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Consuming to Create Jobs: A Moral Dilemma for People of Faith

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Many economists are urging Americans to go into the market and buy more things so that more jobs can be saved or created. But for people of faith, this imperative to buy creates a difficult moral dilemma: indiscriminate consumption can be spiritually and psychologically damaging, yet without consumption the economy, and the jobs that it provides, also suffer. So the question is how to restrain or redirect consumption practices without derailing the engine that powers the economy and provides people the jobs they need to live a fair and just life.

In a market economy, however, there is no imperative regarding which goods are good to consume and which are not. As William Cavanaugh, in his recent book "Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire," has said: "in the ideology of the free market, freedom is conceived as the absence of interference from others. There are no common ends to which our desires are directed."

This freedom of the individual to choose his own ends can lead to a free-for-all economy in which the desires or wants of individuals are stoked, exploited, and even manufactured by effective and seductive advertising. When the sale of the products and services that satisfy desires declines as many would-be consumers come to the conclusion that they simply cannot afford them, the economy suffers, jobs are lost and wage-earners fall on hard times.

It becomes a vicious cycle: potential consumers refrain from consuming for fear of going broke and those who depend on their consumption wind up losing their jobs as well. All this puts an imperative on continuing to consume in order to sustain a job-dependent economy. But consumption, for people of faith, is a double-edged sword. Yes, it can help an economy that is in trouble. But it can also wind up consuming the consumer with demands that do not contribute to a common or even individual good. The desire (often morphing into the need) to buy comes to define the purchaser. And this often leads to indiscriminate buying and, at the other end, indiscriminate production of goods that have no morally or long-term redeeming benefit to the individual or to the society. Who really needs a second or third home?

In the short run, buying can be therapeutic. Many people buy things not primarily because they need them, but because buying itself feels good. What is purchased is less important than the act of purchasing itself. And there are, unfortunately, many jobs whose sole purpose is getting people to buy products or

services, no matter what they are. Many of the non-essential goods people with wealth consume are not essential to basic human well-being. Despite the bumper sticker of a decade or so ago -- "The person who dies with the most toys, wins" -- most people know from experience that mere consumption of more and more goods does not lead to more satisfying lives. Yes, consumption can be economically useful, but we have to ask, at what cost? Aren't there other services and products that might be better suited for more beneficial forms of consumption?

Short of replacing the economy with a totally different one, which might be laudable in the long run but impractical in the short run, perhaps people of faith could initiate a national discussion about which specific goods and services contribute to the common good, to social justice and to individual well-being and reward those goods and services by purchasing them.

Since the market itself has no moral criteria to inform this discussion, the field is open for those who want to argue for an economy built on the creation of jobs that ensure social justice. These might include jobs in the health care sector, in the provision of housing, welfare, rebuilding the infrastructure, healthy food choices, education and so on. People complain about rising health care costs: but if those costs stem from the provision of vital services (along with judicious pruning of wasteful spending) they might justify a shift in jobs from sectors producing trivial and ultimately non-beneficial goods. It's not health-care spending per se that is the problem, it's the other non-essential items of consumption with which it is competing that are the problem. A re-evaluation of what goods and services contribute most to a healthy economy because they contribute to medically and spiritually healthy people is called for. But to get the conversation going, it will be necessary to abandon the notion that consumption is a good in itself and that it doesn't matter what is consumed, no matter how many jobs it produces.