

Consumers and *kenosis*

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In her most recent book, *Blessed Are the Consumers*, Sallie McFague focuses on *kenosis* as the key element in shaping a Christian alternative to the pervasive religion of consumerism. McFague says that consumerism consists of those cultural patterns and practices by which people “find meaning and fulfillment through the consumption of goods and services.” We may rightly identify consumerism as a religion—not merely a cultural pattern—because it is pervasive, it structures and focuses our perceptions and actions, and it supplies the systems by which we value ourselves and others and even make moral judgments.

So while we may be Democrats or Republicans, Asians or African Americans, Baptists or Presbyterians, PhDs or high-school dropouts, males or females, what we all hold in common is our participation in the religion of consumerism—a reality that seems such a natural part of all our lives that we can scarcely imagine an alternative. Most Christians see our religious affiliations as simply one facet of the larger set of consumer choices we make, rather than as a radical alternative to the economic and political order.

For McFague, *kenosis*, the practice of self-limitation and restraint, is key to “the wholesale transformation of our dominant cultural patterns.” Self-limitation is implicit in all of the lectionary passages for this Sunday, from the Ten Commandments to Jesus’ parable about the consumptive values and violence of the Jewish elites. It is most explicit, however, in the passage from Philippians 3, where, in imitation of Christ’s own self-emptying (see 2:6-11), Paul sets forth his superlative curriculum vita in a contest of honor (“confidence in the flesh”) with his opponents, then renounces the whole game as what the NRSV, in its genteel way, calls

“rubbish,”

This passage is often read simply as an argument against circumcision. But it really aims to dismantle the whole cultural system of human “confidence in the flesh”—a system not unlike modern consumerism—of which circumcision was but one example.

Both Paul and Sallie McFague want the followers of Christ not to content themselves simply with replacing one religion or spiritual practice with another, but to model a different way of being human together. And today we know that “together” includes not just our tribe or religion or even species, but the whole of the earth community.