

**TEACHING MARKETING IN A CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY:  
EXAMINING THE TENSIONS BETWEEN CHRISTIAN TEACHING  
AND THE PROMOTION OF CONSUMPTION**

**ANDREW V. ABELA, PH.D.**

One could be forgiven for believing that the Catholic faith does not appear to encourage the practice of marketing and its promotion of material consumption. For example, in Holy Scripture we read: “How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!” (Luke 18:24). St. Thomas Aquinas wrote: “...trade in itself has a certain quality of baseness since it does not of its own nature involve an honorable or necessary end.” (II-II, q. 77, a. 4). Yet the Church does not denounce material prosperity; quite the contrary, prosperity is often presented as the proper reward for virtue. Pope Leo, XIII in his encyclical letter *Rerum Novarum*, for example, wrote that “when Christian morals are completely observed, they yield of themselves a certain measure of prosperity to material existence” (#42). Is there such a thing as a Catholic perspective on marketing? If there is, how radical is it—how close to the root of all marketing theory and activity does it reach?

Pope Benedict XVI, in his address to Catholic educators during his April 2008 visit to the United States, made clear just how high a standard all Catholic education should be held to:

A university or school’s Catholic identity is not simply a question of the number of Catholic students. It is a question of conviction—do we really believe that only in the mystery of the Word made flesh does the mystery of man truly become clear (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 22)? Are we ready to commit our entire self—intellect and will, mind and heart—to God?

If a genuine conviction of the truth of the words of *Gaudium et Spes* 22 is central to the university’s Catholic identity, then should the “mystery of man” made truly clear in the “mystery of the Word made flesh” be at the heart of our understanding of the marketing discipline? Is the mystery of the Incarnation *essential* to our understanding of what it means to be a marketer or a consumer?

The purpose of this paper is to examine some of the challenges faced when teaching marketing in a Catholic university. As a preliminary exploration of the broad topic of a Catholic perspective on marketing, three particular questions are addressed. The first is Can one teach students to become effective marketers without them promoting consumerism? The answer to this question involves incorporating Catholic Social Teaching into the marketing curriculum, which leads to the second question: What aspects of Catholic Social Teaching are relevant to marketing, and what are the implications of this teaching for marketing? Since Catholic universities also teach non-Catholic students, the final question in this paper is can the implications of Catholic Social teaching be generalized for an audience that is not exclusively Catholic? In the

terms provided by Naughton, Bausch, Fontana, and Pierucci (2008), this paper is focused primarily on the integration of faith and reason, and secondarily on practical wisdom.

### **I. How does one teach students to become effective marketers without them promoting consumerism?**

The impact of marketing on consumerism is an important one for marketers to consider, because of the harms of consumerism, and even more important for marketers in Catholic Business Schools. While there is no empirical evidence of a necessary causal connection between marketing and consumerism, it is reasonable to assume, and anecdotal evidence suggests, that certain types of marketing activities do in fact promote consumerism. Historians have noted that the phenomenon of consumerism appears to arise whenever material prosperity has occurred throughout history. Yet there is something about the steady and concomitant growth of consumerism and mass marketing over the past two to three centuries that suggests that the two are closely interrelated, although perhaps in a way that is more intricate than a simple causal relationship in either direction. While empirical evidence of any such relationship has not been forthcoming, it would not seem to be theoretically unreasonable that extensive promotion of all manner of material consumption would lead to such consumption taking on an unreasonably high importance in the lives of many people.

While the relationship between marketing and consumerism is unclear, the harms of consumerism themselves have been solidly documented. People who hold consumerist values tend to have a lower wellbeing and lower life satisfaction, a greater tendency towards compulsive spending, and greater prevalence of depression. (See Abela 2006, 2007, for a more complete discussion of the relationship between marketing and consumerism, and of the harms of consumerism).

For Catholic Business Schools, this topic should be even more concerning, not just because of a greater sensitivity to the social impact of marketing, but because the harms of consumerism are likely even greater on a spiritual level than they are on a psychological level. Consumerism attacks the very heart of our Catholic faith by creating lifestyles where only material things count, and therefore encourages people to serve mammon, not God.

Nevertheless, consumerism is not the only issue that has to be addressed to determine how to approach teaching and research of marketing in a Catholic university. There are many others, including very large questions such as what is the purpose of marketing; and what are the benefits and harms (beyond consumerism) of marketing to society? Each of these questions can be answered in ways that build on Catholic teaching and are consistent with it, or in ways that contradict it.

### **II. What aspects of Catholic Social Teaching are relevant to marketing, and what are the implications of this teaching?**

In working out the answers to these questions, the richness of Catholic Social Teaching is of great assistance, offering insights into the concepts of property, the purpose of

business, the and proper role of investment. At the Catholic University of America, we are working on a project to develop a “Catechism for Business Executives.” In this project we are collecting relevant sources from Catholic Social Teaching to respond to a list of 100 difficult ethical questions faced by Catholic executives, developed through a series of interactions with Catholic business leaders, in particular members of Legatus, an association of Catholic Chief Executive Officers. This work includes some general business questions, which are relevant to all disciplines, not just marketing. Examples include (with associated quotations from CST):

*Are we morally obliged to maximize profits? In accepting investors’ money, are we taking on the duty of making as much money as possible for them?*

The Church acknowledges the legitimate role of profit as an indication that a business is functioning well. (*Centesimus Annus*, 35)

.. the purpose of a business firm is not simply to make a profit, but is to be found in its very existence as a community of persons who in various ways are endeavoring to satisfy their basic needs, and who form a particular group at the service of the whole of society. (CA, 35)

A theory that makes profit the exclusive norm and ultimate end of economic activity is morally unacceptable. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2424)

*Are there any moral obligations about where or how we should invest our firm’s capital, beyond considerations of profitability? (E.g., in deciding where to build a new manufacturing plant, should we allow any other considerations beyond what is going to reap the most profit for the firm?)*

... even the decision to invest in one place rather than another, in one productive sector rather than another, is always a moral and cultural choice. Given the utter necessity of certain economic conditions and of political stability, the decision to invest, that is, to offer people an opportunity to make good use of their own labor, is also determined by an attitude of human sympathy and trust in Providence, which reveal the human quality of the person making such decisions. (CA, 36)

Goods of production - material or immaterial - such as land, factories, practical or artistic skills, oblige their possessors to employ them in ways that will benefit the greatest number. (CCC 2404)

... whoever has received from the bounty of God a greater share of goods, whether corporeal and external, or of the soul, has received them for this purpose, namely, that he employ them for his own perfection and, likewise, as a servant of Divine Providence, for the benefit of others. (*Rerum Novarum*, 36)

Several other questions are focused directly on marketing topics.

## ***Product***

*Are there any moral limitations on what products we can manufacture and sell?*

The fundamental finality of ... production is not the mere increase of products nor profit or control but rather the service of man, and indeed of the whole man with regard for the full range of his material needs and the demands of his intellectual, moral, spiritual, and religious life. (Gaudium et Spes, 64)

*Is it morally acceptable to be involved in the production or marketing of harmless but wasteful or trivial products, if people seem to be willing to buy them?*

In singling out new needs and new means to meet them, one must be guided by a comprehensive picture of man which respects all the dimensions of his being and which subordinates his material and instinctive dimensions to his interior and spiritual ones. (CA, 36)

*Is it morally acceptable to be involved in the production or marketing of toys, video games, or movies that have violent or sexual content?*

Any trend to produce programs and products—including animated films and video games—which in the name of entertainment exalt violence and portray anti-social behavior or the trivialization of human sexuality is a perversion, all the more repulsive when these programs are directed at children and adolescents. How could one explain this 'entertainment' to the countless innocent young people who actually suffer violence, exploitation and abuse? (Benedict XVI, *Papal Message for World Communications Day: "Beauty Inspires and Vivifies Young Hearts and Minds*, 3)

## ***Price***

*What is a just price, and do we have any moral obligation to offer goods at a just price?*

A person who produces something other than for his own use generally does so in order that others may use it after they have paid a just price, mutually agreed upon through free bargaining. (*Centesimus Annus*, 32)

Even if it does not contradict the provisions of civil law, any form of unjustly taking and keeping the property of others is against the seventh commandment: [e.g.] ... forcing up prices by taking advantage of the ignorance or hardship of another. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2409)

## ***Promotion***

*Is it morally acceptable to use imagery to differentiate between two competing brands that are functionally equivalent (e.g. colas, toothpastes, washing powders)*

The practice of 'brand'-related advertising can raise serious problems. Often there are only negligible differences among similar products of

different brands, and advertising may attempt to move people to act on the basis of irrational motives ('brand loyalty,' status, fashion, 'sex appeal,' etc.) instead of presenting differences in product quality and price as bases for rational choice (*Ethics in Advertising*, 10)

*Is it morally acceptable to use members of the clergy or religious imagery to sell products?*

...they should see to it that communications or presentations concerning religious matters are entrusted to worthy and experienced hands and are carried out with fitting reverence. (*Inter Mirifica*, 11)

*Is it morally wrong to contribute to a culture of consumerism? How can we know if the advertising we create and the products we sell are contributing to a culture of consumerism?*

It is not wrong to want to live better; what is wrong is a style of life which is presumed to be better when it is directed towards 'having' rather than 'being', and which wants to have more, not in order to be more but in order to spend life in enjoyment as an end in itself. (CA, 36)

We disagree with the assertion that advertising simply mirrors the attitudes and values of the surrounding culture. No doubt advertising, like the media of social communications in general, does act as a mirror. But, also like media in general, it is a mirror that helps shape the reality it reflects, and sometimes it presents a distorted image of reality. (EIA, 3)

### ***Place***

*To what extent should larger retailers use their size to exert pressure on their much smaller suppliers?*

'The small and average sized undertakings in agriculture, in the arts and crafts, in commerce and industry, should be safeguarded and fostered. Moreover, they should join together in co-operative associations to gain for themselves the benefits and advantages that usually can be gained only from large organizations.' (Pope John XXIII, Mater et Magistra, 84, citing Pope Pius XII, Broadcast message, 1 Sept. 1944, cf. AAS 36 [1944] 254)

### ***Implications of CST***

Perhaps one of the most useful guidelines from Catholic Social Teaching for marketing is from *Centesimus Annus*, 36:

It is therefore necessary to create life-styles in which the quest for truth, beauty, goodness and communion with others for the sake of common growth are the factors which determine consumer choices, savings and investments.

In other words, rather than leaving the determination of the value of particular needs and wants to the subjective evaluation of consumers, the Church proposes the guidelines of

*truth, beauty, goodness, and communion with others* as a more objective measures of the value of the lifestyles promoted and facilitated by marketing.

According to Pope Benedict, as Catholic educators, we are called to foster our students' encounter with Christ. Catholic education cannot be

equated simply with orthodoxy of course content. It demands and inspires much more: namely that each and every aspect of your learning communities reverberates within the ecclesial life of faith. ... First and foremost every Catholic educational institution is a place to encounter the living God who in Jesus Christ reveals his transforming love and truth. (Benedict XVI, *Address to Catholic Educators*, The Catholic University of America, April 17, 2008)

But perhaps this call applies only to student life, and to their theology classes. Can it really apply to the marketing curriculum? The quotes above would seem to indicate that it should. In the quote at the beginning of the article, Benedict notes that, as educators, we are called to commit our entire selves to God. Presumably, our teaching and research efforts should proceed from this standpoint. The "ecclesial life of faith" is to penetrate "each and every aspect" of our institutions—which does not admit of an exception for the marketing discipline.

Is it really appropriate that marketing classes in a Catholic university be an occasion for students' encounter with Christ? As unusual as this may sound, it is a plausible notion.<sup>1</sup> First of all, in non-academic settings there are several organizations and numerous texts ordered to promoting exactly this. Groups like Legatus, Christians in Commerce, and the Catholic Business Network attempt to promote their members' growth in Christian faith within the marketplace. Numerous trade books have been published on how to be a good Christian in the workplace. If this is occurring in practice, then perhaps it is appropriate to reflect it in our classrooms.

Second, even if one were reluctant to take such a stand in a marketing class, it would seem that one could at least uphold as a bare minimum avoiding the promotion of worldviews that are actively hostile to Christianity. In particular, our classes should demonstrate a rich understanding of the consumer as a human person with integrated physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions, all of which have to be respected by marketing activities.

Third, Christian belief fills a gaping hole in our teaching of ethics. Following Nietzsche (1968), MacIntyre (1984) and Rorty (1982) have both argued convincingly (albeit from wildly different perspectives) that the Enlightenment project of justifying morality from reason alone has failed—that reason alone cannot provide a firm foundation for ethical

---

<sup>1</sup> Underlying this debate of how overtly Christian our business teaching should be are two broader contemporary theological debates about nature and grace, and creativity and receptivity. The nature and grace debate, largely between Thomists and Communion theologians, centers on whether nature can really be intelligible without grace—whether it has any meaning except in its final destination in grace. The creativity vs. receptivity debate focuses on whether man images God primarily in his creative activity, or in his receptivity. Both of these have significant implications for the development of a Catholic business scholarship that have yet to be addressed.

judgment. Rorty concludes from this we should give up any notion of absolute ethics, while MacIntyre instead proposes a return to the virtue tradition. Rorty's proposal is of course fundamentally incompatible with Christian faith. The virtue tradition proposed by MacIntyre is not only *compatible with* Christianity, in its fullest manifestation it has been in large part *formed by* Christianity.<sup>2</sup> The virtue tradition can be justified in terms of natural law, and so one does not necessarily have to be a Christian to subscribe to it, but in a university where a large proportion of the students are Christian, it would seem to make sense to begin from this fact and show how their Christian faith provides a sound and thorough moral foundation for life in general and business in particular—while the Enlightenment theories that too often fill the curriculum in business ethics courses in Catholic universities as well as secular ones (including my own Catholic University) are essentially bankrupt.

### **III. Can the implications of Catholic Social Teaching for marketing be generalized for an audience that is not exclusively Catholic?**

How do we allow for the fact that some proportion of the marketing classroom in a Catholic university will be non-Catholic? The Church recognizes that her social teachings have to be intelligible to those who do not share her fundamental assumptions, because by their (social) nature they require collaboration with and acceptance by others in a pluralistic society for their successful implementation, and hence have to be justified without requiring a Christian foundation.

This intelligibility *does* require, however, an understanding of the natural law as a universally applicable framework, and a rejection of any kind of relativism. To quote the Pope again,

When nothing beyond the individual is recognized as definitive, the ultimate criterion of judgment becomes the self and the satisfaction of the individual's immediate wishes. (Address to Educators)

Our approach then, as Clark (2008) has argued, should be to seek and promote the truth in all its manifestations. According to Pope Benedict, this is the true meaning of academic freedom:

In virtue of this freedom you are called to search for the truth wherever careful analysis of evidence leads you. Yet it is also the case that any appeal to the principle of academic freedom in order to justify positions that contradict the faith and the teaching of the Church would obstruct or even betray the university's identity and mission. (Address to Educators)

Such a search for truth does not have to invoke Christian faith or ethics directly. In a recent paper, Prof. Murphy and I critiqued the dominant approaches to marketing ethics over the past fifty years (Abela and Murphy 2008). We were able to do this without having to ground our analysis in any external ethical principles. Instead we proceeded by

---

<sup>2</sup> Some authors have attempted a return to a exclusively classical, pre-Christian version of virtue Hadot, P. (1995), *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*: Blackwell Publishers., but this approach appears to be based on an ingoing assumption that Christianity is irrelevant, rather than any scholarly demonstration of the inferiority of the Christian contribution to the virtue tradition.

identifying contradictions within the current theory. Since truth is unified, any divergence from the truth will inevitably result in a contradiction somewhere. This allows us, as scholars, to critique existing theory without having to insist that our scholarly colleagues share our principles (except the principle of non-contradiction, without which all rational discourse fails anyway).

We are to lead our students to this unity of truth, taking a stance of “‘intellectual charity,’” which

... calls the educator to recognize that the profound responsibility to lead the young to truth is nothing less than an act of love. ... [This] upholds the essential unity of knowledge against the fragmentation which ensues when reason is detached from the pursuit of truth. It guides the young towards the deep satisfaction of exercising freedom in relation to truth, and it strives to articulate the relationship between faith and all aspects of family and civic life.

## REFERENCES

Abela, Andrew V. (2006), "Marketing and Consumerism: A Response to O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy," *European Journal of Marketing*, 40 (1/2), 5-16.

---- (2007), "The Price of Freedom: Consumerism and Liberty in Secular Research and Catholic Teaching," *Journal of Markets & Morality*, 10 (1), 7-25.

Abela, Andrew V. and Patrick E. Murphy (2008), "Marketing with integrity: ethics and the service-dominant logic for marketing," *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 36 (1), 39-53.

Clark, Charles M.A. (2008), "Challenges to Bringing CST to a Catholic Business School."

Hadot, P. (1995), *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*: Blackwell Publishers.

MacIntyre, Alasdair (1984), *After Virtue*. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press.

Naughton, Michael, Thomas Bausch, John Fontana, and Ernest Pierucci (2008), "Business Education at Catholic Universities: An Exploration of the Role of Mission-Driven Business Schools."

Nietzsche, Friedrich (1968), *Twilight of the Idols* (R.J. Hollingdale, Trans.). London.

Rorty, Richard (1982), *Consequences of Pragmatism*: University of Minnesota Press.