

Spring 2014

The Story We Find Ourselves In: Nurturing Christian Identity in a Consumer Culture

Terri L. Elton

Luther Seminary, telton@luthersem.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/faculty_articles

 Part of the [Economics Commons](#), [Practical Theology Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Elton, Terri L., "The Story We Find Ourselves In: Nurturing Christian Identity in a Consumer Culture" (2014). *Faculty Publications*. 63.

http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/faculty_articles/63

Published Citation

Elton, Terri Martinson. "The Story We Find Ourselves in: Nurturing Christian Identity in a Consumer Culture." *Word & World* 34, no. 2 (2014): 168–77. <https://luthersem.idm.oclc.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rft&AN=ATLA0001980098&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.



The Story We Find Ourselves In: Nurturing Christian Identity in a Consumer Culture

TERRI MARTINSON ELTON

At the waters of baptism we—parents, sponsors, and the gathered community—proclaim a countercultural message and promise to nurture a countercultural identity. But as worship ends and the celebratory dinner is eaten, life moves on. And over time we forget our promises, and perhaps even God's. Sure, many of those baptized will participate in Christian education and worship in the years ahead. Some will be raised in homes with Christian commitments and develop Christian faith habits. But research reports that only a few will integrate God's promises into their identity.

We live in a time when most young people believe in, or are open to believing in, God. According to the National Study of Youth and Religion, two-thirds of these young people are loosely or vitally connected to communities of faith. Yet, for most, their belief in God is separate from their identity.¹ For leaders of children,

¹Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) 16–21.

Consumerism has become society's prevailing story, the story in which young people cultivate their identity. If ministry leaders are to help young people nurture their identity as children of God and help them discover a faith that speaks into the current culture, it will be important to help them shift from viewing themselves as objects within a consumer society to seeing themselves as subjects and agents of God's love.

youth, and young adult ministry this news is startling. Young people have connections to faith communities, but our connection is not nurturing a Christian identity. Something needs to change. We, congregations and congregational leaders, have to step back and reflect on what's going on.

I am one who is deeply concerned about this reality. Yet the truth is it will take more than a new confirmation curriculum or reading an article to change this trajectory. But I do have hope. And this hope surfaces by recognizing and attending to the underlying issues. This article focuses on one of those issues: What does it mean to nurture a Christian identity within our consumer society?

THE STORY WE FIND OURSELVES IN

Consumerism has become society's prevailing story, the story in which young people cultivate their identity. Taken for granted in the Western world, consumerism is selling young people a bill of goods and blocking their ability to hear any counter-narrative. The result is that young people are entering adulthood with a false sense of self, twisted understanding of community, and misdirected personal agency. Unless ministry leaders recognize and reframe this prevailing story, children, youth, and young adults are bound to receive God's promises as just another commodity and envision abundant living through the lens of consumerism.

Consumerism is the by-product of living in a capitalistic economy. Capitalism relies on consumers to consume, literally needing people to buy into the system. This need has driven capitalism to adapt and become the complex and sophisticated reality it is today. As the principles of capitalism have crept into most areas of life, capitalism has slowly reoriented society and consumerism has become a way of life. Vincent Miller, a Roman Catholic theologian, believes even culture itself has been commodified.² It is time to take a deeper look at consumerism's power in our culture and, as Miller suggests, offer a theological critique.

Culture plays a significant role in providing an infrastructure for defining meaning, creating relationships, and sustaining life. At culture's core are the beliefs and commitments of a group of people, their way of understanding humanity and abundant living, and a system for putting these ideas into practice. Shaping and nurturing culture happens at various levels: the level of ideals and commitments, the level of systems and frameworks, and the level of concrete, daily practices. Consumerism has influenced all levels of today's culture, and if Christianity is to offer a counter-voice it will also have to address all three.

In a consumerist society, *consumption is the orienting principle and commodities are its currency*. Consumption, once a function for sustaining life, has now become the main activity. Commodities, once limited to goods and services needed for survival, have expanded to include values, beliefs, and labor. How? By *protean power*, or "the power to turn anything into a product to be packaged, sold and con-

²Vincent J. Miller, "Taking Consumer Culture Seriously," *Horizons* 27/2 (2000) 281.

sumed”³ according to the laws of exchange within capitalism. Protean power has redirected religion, relationships, caring for the earth, healthy living, and being popular into aspirations that guide and direct one’s consumption.

How did this happen? In the early stages of capitalism, consuming was modest and served a vision of abundant living defined outside of capitalism. Yet as capitalism developed, society experienced two shifts: consumerism first shifted people’s focus from “being to having” and then shifted their focus from having to “appearing.”⁴ The first shift took place as the value for commodities moved from serving a human need to commodities having value in themselves. In this shift human labor became a commodity and its meaning was redefined. Labor no longer served to sustain life and contribute to society, but became an entity of exchange, used to secure things that fit consumerism’s vision of abundant living. Gradually, other dimensions of human experience followed suit, and as a result all aspects of life became fair game to be used as objects in the capitalism system.⁵

“Appearance rather than exchange or usefulness now determines value.” With this seems like factor, people “prefer that which ‘seems like’ the real thing,” substituting images or replications for the thing itself.

During this time, capitalism put forth a vision of abundant life attached to commodities. This was possible as mass production became commonplace and goods were standardized, affordable, and more readily available. This reality upended the societal virtue of frugality and made consumption a social responsibility. The result was that consumerism now connected commodities with promises of “the good life.”⁶ But the vision didn’t stop there. Shortened product life, style, advertising, and media contributed to and accelerated this vision.⁷ And when this happened, “[p]eople were no longer primarily interested in the goods themselves, but in their images.... [and] consumption became an imaginary activity whose object is the advertisement as much as the product itself.”⁸ Miller asserts, “Appearance rather than exchange or usefulness now determines value.”⁹ With this *seems like* factor, people “prefer that which ‘seems like’ the real thing,” substituting images or replications for the thing itself.¹⁰ Now images connected to advertising play a significant role in shaping one’s understanding of abundant life. And these images, photoshopped and edited, are detached from the messiness of everyday lived

³Ibid., 280.

⁴Ibid., 283.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Joyce Ann Mercer, *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2005) 80.

⁷Miller, “Taking Consumer Culture Seriously,” 282.

⁸Ibid., 283.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Mercer, *Welcoming Children*, 90.

experiences. Within this story, human identity is reduced to that of consumer, agency exercised through consumption, and labor reduced to propelling the consumption treadmill and feeding a *seems like* vision of abundant living.

We know that human identity, agency, and abundant life are all distorted within the narrative of consumerism. *Yet young people do not*, as today social order and relationships are primarily framed within this understanding. In this view, constructing meaning is all about one's choices in consuming. Values and beliefs "float" in society as commodities, apart from tradition, heritage, or particular communities. Human experiences, viewed as commodities, leave relationships as a means to some *seems like* end. Choice, a metavalue, reigns; ethics are merely sentiments; and human flourishing is reduced to personal fulfillment. Joyce Mercer, a practical theologian and professor of Christian education, sums it up this way:

"Consumerism" refers to a way of life structured by and around various practices of consumption and accumulation. In a consumerist society, consumption dominates social practices, such that relationships, activities, space, work, and leisure come to be structured around various practices related to consumption. Consumption becomes a way to achieve social solidarity—relational connections with others, even as it also marks identity and status.¹¹

This is the narrative shaping the human identity of young people; this is the story being told. Is it any wonder young people are struggling to discover who they are in this ever-changing, consumer-driven world?

THERE'S ANOTHER WAY, ANOTHER STORY

For people of faith, this is not our story and this is not our identity. There is another way. Humans are not objects to be played according to the rules of capitalism; humans are subjects of God's love. Christians have a different narrative and it's time we remember it and claim the promises of God spoken into our lives. At each and every baptism we hear this counter-narrative, are reminded of this different story, and directed to another way of life. If ministry leaders are going to help young people nurture their identity as children of God and help them discover a faith that speaks into the current culture, it will be important to help them shift from viewing themselves as objects within a consumer society to seeing themselves as subjects and agents of God's love.

The narrative of a Christian way of life begins and ends with a promise and a desire. God, the creator of the universe, loves the world and desires to be in relationship with it. For Christians, God's love is the orienting principle for our lives and relationships are the currency. This theme begins in Genesis and runs throughout Scripture. This is good news, and this is the story we must tell.

What do we know about God's love? First, *love defines God* and second, *love is relational*. Theologian John Zizioulas notes love is what constitutes

¹¹Ibid., 73.

God's being¹² and this love is witnessed in community, in the persons of the Trinity, and in God's relationship with the world. To be a person is to love, and love requires relationships, therefore relationships constitute being. And third, God's love has a direction, and that direction is toward the world. God's love is witnessed in two dimensions, one creative and another redemptive. The creative dimension is generative and is revealed in the places where life springs forth, community is created, and life flourishes. The redemptive dimension is restorative and is revealed in the broken places where justice is sought, tears are real, and healing longed for.

What does this mean for people of faith? First, *our identity is given*. It's not up for grabs. Created in God's image, love defines and roots us. And second, *our identity can only be understood in communion with God and others*. The relational nature of identity requires both freedom and connectedness. As children of God, we are not a collection of commodified experiences, but are unique persons, created distinct within a greater story. To be a person of faith is to live in a particular place and time, connected to particular persons and communities, living into and out of God's love. Being, not having or appearing, is necessary for our identity and for discovering a Christian way of life. In fact, without being and dwelling in the presence of God and one another we cannot discover who and whose we are.

“Modern individualism does not serve the freedom of human persons. . . . If you want to rule over people, you must separate, isolate, and individualize them as much as you can.”

We know this to be true, but periodically we lose our way and need to be reminded. Just about a year ago, the wife of a man from my congregation died after a long battle with cancer. A man of faith deeply embedded in various communities, Steve knew the power of community throughout his whole life, but especially during the long months of his wife's illness. Today, Steve is struggling to find his way forward. Each community, each relationship is a reminder of the void in his life. For decades his identity was so connected to his wife's that he is struggling to understand his identity without her. Recently I had a conversation with him. As we talked, it was clear the pain was still real and the loss still raw, but having known the gift of Christian community his instincts were to reconnect with it. Interestingly enough, he started by being in worship and serving others. What happens when our young people don't have such reference points?

Jürgen Moltmann writes, “Modern individualism does not serve the freedom of human persons. . . . If you want to rule over people, you must separate, isolate, and individualize them as much as you can.”¹³ This is the message of our culture.

¹²John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002) 46.

¹³Jürgen Moltmann, “Perichoresis: An Old Magic Word for a New Trinitarian Theology,” in *Trinity, Community, and Power: Mapping Trajectories in Wesleyan Theology*, ed. M. Douglas Meeks (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2000) 124.

And this is the culture where young people are shaping their identity. So, how do we counter this message? By fostering, participating in, and defending communal life.¹⁴ Moltmann continues,

Where do I feel personally free? In a supermarket where I can buy whatever I want as long as I have the money for it, but where no one knows me and not even the cashier looks into my eyes? Or in a community where I am accepted, where people know me and look into my eyes and affirm me as I am?...The first focuses on things; the second on persons.¹⁵

Our identity is an existential issue. And a Christian understanding of identity orients our living in a particular way. Zizioulas says,

Life and love are identified in the person...outside the communion of love the person loses its uniqueness and becomes a being like other beings, a “thing” without absolute “identity” and “name,” without a face. Death for a person means ceasing to love and to be loved...whereas life for the person means the survival of the uniqueness of its hypostasis, which is affirmed and maintained by love.¹⁶

Loving and being loved are at the heart of what it means to be; they are what give humans a name and an identity. Called children of God we have a name and are loved beyond measure. Placed within particular communities, Christians embody this love in the world. Dynamic relationships with God, others, and the world are what define us as persons. This personhood is not a *seems like* image, but a lived experience that comes to life within our relationships in the particular places we live and work and play.

Where are we to direct our agency? Humans were created to participate in the ongoing unfolding of creation. Theologian Michael Welker states, “The creature’s own activity, which is itself a process of production, is not only a consequence and result of a creation that is already completed...it is [also] embedded in the process of creation and participates in that process.”¹⁷ Creation is not done and humans were created to contribute, to participate. And just as God’s love is directed to the world, so is our work. This is why meaningful labor is so important. And meaningful work emerges out of our identity and is embedded within a larger story. Work connects humans to God and God’s ongoing activity of loving the world. We, the subjects of God’s love, are filled with the Holy Spirit and empowered to be agents of God’s love, joining God in creating and sustaining life. Christian faith is not an abstraction, and neither is God’s love. Embodied and concrete, God’s love and Christian faith take seriously humans’ lived experiences and the realities of the world.

Martin Luther frames this work with his understanding of Christian freedom. Christians are freed from working for their salvation, so they may be freed

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 49.

¹⁷Michael Welker, *Creation and Reality* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999) 10–11.

for loving their neighbor.¹⁸ This freedom releases people of faith from being captive to the bounds of sin and consumerism's grip. This freedom, critical for loving relationships, allows people of faith to remain distinct while staying connected. This commitment grounds love and locates persons within particular communities, places, and situations. Agency, discovered when connecting our work and our love, has a direction—it is toward the world and for the neighbor.

What is a picture of abundant life? God desires not only for humans to have life, but to have abundant life.¹⁹ This abundant life is persons living in loving relationships with God, the neighbor, and the world. But what does that look like?

God, in Christ, knows the pain and suffering of human existence, and reorients it by proclaiming hope

As already stated, God's love for the world is revealed in two dimensions, creative and redemptive. Each bears witness to God's love in concrete ways in the messy, everyday world. The creative dimension of God's love highlights love's role in creating and sustaining life. Creative love is expressed in big and small ways. It is expressed in ordinary activities, like caring for people's basic needs, fostering and nurturing relationships, and helping people name and claim their gifts. It also emerges when people exercise their imaginations, initiate play, and create environments of discovery. The creative movement of God's love connects humans to the one who created them, and recognizes the Holy Spirit's activity at work. Within this movement, persons dwell together and inhabit shared space, possibilities and hope interrupt the mundane, and the fullness of life is discovered.

The redemptive dimension of God's love recognizes the sinful nature of humanity and brokenness of the world and reclaims love and life. Within our world of freedom and choice, humans are as capable of turning in on themselves as they are of turning out toward the world. Living in the midst of the world's dreams and aspirations, humans lose their way, close themselves off to others, and fixate on themselves. This reality is not new. Sin and brokenness are real parts of the Christian story, and God's love and mercy are revealed as much in broken moments as any other. God meets humanity in the dark, lonely moments of our human existence and offers light. God's promises are as potent when our friends betray us as they are at the waters of baptism. God, in Christ, knows the pain and suffering of human existence, and reorients it by proclaiming hope.

Our God is a God of love. And God's vision of abundant living is one of human beings living in community, opening themselves to the joys and suffering of their neighbor. And as they do, they experience the fullness of God's creative and redemptive love.

¹⁸Martin Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," in *Three Treatises* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989) 278–316.

¹⁹See John 10:10: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

NURTURING CHRISTIAN IDENTITY WITHIN A CRUCIFORM COMMUNITY OF HOPE

Christian communities are called to help young people discover who and whose they are. As people of faith our identity is countercultural, and unless we help young people frame their identity within a Christian narrative, young people are left to see faith and Christianity as another commodity to consume.

As communities of faith open themselves to rethink their call of nurturing Christian identity, they must do so keeping in mind all three levels of culture: beliefs and commitments, frameworks and systems, and practices. Having already articulated commitments around Christian identity, let me end by offering congregations a framework for understanding themselves and suggest some practices for embodying them.

What if congregations were to become cruciform communities of hope? Such a community would weave together three theological ideas; it would be incarnational, sacramental, and missional.

First, *incarnational* communities of faith are communities where unpolished, broken persons can be in relationships. They are places where people like Steve can come and be, just as they are. They are communities where people can turn when the distorted messages of our consumer culture wear them down. And they are filled with relationships where existential questions can be voiced and individual stories heard. Such communities take seriously the currency of relationship in God's economy and honor the gift of being human persons together. In today's world, fostering such community is hard. Yet, congregations as incarnational communities make it possible for young people to open up to others, as they also invest in others. And they don't do it in the abstract; they do it in concrete ways.

Congregations already employ many incarnational practices, so let me highlight just one—accompaniment. Accompaniment is relational ministry that focuses on fostering relationships for no other purpose than journeying together in space, over time. Accompaniment is about knowing another and hearing their story.

Recently, my high school daughter was having a hard time making her way through her senior season of tennis. Physical ailments and surgery had derailed her aspirations, but somehow she got herself on the tennis court by midseason and was ready to play. One afternoon I got a phone call. It was my daughter calling minutes before her match, emotionally distraught. I tried everything I could to support her and help her figure out how to navigate the situation. I'd been there through her journey—the doctor's appointments, the recovery process, the rollercoaster of emotions, and the recasting of dreams. Today, at this moment, while it mattered, it wasn't enough. All I wanted was to sit with her and give her a hug.

Accompanying people in the journey of life is hard and complicated. It's messy, its route unexpected, and it's not very rewarding. But sharing life together is also joyful, life-giving, and promising. As relational beings, we need people in our

lives, people who will journey with us in the good times and the bad, people who express their love in words and deeds and are willing to simply *be* with us. In a *seems like* world, embodied community matters. Being known and knowing others matters. This is a gift congregations can give to young people and it is essential in nurturing identity.

Second, *sacramental* communities of faith center themselves in God's creative and redemptive love, placing their life together in a larger story. In the waters of baptism we claim our identity as children of God, ground that identity in Christian community, and set forth into a lifetime of discovering what it means to be Christian. The bread and wine of the Eucharist place God's grace and mercy in our hands, reordering our lives and reorienting the gathered community. In the simple practices of the sacraments, we mark our place within the Christian story and are reminded whose we are. And as we partake, we are given a glimpse of God's vision of abundant life. In word and sacrament, God breaks into our present reality and makes things new.

Dwelling in living communities centered in word and sacrament leaves its mark on us. Inviting young people into the center of our shared practices changes them, and changes us.

Recently a mother of three small kids shared this story. They were running late getting Luke, the kindergartner, to school. As they arrived (late) to school they went to check him in at the office. As they entered, the secretary asked why they were tardy. Luke answered, "We were blessing each other and making the cross of Jesus on each other's foreheads." The secretary replied, "Oh." Then Luke, without missing a beat, said, "Would you like the cross of Jesus on you?" And before she answered he spit on his finger and made the sign of the cross on her forehead and blessed her. Dwelling in living communities centered in word and sacrament leaves its mark on us. Inviting young people into the center of our shared practices changes them, and changes us.

And third, *missional* communities of faith recognize human agency, our call to the neighbor, and the contextual nature of faith. Such communities direct us to the neighbor and to the world. They foster eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts open to the hurts of the world. They call out the gifts of God's people and the needs of the world. And as they do, they help us find work—meaningful, life-giving work.

This summer my college-aged daughter spent the summer serving in Louisville, Kentucky. She left early one May morning, reluctant and doubting her choice of summer work. She returned in August exhausted and filled with compassion. Each week students from across the country would arrive at their site. Each Monday they would head into the community to serve others. Each Friday they would board vans for home and the staff would regroup for another week. Through en-

gaging in ordinary practices, like raking lawns, playing with children, and serving food, and in the midst of ordinary relationships she experienced God's love in new and powerful ways, ways that brought a countercultural narrative to life.

God's people are called to the world and congregations have a role to play. Congregations can challenge and empower, and they can be catalysts and multipliers. With God's blessing, two loaves and a few fish fed a multitude. God's love is made known through our engagement in the world. Young people want to make a difference in the world and want to be part of something life-changing. It's time to join together.

There is another story and we people of God are the ones to tell it. Young people long to hear it, experience it, and live by it. Nurturing an identity outside the primary narrative will require being embedded in another story, with its commitments, frameworks, and practices. Congregations can be such places, cruciform communities who offer hope. Congregations do so by imagining another vision of abundant life, a vision where God's creative and redemptive love is its orienting principle and relationships its currency. Young people immersed in communities that embody incarnational, sacramental, and missional commitments allow them the opportunity to experience abundant living and come to know who and whose they are: children of God called to love God and the neighbor. ⊕

TERRI MARTINSON ELTON is associate professor of children, youth, and family and director of the Center for Children, Youth, and Family Ministry at Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, Minnesota.