liberation and fallowing obligations of previous Sabbath years, but adds the requirement that land, the source of people's livelihoods, be returned to its original owners of 50 years earlier. In this way

the economic slate was wiped clean, ensuring that nobody remained perpetually on the economic margins.

In sum, explains religious activist and author Ched Myers, the Sabbath teachings in the Hebrew Scriptures contain a clear set of economic principles that are as valuable today as when first set down. The first principle is that extremes of consumption, whether too much or too little, should be avoided. Sufficient consumption, say analysts of Sabbath economics, can be surmised from the interplay between abundance and restraint that runs through the Sabbath stories: the abundance of manna being coupled with the injunction not to hoard, for example, or the provision of productive land being linked to a mandate to redistribute it periodically. God created a cornucopian world, the stories stress; combine this gift with moderation of appetites and the result is a world of plenty for everyone, rather than the resource scarcity that is a basic axiom of modern economics.

The second principle of Sabbath economics is that surplus wealth should circulate, not concentrate, and that mechanisms of redistribution are needed to ensure that any skewing of wealth does not become extreme or entrenched. Central to this principle is the notion that concentrated surpluses are inevitably linked to oppression. The Israelites themselves understood that their own enslavement in Egypt helped to produce the concentrated wealth of the pharaoh. Today, note proponents of Sabbath economics, economic oppression takes the form of sweatshops, sub-adequate wages, child labor, and other labor abuses. On these are built the concentrated wealth of many individuals, corporations, and nations.

The third principle is that believers should rest regularly, thank God for their blessings, and remember the first two principles through the rituals of community worship.

The Power To Inspire

It is easy to dismiss these teachings as quaint artifacts of the Jewish and Christian traditions. After all, it is probably safe to

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Waiting for the bus,
Guatemala.

assume that only a tiny minority of practicing Jews and Christians read the various stories of Sabbath obligations as treatises in economics. But these texts are clearly not merely utopian visions: they were the operating ethical base of the Hebrew economy thousands of years ago. There is no reason, in principle, why the same ethical imagination could not be resurrected today. Moreover, the principles of Sabbath economics have in recent years revealed their power to energize important publics on debt and taxation issues, cousins to consumption because the way they are addressed can raise the consumption levels of the poorest and curb the consumption of the wealthiest.

Perhaps the finest example of the motivational power of these texts is the Jubilee 2000 movement, an effort to reduce developing country debt whose very name evokes the most radical of the Sabbath economics-based practices. The debt crisis was in large part created by a recession in industrial countries in the early 1980s that increased borrower country payments while decreasing their capacity to export and generate the foreign exchange needed to pay down their debt. Borrowers' indebtedness soon increased to the point that it was virtually impossible to pay off. What was needed, it seemed, was a strategy to wipe clean the economic slate and offer countries a fresh start.

The strategic matching of the year 2000 with the powerful religious story of the Jubilee had the effect of firing the imagination of many religious rank and file, who became heavily involved in starting the Jubilee 2000 movement in 1996. Meanwhile, the Religious Working Group on the World Bank & IMF (RWG) was formed to look at debt, structural adjustment, and other economic issues facing developing countries. By 1997, RWG had begun to collaborate closely with the British Jubilee 2000 campaign and had announced the formation of Jubilee 2000/USA.

RWG targeted for action the annual Group of Seven (G7) meetings of leaders of the world's wealthiest nations, organizing some 70,000 demonstrators at the 1998 G7 summit in

Birmingham, for example, to form a ring around the meeting site, and presenting a petition at the 1999 Cologne summit demanding debt forgiveness. The petition was signed by 12 million people. The result was the first real reductions in debt since the debt crisis began in 1980 (previous efforts had largely only changed the terms of payment). Will Hutton, a British economic commentator, wrote in the *Observer* that without the "moral imagination of religion" and the leadership of the religious community, "there would be no Jubilee 2000, no debt campaign, and no international public pressure" to reduce developing country debt.

Another noteworthy example of the power that can emerge from a serious reading of sacred texts comes from the politically conservative U.S. state of Alabama. In 2001, law professor and theology student Susan Pace Hamill was dumbfounded to learn how regressive Alabama's tax code was, with state taxation kicking in at an annual income of only \$4,600, the lowest in the nation and far below the official poverty level of \$17,000. Meanwhile, timber interests, which own 71 percent of the state's land area, accounted for only two percent of the state's property tax. Hamill used her thesis work to analyze the state tax code from the perspective of Jewish and Christian scriptural teachings, publishing "An Argument for Tax Reform based on Judeo-Christian Ethics" in the *Alabama Law Review* in 2002.

Her work caught the attention of the conservative Republican governor, Bob Riley, a practicing Christian, who spearheaded an effort to raise the income level at which state taxation kicks in to above the U.S. official poverty level. In the process, he mobilized the religious community, gathering endorsements from the five largest Christian denominations in the state, including the Alabama Baptist Convention, which represents 3,100 of the state's 8,000 churches. Unfortunately, the effort failed at the polls, largely because of the well-funded opposition from the timber and agricultural interests whose taxes would have been raised to offset the loss of revenues from the state's poorest. But the fact that a conservative sector



Riding a bike,
Deira, Dubai.

of a conservative state was able to persuade a conservative governor to make a serious stab at an issue of economic justice, based on a religious argument, is an impressive testament to the power of a spiritual appeal to change hearts and minds.

Ideas Whose Time Has Come—Again?

Whatever the success of the Sarvodayan and Jubilee movements, they represent but a tiny fraction of religious activity in the world today. And it seems safe to assume that the vast majority of religious people do not make a connection between their faith and consumption, beyond the (admittedly significant) understanding of the need to make charitable contributions. Meanwhile, the consumption juggernaut rolls on globally, with wealthy nations continuing to consume at ever-higher levels and large chunks of the developing world as attracted to the consumption promise as any other nation. Is a religiously led, globally effective movement to promote healthier and more just models of consumption little more than a quixotic dream?

There are reasons to believe that the potential for change continues to be significant. For starters, Americans and Europeans appear to be awakening to the realization that consumption beyond a moderate level can actually be harmful to individuals, as the surge in obesity, depression, and indebtedness suggest. Churches and synagogues concerned about the well-being of their own faithful have growing reason to take action to help free their followers from the debilitating addiction of consumption. Indeed, the 12-step groups operating in church and synagogue basements for decades, often as an outreach service, may now need to tackle the consumption addiction of entire congregations.

The international context is different as well, with the rise of China, India, and other rapidly developing countries raising moral questions about environmental impact and equitable access to consumption opportunities. How will the global community make room for the legitimate material aspirations

of these nations? In short, previously dormant moral questions surrounding consumption may now have new power, power that might awaken the interest of faith communities.

Religions may also be prepared to take seriously the prospect that consumerism is a serious competitor for the allegiance of millions of people. The fact that societies of high consumption tend to be highly secular is not likely an accident. As more people turn to markets and shopping malls for fulfillment (however temporary and unsatisfying that fulfillment might be) religions are challenged to respond.

Competition from consumerism may be the most significant incentive for religions to become involved, but it is likely also the most challenging. Could it be that faith communities have had so little impact on consumption trends, despite thousands of years of durable teachings on the topic, because they are as bound to the consumer culture as the rest of society? Or because they fear that challenging their congregants on consumption would quickly empty their pews? Questioning consumption seriously, after all, is to challenge a host of societal interests and to anger a broad swath of the public.

What is clear from the Jubilee and Sarvodaya examples is that religious vision has tremendous power to induce societal change. Religions that re-embrace the original vision—that take seriously once again the sentiments expressed in those snipped passages from Scripture—could help to make the world anew. Wishful thinking perhaps, but theologian Douglas John Hall notes that religion becomes relevant in desperate times, that churches get creative precisely when the culture becomes disillusioned. In a world in economic and ecological crisis early in the 21st century, these teachings may be religions' best kept secrets.

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