

Teaching Marketing at a Catholic University

Response by John Little

CREDO – Centre for Research into Ethics and Decision-making in Organizations
Australian Catholic University, Melbourne, Australia

In his paper, Andrew Abela explores a key question: whether the Incarnation has something to say to marketing, even to the roots of marketing theory. In their paper, Peggy Sue Loroz and Michael Stebbins also explore the intent of the same question – as is fitting in this conference. This is a key question concerning the nature of the human person and how best to explore it in the largely post-modern mentality of a business school, whether Catholic or secular.

Although the two papers have different approaches – Abela's is largely of a social science perspective, Loroz and Stebbins is more personalist – each is heading to the same conclusion concerning the individual student whom they are trying to engage, form and develop for a vocation (or career) in business and make business – and marketing – decisions in the future.

I found Abela's discussion of consumerism most interesting. Although it is a part of marketing's impact, he is also on the lookout for more significant empirical evidence to link marketing's effects with consumerism than is currently in the literature. Anecdotal evidence suggests there is a relationship; there is significant empirical evidence on the harmful effects of consumerism - poor health in the psychological and even spiritual sense. If our modern society depends for its economic growth and prosperity on consumerism, how do we reorient the social as well as business fabric? From this discussion, Andrew then asks larger questions about the role and purpose of marketing.

For answers, he looks closely at Catholic Social Teaching. He has taken an interesting initiative, namely to get questions from 100 CEOs on ethical issues they face, and then to find answers from CST, thus producing a Business Catechism. The Catechism could help students debate real issues in class, and then find principles in the Catholic Social Teaching that could apply. An extension would be for the students to articulate their own issues, and then explore within CST to find appropriate responses.

At the end of this section in his paper, Andrew draws on *CENTISIMUS Anno* to highlight the Church's emphasis "of beauty, truth, goodness and communion with others as a more objective measure of the value of the lifestyles promoted and facilitated by marketing." But I am left wondering how students infected by the post-modern secular mindset would appropriate these guidelines, unless they could first find them operative within themselves, within their own deeper, reflective spirit. Abela suggests the virtue tradition, grounded on natural law, would help them in this regard.

This brings me to some complementary leads suggested by Loroz and Stebbins. Where Andrew presents, in the first part of his paper, a social science perspective, and then moves towards a more personalist perspective in his closing section about virtue, Peggy Sue and Michael, throughout their paper, adopt a stronger personalist approach. In one example which addresses the larger question of marketing's role, the students reflect on the social impact of products they are familiar with. In a second example they discuss the sovereignty of the consumer; in a third,

they discuss what they consider good, bad and ugly examples of advertising, and explain why. Each of these examples could open up a deeper awareness of the meaning of the human person, by engaging students in a reflective process to find within themselves the basis for their own judgments about what is holistic, what is good or bad, and what is fair and sovereign. A good teacher will find the way to evoke and lead such discussions and help the students find the appropriate insights grounded on personal experience and tested by class discussion.

This takes us to Lonergan, who Stebbins introduces through the “ethics of achievement” and the ‘double loop’ decision-making process. The power of questions, the value of insight, the place of reflective judgement, the evaluative processes of deciding and taking action – all involve key skills which students need to identify within themselves, then develop and apply within their careers in business – in problem solving, decision-making and engaging others in organisational processes through good listening, questioning and moral judgment.

Both papers are ultimately concerned also about the development of our moral judgment as well as with marketing technique. What are the skills we need? How do we tap into the learning of those who have gone before? How do we pass on what is best from the experiences of business over the past 50 – 100 years? How do we draw down the best of our Catholic tradition and thinking in relation to social justice? Do business and the Catholic tradition meet at a crossroad? Are they opposed, and in conflict? Or do they run on parallel tracks, but distant from each other?

Ultimately, however, it is the human person who confronts these matters within themselves. Each of us need appropriate skills to navigate our own thoughts that arise in personal dilemmas, tensions and conflicts. What occurs within each of us will mirror what organizations experience on a larger scale. Insight is always the key inner event that resolves problems, clarifies issues of conflict and finds fresh ways forward. But insights are only produced through asking appropriate questions. In this sense, students need to be helped to find the right questions to ask of any situation in a marketing case or example, and then to systematically explore the robustness of the insights they get. Lonergan has a lot to offer in this respect. He points to the challenge of developing the notion of the ‘good’ created within the depths of each of us.

If the ‘good’ lies within, are we not then back to the place of the Incarnation in marketing. In reflecting upon both papers, I was lead to wonder about the pedagogical (and marketing) methods of the Lord. Did he not ask questions, tell stories to stimulate one’s wonder about meaning, convey ideas which challenge prevailing notions; and demonstrated in practice what his message was all about by his interest in the individual person. Although Scripture does not refer to it, I would be surprised if he did not use humour. Would not his use of irony, metaphor and language delight his audience and made them laugh at the sheer wonder of his skill? To my mind, all his methods are intended to lead his listeners to insight. And humour is at the heart of insight.

I raise the question of humour, because advertising which uses humour is always memorable. Recall how we laugh ourselves when we get the point of something that has, for a time, eluded us. I found myself Googling to find the famous “Rolo chocolate candy commercial” about the elephant. Much to my delight I found it. (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZuJ700_V7eI).

Also, I remember the Volkswagen ads of the 60s used to be wonderfully humorous or self-mocking to make their point. Perhaps there is a vital place for humour in advertising that will address the concerns of consumerism, recognise the values of the common good, and still convey the desired qualities of a product, without offending human dignity. Both papers imply methods which challenge students find creative ways to raise awareness of this dignity and the common good.

At the end of the day, both papers are seeking to develop the skills of their students. Abela refers again to virtue; Loroz and Stebbins, to the skills of using the mind well – along lines identified by Lonergan. Take honesty, for example. And the courage to express one's mind when honesty demands it. It may be that one is uncomfortable with a marketing strategy, say the portrayal of sexuality, but is working within an environment where such an approach is taken for granted, even as necessary. Does one express one's discomfort, or keep it under wraps for fear? Is one creative enough to offer an alternative approach? How does one negotiate within a business or social culture hostile to the dignity of the human person, such as illuminated by Catholic faith? Here virtue helps. But a pedagogy that helps students identify these very forces within themselves - and discuss them in the classroom - may be more challenging.

Both the empirical studies that Abela uses and the personalist methods that Stebbins and Loroz promote and to which Abela refers in his reference to virtue and the purification of reason are relevant to this conference. Both will generate further development and practical exercises, examples and case studies. The teacher's influence lies in the kinds of questions they ask of their students, and the interest of students to find real answers of value for their later professional lives.

Loroz and Stebbins raise a vital question about the role that faculty play in this process. They point out that many faculty members feel they should remain neutral with respect to value questions. This seems unfortunate, to my mind, and an error of post-modern thinking. Truth is a value – does it not require one to be forthright and tough-minded when seeking it? Can a good teacher be otherwise? Tough-mindedness can still ask tough questions while respecting the dignity of the other. That surely is the challenge of all who teach, especially in a Catholic university.

In conclusion, I found both papers stimulating and creative in their exploration of the themes of this conference. Both have much to offer in practical suggestions. Both converge on the importance of the human person, and rightly look to the insights of Catholic faith to deepen that appreciation. The real challenge is to bring these matters forward within a largely secular culture by appealing to the innate spiritual qualities of both staff and students. Again, in my view, a method to open up more deeply in this area has been put forward by Loroz and Stebbins and is recognised by Abela in his discussion of virtue and natural law.