

The Real Dangers of Consumerism

by Daniel Graham

Not all consumerism is bad. Consumerism is appropriate in the marketplace. It is good to be careful consumers, to exercise the freedom to choose within our budgets and personal tastes, and to protect ourselves from fraudulent or predatory businesses.

Consumerism becomes problematic, however, when we let it permeate the rest of our lives, for example, our approaches to government, Church, and even family.

Consumerism corrupts government. Since the 1960s, citizens and politicians alike increasingly view government as a buffet of goods and services. Policy debates devolve into crass arguments about which politician can provide the greatest value for the least taxes. Appeals to the virtues of freedom and self-reliance are lost; civic duty becomes irrelevant. The healthcare debate is an example of the triumph of consumerism over virtue. The consumer-oriented government, destined to grow without limits, is thereby doomed to become oppressive. The irony is that consumer-oriented citizens will eventually despise the government they created.

Consumerism is even more poisonous for the Church and explains the exodus. Juila Duin, religion editor for The Washington Times, details the hemorrhage of membership in her engaging book, *Quitting Church: Why the Faithful are Fleeing and What to do about it*. The modern church, in keeping with the times, uses marketing methods to recruit new members. Membership equals money. Senior clergy run the church on a corporate model, offering more and more services, novelties, and conveniences.

For example, the Diocese of Arlington just set up a program where parishioners can auto-pay donations by credit card or bank transfer without the inconvenience of attending church services. The members of the laity become customers, rewarding the clergy-managers depending on perceived value. The members of the laity, behaving like prudent consumers, shop for a better value -- or they quit church altogether.

Some clergy argue that we need to attract the unchurched with goods and services, then steer them toward God. In business, that marketing strategy is called bait-and-switch, a tactic despised by consumers and doomed to failure. Such tactics demean religion. If we approach religion as consumers, we will eventually be disappointed in the goods and services. Most likely, we will join the ranks of the millions of consumer-oriented Christians who stop going to church.

It is ironic that politicians and clergy attack consumerism in the marketplace, while at the same time they embrace consumerism as their mode of operation.

The saddest aspect of consumerism is its effect on families. If spouses treat one another as employees or customers, or as sources of goods and services, then marriages will be in deep trouble. Consumer-oriented parents manage their children. Some parents boss their children like little employees who are usually wrong. Other parents kowtow to their children, the little customers who are always right. Eventually, parents become disappointed in their children and the children become disappointed in their parents.

Consumer-oriented families have no staying power. These family members like the hearth-and-home perks: Thanksgiving dinner and warm apple pie, companionship and sentimentality.

However, when a family member becomes damaged goods -- stricken with dementia, for example -- the consumer's impulse is to send the damaged goods back or at least get the damaged goods out of sight. The healthy family members may decide that the stricken member's life is not worth living -- the goods and services consumed are not worth the costs. They calculate that the cost of being a family exceeds the benefits, and the consumer-oriented family falls apart.

We need to work hard to reverse this disturbing trend so that consumerism does not ruin our love of country, our faith, or our families. We need to keep consumerism where it belongs -- only in the marketplace.

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