Converting Consumerism: A Liturgical-Ethical Application of Critical Realism

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Abstract: Critical realism as a lens of thought is not new to theological inquiry, but recently a growing number of theologians have been using its conceptual frameworks to guide their thought on how social structures function theologically, and how ethics might function in light of its insights. This article pulls these developments into the nexus of liturgy and ethics, applying critical realist categories to contemporary understandings of how liturgical celebration (and the structures thereof) form, inform, and/or malform Christian ethical imaginations and practices. The article begins with a brief survey of the main tenets of critical realism and their histories in theological inquiry, and argues that a main gift critical realism can offer liturgical and sacramental theology is a structural understanding of liturgical narrative- and value-building. Having described this gift, the article moves to a concrete application of this method in liturgical theology and its implications for ethics: addressing consumerism as a culture that can be both validated and challenged by liturgical and sacramental structures. The article ends with some brief suggestions for using and shifting liturgical structures to better facilitate the Christian conversion of consumerism.

1. Introduction

Consumerism is so deeply a part of the cultural landscape of the United States that to critique it from a theological point of view might seem at once overly obvious (given the penchant of consumerism to reduce all entities to objects of commerce) and borderline futile (given consumerism's breadth and vitality). That said, at the confluence of liturgical theology and theological ethics, there is space for critiquing cultural currents in the context of ritual formation, lending to the project a method that moves beyond only argument. This article situates itself in that confluence, and uses a critical realist framework to situate critiques of consumerism, and suggests how liturgy might better embody something other than consumerist tendencies.

While critical realism as a method or hermeneutical approach to theology is not new, recently scholars have moved beyond its applications in biblical studies and systematics, to employing its precepts in theological ethics and theological accounts of social realities. Into this burgeoning milieu this article begins to introduce another area of use for critical realism: in liturgical/sacramental theology and its relationship with ethics.

To do so, the article proceeds in three parts. First, it outlines a brief history and background of critical realism, and especially those of its tenets that have given rise to much of its contemporary application in social theory, and subsequently in theological ethics. The main gifts that critical realism brings to sacramental and liturgical theology, I argue, are its conceptions of the interplay between structures and agents, and the ways in which the two emerge from one another, and interact with culture. Second, in order to sketch one concrete application of critical realism to an issue in liturgical/sacramental

theology, the article describes consumerism, or consumer culture, from a theological perspective, and argues that the ethical impact of consumer culture upon liturgy (and *vice versa*) can be best appreciated through the lens of critical realism. Finally, the article unpacks how critical realist categories can provide insights for how to approach and respond to consumer culture liturgically, and ends with two concrete examples of structural elaboration,[1] which can either liturgically buttress or weaken consumer culture.

2. Critical Realism

One might best conceive of critical realism not as a single theory or school of thought, but as a common set of shared convictions that have bled across philosophical, theological, and social-scientific disciplines in various attempts to give an adequate account of reality and humans' experiences thereof. According to Stanley E. Porter and Andrew W. Pitts, philosophical approaches that took the name critical realism began in the early twentieth century in North America, but while they share some of the aspects of what is currently meant by critical realism, most contemporary critical realists would find their intellectual roots in the seminal work of Roy Bhaskar.[2] Others have argued that critical realism's roots are best located as far back as Kant,[3] but regardless of the lineage, critical realists' convictions (and conclusions) tend to orbit at least three precepts. First, ontology and epistemology are distinct, in that what is real cannot be reduced simply to what is known. Second, while events occur due to real forces that do not depend upon humans' recognition of them for their efficacy, science properly understood is a socially constructed process, and therefore produces socially conditioned perceptions that describe those forces while remaining distinct from the real. Critical realists are keen to insist that there are no laws in nature, just forces, which human creations called "scientific laws" attempt to describe. Third, reality is stratified, which is to say that complex entities or structures emerge from less complex ones.[4] What follows is a brief summary of why these precepts matter philosophically, and how they have been used in social theory (which sets the stage for their use in theology, and therefore liturgy).[5]

The first precept, that ontology is not reducible to epistemology, is where Bhaskar diverges from (and responds to) Kant.[6] For Bhaskar and the critical realism that follows him, what *is* does not depend upon humans' perception of it. What Bhaskar sees himself combating by adopting this precept is a kind of "classical empiricism" that limits the real to human scientific inquiry, that is, to what humans can perceive or have perceived with the five senses.[7] Beyond the strictly scientific implications of this view of reality as "transcending"[8] human perception or context, Bhaskar's insight allows human knowing to circumvent the problems of "imprisoning" humans in the context of language or social

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1　This is not my term. I take it from critical realist Margaret Archer, as shown below.

2　(Porter and Pitts 2015, pp. 278–83). I should note at this point that, in Roman Catholic circles, critical realism is often connected with the work of Bernard Lonergan. However, my choice to engage Bhaskar and those who follow him (Archer, etc.) results from my interest in specifically social theory and applications of critical realism. Lonergan, for his part, tended to continue the line of critical realism as a cognitional theory, and developments of biblical hermeneutics tended to follow that (see, for example, Denton 2015, p. 240). Denton develops this explanation further in (Denton 2004), and points readers to chapter 1 of (Lonergan 1972). The Lonerganian strain of critical realism is not irrelevant to the current project, but Archer's development (springing from Bhaskar) is more immediately applicable to this discussion.

3　(Niiniluoto 1999, pp. 91–94).

4　Porter and Pitts, citing Bhaskar, term these three precepts intransitivity, transfactuality, and stratification ("Critical Realism in Context," 283). Porter and Pitts cite Bhaskar's 1998, p. xiii) as the source for these terms.

5　Critical realism, like any other set of convictions, is not without its critics. See, for an example critiquing critical realism in the conversation between religion and science, (Robbins 1999). Critical realism has also been critiqued as needlessly complicated (Murphy 1988), and as overemphasizing events (Mearman 2006). Even in light of these critiques, I find its approach compelling, for reasons discussed below in the article.

6　(Jerončić 2015, p. 357).

7　(Bhaskar 2008, pp. 26–27).

8　Bhaskar had originally termed this part of his formulation "transcendental realism" (Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science*, 26).

context.[9] That reality exists regardless of perception by objects that inhabit it, pulls the object of human knowing beyond the linguistic.

This is also an initial point of contact for social theory and theology. According to Christian Smith, so-called "network structuralism" in the social sciences has attempted to definitively move the subject of social inquiry from the individual human to the "structured system of social relations that comprises the real social world."[10] For our purposes, very similar methodological moves in liturgical and sacramental theology have been championed by figures such as Louis-Marie Chauvet, for whom the primary subject of inquiry in liturgical/sacramental theology is the Christian assembly, conditioned by the linguistic, symbolic systems that construct it.[11] What this first precept of critical realism offers is a corrective that maintains that what is structurally, anthropologically, or even relationally real remains real, independent of humans' ability to perceive it. Put another way, anthropological reality is not reducible to context, community, and/or language. Instead, as Schilbrack notes, "critical realism seeks to defend a clearer recognition of the fact (a) that our perception and knowledge are conditioned by our social locations does not imply (b) that we cannot refer successfully to a world that exists independent of language."[12]

The second precept, that scientific (and all academic) inquiry is socially conditioned, provides something of a counterpoint to the first precept. For Bhaskar and critical realists, adherence to traditional philosophies of science (i.e., those that hold reality to be independent from human perception thereof) is only tenable in conjunction with the recognition that what science produces is not reality, but rather socially conditioned and socially articulated ideas about reality. In explaining this distinction, Daniel K. Finn uses the following example:

> "[When I drop a book], The book does not hit the floor "because of the law of gravity." It hits the floor because of the relation of the book and the earth, and the force (not a law) of gravity which that relation generates. The law of gravity is simply the scientist's summary of the ontologically real causal relationship between the earth and the book."[13]

While the first precept guarded against reductions of reality to that which humans perceive or can perceive (subject therefore to human language), the second precept guards against elevating human perception to ontology rather than epistemology. In a word, the second precept resists what Finn calls empiricism,[14] the perspective that claims what humans can know and demonstrate scientifically is what is ultimately true, real on the level of ontology.

The first and second precepts provide something like epistemological poles around which critical realism orbits, but the third precept about the stratification of reality provides the driving force for critical realism's application to social theory and ultimately theology. The fact that reality is stratified connects deeply with the concept of emergence, conceived of as the idea that higher-order or more complex realities are not reducible to or ultimately explainable only on the basis of those lower-order realities that make them up.[15] For example, a complex reality like the Christian liturgical assembly is made up of a number of other relational realities (e.g., a presider and congregation, a local and universal church, a religious group and its surrounding community, the assisting ministers and the presiding minister, the music ministers and those to whom they minister, etc.), but the liturgical assembly is

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[9] (Schilbrack 2014, p. 168).
[10] (Smith 2010, p. 210).
[11] See, for example, (Chauvet 2001, especially pp. 31–34). Chauvet also explains this in more depth in (Chauvet 1995, pp. 180–89). A more developed comparison of the parallels between recent social theory and recent liturgical/sacramental theology runs beyond the scope of this discussion. Suffice it to say here that critical realism's challenges to network structuralism have yet to precipitate a similar challenge to assembly-centered liturgical/sacramental theology.
[12] (Schilbrack 2014, p. 168).
[13] (Finn 2016, p. 148).
[14] (Ibid., p. 148).
[15] (Bhaskar 1998, p. xiii).

not reducible to any one or even the composite of all these realities that nevertheless constitute it. Or, to take an example from economics, Finn has argued that the "market" is a reality that exists on a higher level than the individual persons who inhabit or participate in it, and while persons' participation in the market is real, the market reality is not reducible only to the actions of the persons within it.[16]

Emergence is hardly the exclusive domain of critical realism, but the ways by which it is translated into social theory in relation to the first two precepts provide fertile ground to be tilled for liturgical/sacramental theology. Much of this translation has been done by Margaret S. Archer, for whom emergence and the stratified nature of reality provide a way of transcending (that is *not* to say resolving) the temptation to reduce human realities to either results of individual action (individualism) or to social context (collectivism).[17] For Archer, it is too simplistic to fall into an either/or between individualism and collectivism, and it is too sloppy to brazenly tout a both/and. Rather, as David Cloutier explains, "Critical realism seeks a framework in which the two [individual agency and social structure] are 'related rather than conflated,' with proper attention given to the distinct 'properties and powers' of each."[18] In Archer's view, individual agency and social structures *emerge* from one another, becoming newly irreducible to each other in the processes of emergence that play out over time. Emergence in this sense is conditioned by historicity,[19] because as an individual's agency emerges from the social structures that surround her or him, so also are those social structures continually emerging from the exercises of individual agency that make them up. These emergences must function on the basis of time, precluding any critical realist approach from ignoring concrete, embodied history when performing an analysis.

A brief word about exactly *how* agency and structure influence one another in critical realism will set the stage for this discussion to transition into its central application: consumerism as it encounters liturgy. For Archer, structure and agency emerge from one another in essentially a three-stage cyclical process she calls the "morphogenic cycle,"[20] a technically defined synonym for what nonsociologists might call social change. Archer calls the first step[21] in this process "structural conditioning," in which "systemic properties are viewed as the emergent or aggregate consequences of past actions."[22] This step is where structures exert causal force on agents, by defining the parameters within which agency is exercised. Structures, which have already emerged from past cycles of this process, provide the framework of possibilities within which an agent makes decisions. For example, the structure of presider-congregation within liturgy, already an emergent structure, makes up part of the framework within which a parent with a fussy child decides whether or not to take the child out of the sanctuary during the sermon/homily. If one's child begins crying during the preaching, what is a parent to do? The parent is free to leave with the child and also free not to do so, but liturgical structures, having emerged from previous actions and structures, will define in large part the costs and benefits associated with each possibility the parent/agent considers. Additionally, the congregation and the preacher will be evaluating costs and benefits of possible actions. Does the preacher simply speak louder? Do other congregants shoot dirty looks at the parent, or take a moment to appreciate the young life and growth of their community? As the parent, congregation, and preacher deliberate, they negotiate the

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[16] (Finn 2019, p. 97, and all of chapter 7).

[17] (Archer 1995, pp. 33–64). Archer further explains these temptations with the terms "downward conflation," which is the temptation to conceive of human reality as the result of social context determining individual actions, "upward conflation," which is the temptation to see social context as *only* determined by individual actions, and "central conflation," which is an attempt at a both/and for agency and structure, but which ignores the importance of time for their interplay (Ibid., pp. 81–89).

[18] (Cloutier 2017, p. 70).

[19] (Archer 1995, pp. 66, 154).

[20] Archer notes that she borrows the term "morphogenesis" from (Buckly 1967), in large part because of its definition as elaborating (or beginning to change) the current forms that systems take (Archer 1995, p. 75, n. 11.).

[21] "First" here operates as conceptual only; in experience this "first" step is already emergent from previous cycles of this process.

[22] (Archer 1995, p. 90).

interplay between the structures they experience and what Christian Smith calls agents' "motivations," the beliefs, desires, and emotions that drive an agent to act.[23]

The second step is, as one might expect, "social interaction," by which Archer means the action(s) the agent chooses to take.[24] This step is also emergent in that it is not reducible *only* to a certain structure or set of structures that informed it. The parent's decision whether or not to remove the fussy child from liturgy is informed, but *not* determined, by the structures within which it occurs. The parent, if one asked, might explain the decision as a result of any number of reasons or structures, but the exercise of agency is essentially indeterminate; it *emerges* as a choice, rather than a deterministic result.

The third step that closes the morphogenic cycle (and opens it to endless further rotations) is what Archer calls "structural elaboration," which refers to "the modification of previous structural properties and the introduction of new ones . . . [which is] the combined product of the different outcomes pursued simultaneously."[25] Structural elaboration is the unpredictable process of the reproduction or transformation of social structures from exercises of agency. If the parent leaves with the fussy child, what impact will that action (coupled with the actions of others in the assembly, the actions of the presider, among others) have on liturgical structures? If the parent remains with the fussy child, what impact will that have on the structures of liturgy? One might be able to predict likely outcomes, but these predictions are of their nature fallible. The structures will morph based on the actions of agents, but like the actions of agents in the second step, this is an emergent change, not reducible simply to the actions that occasioned it.

Overall, the morphogenic cycle Archer develops provides a conceptual framework within with to account for the mutual influence of agency and structures, but is a wild and sometimes volatile framework, rather than a determinative one. This unpredictability is exactly why Archer's critical realist approach to agency and structure is so fertile for liturgical/sacramental theology: in liturgy, Archer's morphogenic cycle repeats any number of times, again and again as a heartbeat within Christianity (and I have yet to meet a liturgist or sacramental theologian who would describe any liturgy as conclusively predictable).

3. Consumerism and Christianity

Why is consumerism a likely aspect of culture for critical realism to address within liturgical/ sacramental theology? To answer, it would be good to explain why I have refrained from using the term "culture" thus far in the discussion. In critical realist social theory, culture refers to artifacts or systems of meaning or value, while structure (which has been our focus in this discussion thus far) deals with objective relationships between social entities. In the words of critical realist Douglas Porpora, "structure refers to social organizational relations . . . [while] culture refers to . . . anything with meaningful content produced by social intentionality."[26] In this light, consumerism is a culture, and a fairly strong one in the context of the United States.[27] However, cultures and structures inform one another, such that while structures may be interpreted through cultural lenses, so also are those cultural lenses conditioned by structures, which are themselves continually modified in and through the morphogenic cycle of structural conditioning, social interaction, and structural elaboration. My goal in this section is to describe a culture of consumerism as it encounters Christianity, especially in the United States, which will set the stage for thinking through how liturgy—with critical realist conceptions of structure and agency—may begin to convert it.

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[23] (Smith 2015, pp. 69–82).
[24] (Archer 1995, pp. 90–91).
[25] (Ibid., p. 91).
[26] Douglas Porpora, qtd. in (Finn 2016, p. 138, n.11).
[27] Consumerism is hardly an issue *only* for the United States, but the attention of this discussion will remain on the context of the United States. That said, consumer actions of course carry global implications, both economic and religious. For a study of these implications and how they form Christianity, see (Miller 2010).

That consumerism exerts cultural influence is hardly debatable in the context of the United States, but whether or not it is a culture itself (and if it is, what that means) may be less readily apparent. Vincent J. Miller, in his work *Consuming Religion*, argues convincingly that consumerism is best treated not as a culture itself, but that neither is it reducible simply to beliefs or values.[28] Miller describes his experience teaching students at Catholic universities who readily "absorb the most radical reconstructions of Jesus' politics, the preferential option for the poor, and Catholic social teaching," and yet inhabit quite comfortably the disconnect between these beliefs and many of their eventual entries into consumer culture and the "professional managerial class."[29] Consumer culture seemingly trumps even sincerely held ideas or beliefs. Part of the reason for this, in Miller's view, is the totalizing commodification that saturates the lives of persons. For Miller, what he calls "commodity abstraction" separates persons—even those who value social justice and equity—from consideration of the background and implications of their consumer actions, even as the commodities stand before consumers in apparent utter clarity.[30] In his words, "like all seductions, [commodities] veil as much as they reveal."[31] The result for Miller is that a deeper account of what constitutes "consumer culture" is necessary in order for Christianity to adequately respond to it. Employing the work of Kathryn Tanner and Wendy Griswold, Miller maintains that to speak of consumer culture is best done in reference to "cultural habits of use and interpretation that are derived from the consumption of commodified cultural objects."[32] Miller's choice in this regard allows him to recognize the potency of consumer culture without relegating it exclusively to any specific social location. Instead, persons from diverse social locations can and do participate in consumer culture in varying degrees, informed not simply by value or belief, but also by their "habits of use and interpretation."

For the purposes of this discussion, two central aspects of consumer culture that Miller discusses are of significant interest (Miller discusses many more, but these two warrant our attention here): the "Fordist" move from domestic production to consumption, and the religious "style" of spirituality. Miller cites Michel Aglietta to first use the term Fordism, which connotes the shifts in production and labor that took place in the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. The vast increase in industrialization and production precipitated (among other things) a kind of "deskilling" of labor that, according to Miller, "had consequences that went far beyond the shop floor. Combined with the ever more complete exhaustion of the worker's energy in the course of the workday, it helped transform the home from a site of domestic production into a place increasingly dependent on mass consumption."[33] This shift moved consumer culture into home life in a new, totalizing way, wherein nearly every aspect of domestic existence became an occasion for asking, "what can we consume (rather than produce) in order to satisfy this need?"

This shift was further solidified according to Miller by the rise of single-family homes and the consequent cultural isolation of the nuclear family.[34] While previous models of family life likely included the support and maintenance of relationships with extended family, the cultural shifts that enshrined the nuclear family as the fundamental social unit carried with it the likely unintended consequence of replacing that extended family support with devices to consume. In the same way that domestic production was supplanted by domestic consumption, extended-family support was largely supplanted by reliance on consumption of devices (for example, appliances). Additionally, reliance on these devices did not bring with it an increase in leisure time or freedom from necessary labor, but rather (and overwhelmingly), it precipitated an increase in standards of domestic work

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28　(Miller 2003, pp. 15–31).

29　Ibid., p. 19.

30　Ibid., pp. 37–38. Miller discusses here also the problems of recognizing value only in things, and further only in the *exchange* of things. Such valuing, he argues, is not so much a conscious choice as it is "our cultural default" (37).

31　Ibid.

32　Ibid., p. 30.

33　Ibid., p. 41.

34　Ibid., pp. 46–51.

that such devices provided (laundry, cooking, cleaning, shopping, etc.).[35] Miller does acknowledge that Fordism eventually gives way to a post-Fordist context of consumption,[36] but that development seems to only exacerbate the totalizing tendency of consumer culture. Whereas Fordism ushered in a focus on the nuclear family and domestic consumption in that context, post-Fordism seems to isolate even the individuals within families, bringing with it similar substitutions on an individual level of consumption for production, and devices for support. Such consequences are not without parallels in the lives of liturgical communities, as we will see in the next section.

The second aspect of consumer culture, and the one that bears directly upon theology, is the religious style of spirituality. Much can be said about approaching religion through the lens of spirituality (taken as a popular term rather than the academic discipline of spirituality), but for our purposes, of central concern is Miller's point that "spirituality as the emergent form of religious life is consonant with the workings of commodification."[37] In popular forms of spirituality in the United States, what tends to be of paramount importance is how well certain aspects of religion can satisfy whatever religious needs or desires an individual experiences, how efficiently they can do so, and in what combination they are most appealing. Timothy Brunk, writing on consumerism and liturgy, locates this tendency not primarily in Fordism or even secularization as Miller tends to, but rather specifically in the "consumerist mindset" that transforms the dignity of persons into the absolute priority of individual desires and concerns.[38] Individualism, for Brunk, precipitates what he calls the consumerist mindset because it translates religiously into a perpetual question of "What do I need now?"[39] Like the dissolution of domestic productivity and extended family support in the wake of Fordism, the religious style of individualized spirituality tends to dissolve, as Brunk points out, both the understanding of the importance of liturgical assembly, and also many notions of both religious permanence or loyalty.[40]

Brunk also moves further in this direction, explaining that consumerism tends toward a culture that values immediate gratification, which encourages individuals to constantly ask themselves whether what they have or are is sufficient, and which products (religious or otherwise) could best reinvent them into some better version.[41] When one's culturally formed mindset in any activity—especially liturgy—is to constantly evaluate whether the activity is satisfying one's perceived needs with adequate efficiency and strength, the very category of participation can be compromised. Or, at least, participation becomes a carrier primarily of evaluation, and thereby transforms from production (adding one's participation to some activity, like a liturgical assembly and community) to consumption (consuming a liturgical assembly or community as a product or device). This attention to self-evaluation is akin to what Tom Beaudoin calls "branded culture," by which he means that, in the context of religion like any other context, what persons consume (by wearing certain clothes, eating certain things, etc.) continually builds or rebuilds who they are, even as spiritual persons.[42] The liturgical-theological problems with this are well-documented,[43] but such problems diffuse also into the realm of theological ethics. To the degree that liturgical celebration accommodates or especially appropriates the consumerist mindset, it also participates in the ethics that operate in consumer culture.

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[35] (Schor 1991, pp. 88–94). Schor also documents the significant increases in time required for labor over the last few decades of the twentieth century (17–82) and argues that Americans have essentially become captives of a work-and-spend cycle in which consumerism is totalizing (107–38).

[36] (Miller 2003, pp. 66–71).

[37] Ibid., p. 106.

[38] (Brunk 2011, p. 55).

[39] Ibid., p. 56.

[40] Ibid., pp. 56–57.

[41] Ibid., pp. 57–67.

[42] (Beaudoin 2003, volume 7, p. 59).

[43] See also (Cavanaugh 2002, or Veiga 2012, or even the earlier essay by Kiesling 1978).

Theological-ethical appraisals and critiques of consumerism have already been done extraordinarily well,[44] but to them I would like to add one ethics-based interpretation of consumer culture as it applies to liturgy: consumer culture as ethical egoism. By ethical egoism, I mean an ethics that takes self-interest as the basis for discerning what is good. At first blush, this may seem so obviously contradictory to coherent Christian approaches to ethics as to not warrant discussion, but when I teach ethics to undergraduate students, my experience has been that many if not most students find it fairly easy to both espouse Christian ideals of justice, love, forgiveness, selflessness, and mercy, and also to hold self-interest as the primary, necessary criterion for what constitutes good living. Or at the very least, relatively few students seem willing to depart from what they view as the practicality of ethical egoism when it conflicts with the ideals of more explicitly Christian ethical systems, or they attempt desperately to deny that there might be any such conflict between naked self-interest and Christian ethics.

Few writers have helped me elicit this more clearly in the classroom than Ayn Rand, for whom the virtues of rationality, productiveness, and pride lead to the desired state of happiness, a state for which at least the self-interest of maintaining life (and ideally a rational, productive, and proud life) is necessary.[45] Almost without fail, there is no learning curve here for students, who have been formed by consumer culture, among other things, to operate according to the propagation (production) of their own views of life, rationality, and pride, and to consume whatever goods or services will most efficiently accomplish that production. So deep does this formation run that when I dare to suggest that some principle other than self-interest may be suited to ethical living, the reactions tend to hover around questions like, "that would be less efficient or practical," "why would I want to pursue something other than my own interests," or "how would that lead me to get what I want out of life?"

My point here is not about ethics writ large. Translated into reactions about liturgy, the questions I get from my students about moving away from self-interested consumption could remain essentially unchanged when discerning one's possible participation in liturgical communities. Consumer culture, as we noted with Vincent Miller above, is far more than a set of values; it is woven into the fabric of American Christians' self-understanding. In this context, the question is not only about Christians treating liturgical communities as commodities to be consumed; it is also about the ways in which liturgical communities can—intentionally or unintentionally—affirm the consumerist approach to religion, and thereby give a religious mandate to consumerist ethics (read: ethical egoism). If liturgy is, among other things, a place of ethical formation, then reactions to and accommodations of consumer culture within liturgy give flesh both to consumer culture's impact on liturgy (*ad-intra*) and liturgy's validation and/or repudiation of consumer culture (*ad-extra*). To develop this line of thought further, we must return to critical realism's treatment of structures and agents, as well as the ways by which they interact with culture.

4. Converting Consumerism

Critical realism is not new to theological inquiry,[46] but relatively little has been done in applying its insights to liturgical or sacramental theology. However, critical realism's approach to the interplay between structures and agents, and therefore between these two and culture, provides a potent way forward in areas where liturgical and sacramental theology has sometimes dissolved into vagueness (i.e., the oft-unspoken presumption that if we get our theology just a little more correct, then right liturgy or right liturgical/ethical formation ought to organically follow) or defeatism ("all we really need is better catechesis!"). Into these rather unsatisfying theological endgames, critical realism can inject a

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[44]　See, for example, (Beabout and Escheverria 2002, or Himes 2007).

[45]　(Rand 1964, pp. 9–24).

[46]　Many of its uses thus far have been relegated to biblical studies and systematic theology. See, for example, (Meyer 1994, or Achtemeier 1994). See also note 2 above, for my reasoning in bypassing the critical realism of Bernard Lonergan in this discussion.

helpful framework for contriving concrete possibilities for cultural conversion, if a community is brave enough—or, admittedly, possibly also foolhardy enough—to take hold of and shift the unpredictable structural levers of the morphogenic cycle. What follows are some suggestions for doing so in order to address consumer culture and its challenge to liturgy.

The first section of this discussion outlined a critical realist conception of the interplay between structure and agency, namely one of mutual emergence, which Archer terms the morphogenic cycle. However, in order to apply this framework to the issue of consumer culture, we need to recognize that a parallel interplay takes place between culture and agency. For Archer, while the morphogenic cycle between structure and agency rotates through the processes of structural conditioning, social interaction, and structural elaboration, the morphogenic cycle between culture and agency similarly proceeds through processes of cultural conditioning, sociocultural interaction, and cultural elaboration.[47] Additionally, the central causal forces of the structure–agency cycle hold in parallel with the culture–agency cycle, in that cultural conditioning comprises the social backdrop for an agent's decision-making, and exerts indeterminate causal force on the agent. The agent then acts (sociocultural interaction), having been formed by the cultural factors of which she or he is a part, and that action, coupled with the actions of other agents in the sociocultural interaction, gives way to cultural elaboration, the formation, re-formation, and malformation of which closes the cycle and begins it again.

One ought to note at least two things in this conception of the relationships between structure and agents, and agents and culture. First, as Archer points out, the two morphogenic cycles "intersect in the middle element of the basic cycle."[48] Agency, it turns out, is the unit common to both structure and culture, and the unit that provides the bulk of translation between the two. It is important to note that for Archer, agency does not necessarily imply *only* the agency of individual persons. Rather, she speaks also of the agency of "interest groups,"[49] recognizing that the exercise of individual agency is almost never that of an isolated, solitary actor. Still, agency remains weighted toward the individual, and to that extent it implies that the translation of social reality between structures and culture essentially takes place through the actions of persons—enstructured and encultured agents certainly, but nevertheless persons.

Second, the intersection of the two cycles, while mediated through social interaction and sociocultural interaction—that is, the actions of agents—does not imply a direct nexus point between the two cycles. Rather, in Archer's view, it is actually the third steps of the cycles that cross over to inform the first step of the cycles parallel to them.[50] Structural elaboration emerges into cultural conditioning, and cultural elaboration emerges into structural conditioning. The import of this point is, for our purposes, to caution against thinking that a change in structural conditioning can lead to a change in culture (through social interaction of agents) without continued elaboration of that structure beyond the initial change, or that vice versa, a shift in structural conditioning can, through sociocultural interaction of agents, lead to a shift in structure without continued elaboration of culture as well. In a word, this process is messy. It is also unpredictable. It is also, for Archer, quite real. Changes in structure, culture, and agency can be both intentional and unintentional, but they are not mechanistic. The morphogenic cycles of structure–agency and culture–agency are not determinative cycles; they are cycles of emergence, where each revolution of the cycle will bend the trajectory of the cycle in a slightly new, unpredictable way. There are ways in which shifts to agency, culture, and structure may steer that bending, but these are far from deterministic processes.

With this humility of purpose in mind, I would posit the thesis that liturgical and sacramental theology, especially in the context of liturgy and ethics, has paid admirable attention to culture and

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[47] (Archer 1995, pp. 168–69, 309).
[48] Ibid., p. 305. Emphasis removed.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid., p. 309.

agency, but it has tended to either ignore or shy away from structure. What I mean by this is that when problems appear in liturgy, the bulk of theological energy tends to be spent in the meaning-building or clarification of cultural realities, or in suggesting and refining practices intended to shape agency culturally. To be clear, these are good and necessary things to do (for example, Timothy Brunk's article, cited above, after working through an account of consumerist culture, ends with some very helpful suggestions about forming agency and culture).[51] However, critical realism suggests that there is a potent third area of social reality that is open to analysis and even change: that of structures. Structures, as objective entities distinct from agency and culture, nevertheless both build and are built by agency and culture. Liturgical/sacramental theology, especially as it encounters ethics, would needlessly hinder itself by ignoring structures and their ability to change.

　　　To show what I mean, I'd like to suggest two examples of structural conditions that have shifted (and continue to shift) as a result of cultural elaboration that, according to the morphogenic cycle, emerged from sociocultural interaction and the cultural conditioning that preceded it. I do so with the conviction that changes (elaborations) in these structures have and can continue to shift cultural conditioning in the context of liturgy, for good or ill. One should take care not to expect a quick-fix or silver bullet solution here. Recall that for Archer, the historicity of the relationship between agents and structures is integral to their reality, and so shifting of structures is not something that takes place instantaneously. In fact, not only do changes not take place instantaneously, but shifts to structure would best be approached stepwise, in order to avoid falling into the illusion that one might reduce structures to mere tools of agency. If an agent or group of agents shifts a structure, at best they may have in mind a general trajectory toward or away from which such structures will elaborate as they continue to develop. Structures shift through the morphogenic cycle, and not necessarily quickly. With this humility of purpose in mind, what follows are two examples of how liturgical/sacramental structures might change in order to begin bending the morphogenic cycle away from consumerism. There may be other beginnings, and better ones depending on the specific context of a liturgical community; these are examples, not solutions.

Example 1. *Who makes the communion elements?*

　　　Simply asking this question may reveal my agenda in asking it (and, it is important to note, I am far from the first one to raise this particular issue).[52] There is a relational structure between the baker of the bread and the liturgical community, as well as between the winemaker and the liturgical community. My assertion here is that elaboration of consumer culture has so driven the structural conditioning of these relationships that for a great many liturgical communities, parallel to the supplanting of domestic production by mass consumption we saw in Vincent Miller's work above, these relational structures do not even register as embodiments of consumerism. This of course would come with notable exceptions (certainly some liturgical communities maintain direct and ethical relationships with local producers of bread and wine), but the pervasiveness of sleeves of wafers and gallon jugs of Mogen David in many liturgical celebrations suggest to me that the exceptions remain exceptions.[53]

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[51]　(Brunk 2011, pp. 68–72).

[52]　This question has been asked from a variety of theological vantage points, but many thus far tend to connect the question to environmental concerns, and/or questions of returning eucharistic practice to that of a full meal for community sustenance. These are certainly important aspects of the question, but for our purposes in this discussion, I would like to ask it specifically in relation to consumer culture and the possibility for structures of eucharistic practice to shift that cultural paradigm. For other engagements of this question, see (Jung 2006, pp. 130–40; Hostetter 2017, p. 54; Northcott 2007, pp. 261–66). Laura M. Hartman does ask this question in passing relationship to consumerism, but I would like to push further in this direction than her project initially goes (Hartman 2011, p. 163).

[53]　It may also be good to recognize that some mass production enterprises are nevertheless cast as much as possible as sustainable, family-owned businesses, indicating a recognition of the tensions of consumerism even in its execution (see, for example, Zezima 2008).

I am not suggesting that switching from mass-produced wine to a local (even parishioner) winemaker and from mass-produced wafers to a church bread-baking group will magically equip a liturgical community to resist the totalizing commodification of persons and communities that consumer culture heralds. Rather, I am suggesting that basing structures—for example the structures of relationships between a liturgical community and those who produce its communion elements—on elaborations of consumer culture already weights the social interactions of that community toward cycling ever deeper into consumer culture. This is more than a matter of hypocrisy (though it is that as well, because how can I critique consumerism while consecrating its fruits?) because hypocrisy is nearly exclusively the realm of the agent (contradictory words and actions). This is instead a matter of the structural frameworks that pave the way for hypocrisy in the first place. To shift the structures of sourcing a liturgical community's communion elements could—slowly, ever slowly—elaborate into a cultural conditioning that is something other than consumerism. It also might not. But the question at this point is, even in the context of slow historicity and unpredictability, why not bet on structures that depart from consumerism, rather than ignoring the structural realities by exclusive focus on culture and agency?

Example 2. *Who sets the communion table?*

About two years ago, the liturgical community in which I worship adopted a structure of communion preparation in which the children of the congregation—as many or as few as are present—do the work of preparing the communion table. During the offering, the children leave their seats in the pews and make their way to where the dishes and elements are stored (they neither need explicit invitation anymore, nor do they process; it's a beautifully malleable and rather uncoordinated process). Then, they take turns bringing the wine, the bread, the plates, the chalices, the towels, and whatever else happens to be present up to the altar, where they are received by the presider, and having been thanked for their help, the children return to their seats. To be clear: this is a process, not essentially a structure. However, it was made possible by a structural elaboration in which the community (most especially the presider) recognized the structure of presider–table-setter and shifted at least one aspect of it, namely, that the table-setter was no longer the usually adult assisting minister of the day, and instead became the assembly's young ones.[54]

This structural elaboration has made possible an area of meaning-making, that is, cultural conditioning, that was not available before the structure shifted. Certainly the meanings derived are unpredictable—just as many likely see this as an opportunity for an "isn't-that-cute" precious moment as for anything deeper—but even in that context of unpredictability, the emergent cultural conditioning has paved the way for other emergent sociocultural interactions and cultural elaborations. Child agents, on the whole, have taken quite seriously their new role, with older children guiding younger children in how to participate, and often helping them when underdeveloped motor skills threaten to send some piece of pottery crashing to the floor. The assembly, for its part, has begun to recognize the value not simply in "letting kids participate," but in treating children's contributions as both real and necessary to the celebration.[55]

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54 I should mention here that structures are not primarily concerned, in critical realism, with *who* exactly is filling them, so one might argue that I have misused the term structure in this example. I would reply that what changed in the structural relationship *was* actually a set of aspects that were seen either as obvious or even essential: age (from adult to the young), number (from one to an indeterminate number), and efficiency (the current structure produces longer, less reliable table-setting).

55 It might be helpful to note here that, in this particular liturgical community, the children are also welcome to participate in the Holy Communion they have helped set up if they desire to (with the understanding that they are ideally being formed in ever-greater understanding of the mystery they participate in). I readily acknowledge that this may not be possible for all liturgical communities, but again, what I am trying to elucidate here is not imitation of these specific structural shifts, but community-appropriate structural shifts that would tend to elaborate away from consumer culture.

The point at which this example touches consumer culture is that ultimately this process is not efficient (it does not easily lend itself to instant gratification), nor does it prioritize the consumption of religion for the nuclear family (families are physically separated when their children go to set the table and their parents/guardians remain in the pews) or the interests of any single individual (some like the practice, and some do not). The children's witness is that this labor makes a difference, and the meanings consequent upon consumer culture do not fit easily into this structural conditioning. The kids haven't bought or merited a place at the table, other than by being invited. However, this structure, perhaps by its novelty and perhaps by other factors, is pronounced; it is highly visible and accentuates by its makeup the other structures at work in the liturgy. In this way, what one might derive as ethical implications from the celebration of the liturgical assembly is formed, at least in part, by a structure that is not soaked in consumerism. Again, such a structure does not "fix" consumerism on its own, not by a long shot. Rather, this structure opens the door for further structural and cultural elaborations, which may continue to twist away from consumer culture, or they may not. In either case, the liturgical community has elaborated this structure in order to embody something true about the liturgical celebration and its ethical implications beyond, and I believe that is a gamble from which liturgical and sacramental theology can learn.

5. Conclusions

This article has argued that critical realism provides fertile conceptual ground in which to sow liturgical/sacramental theology, especially as it encounters ethics. Beginning with a summary of the development of critical realism and the ways in which it was translated into social theory, I then argued that Archer's model of the morphogenic cycle provides a compelling way to conceive of the mutual emergence of structure and agency. Following this, the article presented a theological view of consumer culture, and named both liturgical and ethical problems with consumerism. Finally, I argued that the parallel morphogenic cycles of structure–agency and culture–agency provide an illuminating framework for understanding the underappreciated importance of structure in liturgy and ethics, alongside agency and culture. Given the examples of both the structure of who provides the communion elements to liturgical communities and who sets the communion table, I argued that structures can, albeit slowly and unpredictably, provide another avenue for conditioning liturgical-ethical engagement with cultural forces like consumerism. This is not a silver-bullet fix, but critical realism's treatment of structures can provide another worthy tool to studies in liturgy and ethics.

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