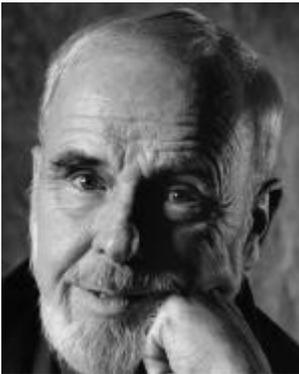


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Spirituality in a time of deep recession

by Rich Heffern



John Kavanaugh S.J.

One of the perennial bestsellers in the field of Catholic spirituality is Jesuit Fr. John Kavanaugh's Following Christ in a Consumer Society: The Spirituality of Cultural Resistance. Published in 1981, it's been in print ever since, and has been revised and updated twice. Kavanaugh teaches at St. Louis University where he is director of the Ethics Across the Curriculum program. He is an award-winning columnist for America magazine.

NCR: Your book was about confronting both Christ and American culture. It appeared in 1981, early in a decade that glorified greed, then was updated in 1991 following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the first Gulf War, and then in 2006 following the events of Sept. 11. If you were to revise it one more time -- now after the onset of deep recession, as the idols of capitalism show their clay feet -- what might you say to us?

Kavanaugh: My major concerns when I wrote the book were that there were no moral constraints on capitalism and consumerism, which increasingly took over our lives and relationships. Those who thought

the dynamics of capitalism were somehow balanced by the political and the cultural-moral sectors failed to understand how unconstrained capitalism held dominance over both politics and religion. Even Alan Greenspan, an advocate of Ayn Rand, professed surprise that the world of commerce and finance did not work under ethical limits.

Things are palpably not working out well in the consumer culture that you've described and critiqued so well. What effect will this decline have on the kind of formation of person and habit-shaping that you claim the consumer society performs on us?

While the economic decline has worked its greatest damage on the middle and lower income groups, with unemployment, displacement, the necessity for multiple jobs just to survive it, it is teaching people that we perhaps don't need all the "essentials" we once thought imperative.

We experience ourselves as incomplete and where once we often sought completion in acquiring consumer goods, we perhaps now look to other sources.

You advocate in your book as an antidote to consumerism a return to "human personhood, relationship, to the admission of inadequacy, to love and to transcendence." The commodity hucksters' offer doesn't seem as appealing as perhaps it once did. Does a movement toward spirituality take on a whole new meaning in the light of deep domestic and global recession?

Whether in good times or bad, a person who practices the disciplines of interiority, community, laboring for justice, for simplicity of life and openness to the marginalized in our society will be able to flourish as a human and as a Christian. Without these integrated disciplines, our life is deeply impoverished. Imagine the despairing worldview of the two Catholic men who committed suicide while killing wife and children because of their financial crises.

You speak of the impoverishment and domestication of the Christian faith, and of the intrinsic and necessary relationship between a living faith and an "activist" love. What does that kind of love, the call to the service of humanity and human fulfillment, have to offer us in hard times?

A living faith will necessarily lead to actions of justice and the works of love. These practices, in turn, lead us to a deeper appreciation of our interior and relational lives. Our Christian faith is communicated primarily by witness and invitation, which are encountered only through personal interaction and lived experience. Liberation, most fundamentally, is not a political, economic or sociological phenomenon. It can be found -- or accepted -- only when we are made present to ourselves and our possibilities, only when we are in touch with our deepest humanity.

Christianity, at rock bottom, you say, conflicts with American culture, even subverts it. However, as consumerism, which has been such a central part of that culture, weakens its hold on us, how does Christianity stand now in relationship to that culture? Is its voice perhaps strengthened?

Consumerism is only one aspect of the problem of idolatry, worshiping the products of one's hands. We are still in great thrall to the idolizing of the nation, of success and of self interest.

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Specifically, what might the Catholic spirituality and sacramental traditions have to offer us as we struggle to reinvent our lives and communities?

I think our greatest challenge is the contemporary tendency among many Christians and Catholics to reduce our faith to issues like abortion and homosexuality. These are important, but in the minds of many they seem more important than the fullness of faith itself.

There are seven deadly sins, not one. There are 10 commandments. There are eight beatitudes. Most important, all of these issues, as well as all the pronouncements of bishops or complaints from the Catholic left or right, are meaningless and empty if Christ has not saved us and called us to live our lives through and in him. Although the encyclicals of Pope Benedict call us to the basics of our faith, I think most Catholics in our country perceive the church as being unconcerned about the preaching of Christ crucified.

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