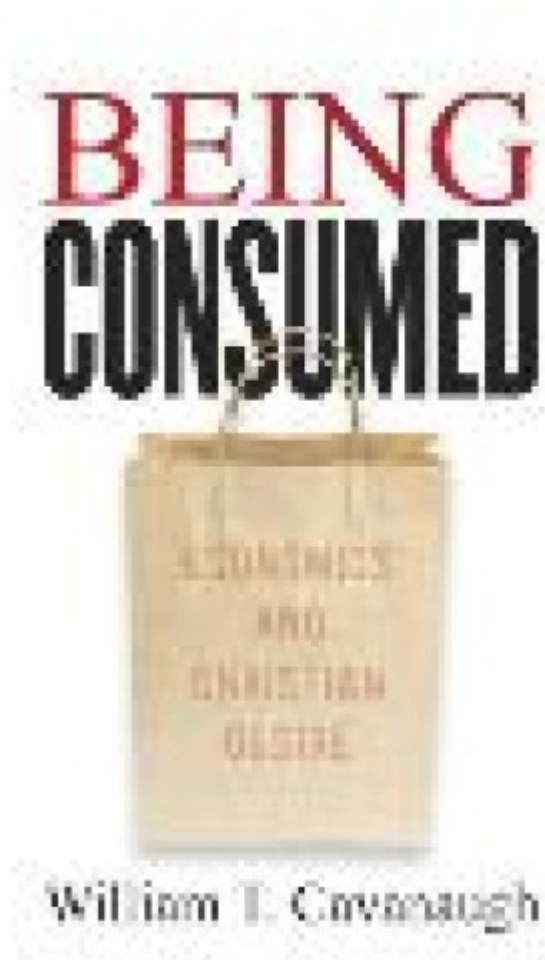


Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire

reviewed by [David W. Miller](#) in the [April 7, 2009](#) issue

In Review



Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire

William T. Cavanaugh
Eerdmans

Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire is a deceptively short yet theologically deep book. As William Cavanaugh inquires how Christians should think about and engage in economic life, he draws on the resources of his Catholic tradition, including such figures as Augustine, Aquinas, Hans Urs von Balthasar and John Paul II. His four chapters, on the free market, consumerism, globalization and scarcity, are interrelated, but each could stand alone as an essay worthy of reflection and study. Cavanaugh explores concrete attempts by Christians to “discern and create economic practices, spaces, and transactions that are truly free” and “marked by the body of Christ.”

Cavanaugh inverts the conventional view that today’s hyperconsumption is driven by an overly strong attachment to material goods; instead, he suggests, greed causes detachment from the things we buy, consume and toss away. In his chapter on scarcity, he argues that we misplace our desires in material wants, and satisfaction of those wants never fulfills us. He proposes the Eucharist as the only healthy model of consumption, and he uses the church catholic as the model for being both global and local, demonstrating that Christ solves the philosophical problem of the one and the many because only Christ is the “concrete universal.” He also turns to eschatology for a model of appropriate fulfillment and abundance in Christ.

There is much to commend in this thoughtful and well-timed book. Cavanaugh proposes a fresh way to think about economic life, avoiding the familiar and polarizing dialectics of socialism versus capitalism, Karl Marx versus Milton Friedman, and state-controlled versus free-market economic structures. In their place he proposes constructive alternative economic ideas and practices that can function in the real world in which we live and work, offering as models specific organizations that embody and reflect his theological framework.

However, the book has some limitations. Structurally, the four chapters at times seem like unrelated essays. The main contours and arguments are well positioned in the introduction, but the book ends abruptly with the final chapter. The work would be enriched if there were a concluding chapter that tied together the threads, provided a cohesive review of the theological arguments and challenged readers to develop their own practical responses.

Theologically, Cavanaugh unabashedly works within the Roman Catholic tradition, and while he often refers to the church catholic, many Protestant and other readers unfamiliar with Catholic theology might find themselves at a disadvantage. Moreover, a central part of his argument about local churches creating new economic practices and spaces relies on an unspoken presupposition that small is good. The implication is that unjust and unethical economic behavior is found only in big business and the global market. But sin and unethical behavior are present in all organizations, whether small or large. Finally, when people create the alternative economic spaces that Cavanaugh recommends, they can withdraw theological and social pressure to reform existing structures from within while undervaluing the good that can exist in larger companies and global structures.

These critiques aside, Cavanaugh's writing is sophisticated and theologically rich. Yet the theology is not daunting, and it may help laypeople to appreciate Christ and the Eucharist in new ways.