The Commodification of Social Justice

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It was in the coffee aisle of a local supermarket some time ago that the problem of the commodification of social justice became apparent to me.

The culprit was a bag of organic, fair-trade coffee beans. Such products were certainly nothing new, as coffee – the second-most traded commodity in the world – had by that time become a rallying point for the socially just and the ethically conscious. Indeed, I was already quite accustomed to seeing organic and fair-trade products on store shelves, in specialty shops, and in the hands of proudly anti-establishment friends. It was not the product itself, therefore, but rather the packaging that had caught my attention. In almost every respect it was a typically chic, fashionably minimalistic, and hardly remarkable design, with the exception of the branded label: splashed across the front, in prominent lowercase titling, were the words, “ethical bean.”

I immediately considered the obvious question: how could a bean be ethical? “Ethicality” seems to describe actions, not objects; thus only the means of the bean’s production, and perhaps the act of supporting these means, could properly be described as such. Yet here was a bag of “ethical” coffee which was, in effect, attributing the ethical dimension of particular actions and social justice initiatives to the product itself. Was this not a commodification – the process by which extrinsic and often economic value is assigned to something, allowing it to be sold, purchased, and acquired – of ethicality, of justice itself? And if it was, then what practical and moral-theological implications did it

1 This is the brand name of the Ethical Bean Coffee Company, a Canadian coffee company established in 2003.
have from a Christian perspective? These questions certainly warrant further consideration, beginning with an understanding of the relationship between justice and the market.

Historically, the marketplace has been an important arena for exploring issues of social justice. The abolition of slavery and child labour and the creation of legislation regarding safety and equality in the workplace are some of the numerous ways in which the market has sought to uphold principles of basic human rights and dignities. These issues, however, have traditionally been directly relevant to the function of the market itself. Although many recent initiatives certainly share this focus – notably the fair trade and organic movements – others, such as funds for international development or medical research, are less clearly linked to the economy as such.

This broadening of horizons can be attributed to a general shift in the economic strategy of social justice movements. In the past, the market was seen as the place in which social justice was to be effected, and movements focused on changing business practices and market dynamics to achieve their ends; this is no doubt still the case with respect to movements such as fair trade, which focus on predominantly economic issues. However, justice movements in general – including fair trade – now increasingly see the market as instrumental for the achievement of their objectives. In other words, these movements now aim to use the market’s own dynamics of production and consumption to effect socially just change. This new approach is epitomised in the sale of “ethical goods,” the profits of which are used to fund social justice initiatives.

Ethical goods, or goods produced and sold with the explicit aim of benefitting an initiative of social justice, are as varied as conventional consumer products. Nevertheless, ethical goods are alike in two respects: they are sold with an “ethical premium,” a predetermined portion of the sale price which is redirected to the initiatives they support,
and their particular brand – an abstracted concept or identity attached to a product – is infused with the meaning and objectives of these initiatives. This latter characteristic ensures consumer awareness of the ethical nature of the product and adds purchasing incentives, as the consumer purchases not only the product itself but also the ethical brand identity associated with it.

Well-known examples of ethical goods include the “Fairtrade” certified range of products in many European and North American markets. These products – ranging from coffee to cotton to fruits and vegetables – are given a certification based on an evaluation of their means of production according to guidelines determined by Fairtrade Labelling Organizations (FLO) International, a fair trade standard-setting organisation based in Germany.² Certified products are sold with a “Fairtrade Premium,” which is funnelled back to producers, and are marked with the distinctive “Fairtrade” logo, which consumers use to identify and purchase them.³

There is a basic principle of equality underlying the fair trade movement, which is premised on the fundamental inequality of existing trade relationships. Traditionally, a poor majority of workers have sold goods and provided labour at low prices to an affluent minority of consumers, widening the gap between the rich and the poor and leading to a concentration of wealth which overwhelmingly favours a small fraction of the world’s population. Fair trade seeks prices and wages that allow producers to afford the necessities, services, and opportunities for improvement which are currently only available to the

² FLO International issues “Generic Fairtrade Standards” outlining requirements for social, socioeconmic, and environmental development, as well as for labour conditions, and separate “Product Standards” for specific products (see http://www.fairtrade.net/standards.html).
³ These pricing standards apply to the sale of goods from producers to corporate buyers. Prices vary depending on the product and its place of origin: for example, until May 31st, 2008, “washed Arabica” coffee beans grown in Central America, Africa, and Asia had a “Fairtrade Minimum Price” of $1.21 and a $0.10 “Fairtrade Premium,” with an additional $0.20 “Organic Differential” for certified organic beans, per pound (all figures USD; see http://www.fairtrade.net/product_standards.html).
wealthy; FLO International aims to achieve this by enforcing both a minimum price and the “Fairtrade Premium,” which are used to improve working and living conditions for producers. The aim is equality, not just of basic rights, but of opportunities for social, political, and economic activity and improvement.

Another prominent example is the “(PRODUCT) RED” branding line, an initiative begun by U2 vocalist Bono and politician Bobby Shriver to address the AIDS epidemic in Africa. The brand is licensed to numerous corporations, including The Gap, Motorola, and Apple, which in turn create or modify products with the (PRODUCT) RED logo and commit to donating a portion of the profits from these products to The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria. The Global Fund allocates the money to specialised grants for HIV and AIDS treatment in four countries in sub-Saharan Africa, where the pandemic is at its worst. The amount donated varies, from $10.00 for every purchase of a (RED)-labelled Apple iPod Nano to 50% of the profits from sales of (RED) apparel sold by The Gap. Products are prominently and unmistakably marked by a variation of the (RED) logo and colour scheme, and enormous marketing campaigns have helped to develop the brand’s identity since its launch on The Oprah Winfrey Show in 2006.

The key motivating factor for the (RED) initiative is the prevention of unnecessary death, which might broadly be described as a principle of the human right to life and livelihood. According to the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, 76% of AIDS-related deaths in 2007 occurred in sub-Saharan Africa. No cure or vaccine for HIV

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4 These “Global Fund (RED) grants” exist in Ghana, Lesotho, Rwanda, and Swaziland, and provide for HIV treatment, testing, and training of medical personnel (see http://www.joined.com/Learn/HowRedWorks/EveryPenny.aspx).
5 The $10 donation was the original amount declared by Apple, Inc for its $249.99 8GB (RED) iPod Nano and reported by various sources (see http://news.cnet.com/Apple-paints-another-iPod-red/2100-1041_3-6132350.html); Apple no longer discloses the amount it donates.
currently exists; only highly regular – often twice a day – and expensive anti-retroviral
treatments can help to suppress its effects. In a region where 40% of the population lives on
less than a dollar per day, these treatments are far too expensive for many to afford. (RED)
aims to use the profits gained from conventional commercial practices to provide these
treatments, as well as other essential measures, to those who cannot otherwise afford them.

Certainly, ethical goods such as these represent a bold new approach to the fight for
social justice in the developed world. Through their commercial nature, they are able to
harness the enormous economic power of consumerism and the capitalist market. By the
same token, they allow the cause of justice to be advanced without fundamentally changing
the pattern of consumption characteristic of capitalistic economies and cultures. Voluntary
donations to particular initiatives are not necessary; consumers can shop and make a
difference at the same time. Ethical goods also simplify the process of achieving justice: by
purchasing specific, clearly identified products, clear goals can be attained. In the words of
(PRODUCT) RED’s website, “BUY (RED) / SAVE LIVES.”

Yet is such a direct and simplified association of the ideals of justice with commercial
products not, at the same time, a commodification of these ideals? As we have noted,
principles such as equality and the universal right to life are incorporated into ethical brands
and thus directly linked to ethical goods; these goods, in turn, have fixed economic values,
which apply not only to the physical products being sold but also to the brand and ethical
principles associated with them. Thus, in the same way that many consumers purchase

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abstracted brand identities in conventional products, consumers of ethical goods also
purchase a share in the ethical principles they support.

We may return to the examples of Fairtrade and (PRODUCT) RED in order to
better understand this process of commodification. Gavin Fridell argues that “many ethical
consumers likely purchase fair-trade goods in part for the same reasons that they or others
purchase ‘unfair’ commodities produced by conventional corporations: to buffer up their
own sense of self-validation.” At the core of this motivation is “narcissism,” a
psychoanalytic category describing deep anxiety and alienation which manifests itself in a
need for validation. Fridell argues that the intensely competitive capitalistic society, in which
workers must commodify and sell themselves to their superiors in order to succeed,
exacerbates this anxiety and alienation. Consequently, in order to avoid feeling powerless
and meaningless, people turn to consumption of brands and thereby construct alternative
identities by which they can be validated. Fair-trade and other “ethical” consumption
patterns, in which principles of justice are purchased as brands and integrated into these
identities, are part of the process of validation.10

Meanwhile, Lisa Ann Richey and Stefano Ponte describe (PRODUCT) RED as the
merging of compassion and consumption in a doubly attractive package that appeals to
capitalist society.11 Drawing simple causal links between purchasing fashionable items and
saving lives, (RED) creates a single act of “heroic shopping,” which is essentially a
reimagining of consumption as simultaneously conspicuous and compassionate.

Consumption of these goods may not simply be motivated by self-validation in

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10 Fridell, 89.
11 Lisa Ann Richey and Stefano Ponte, “Better (Red)™ than Dead? Celebrities, Consumption and
compassionate action, as Fridell argues, but also by the validation of others in conspicuous, fashionable branding. Ethical action thus goes hand-in-hand with fashionable consumption, making the action fashionable and the consumption ethical. Justice is not merely commodified; it is also inseparably associated with consumption and the process of commodification itself.

From the standpoint of practicality and efficacy, one easily understands the rationale behind the commodification of social justice. Regarding (PRODUCT) RED, Paul Vallely argues in *The Independent* that it “was the attempt to draw into the wider coalition for Africa people who, if they didn’t buy a RED iPod, would just have bought one of another colour.”\(^{12}\) (RED)’s own website focuses on the equal pricing of (RED) products with other, comparable products, and argues, “But the (RED) one generates funds to help eliminate AIDS in Africa.”\(^{13}\) The logic is simple: since consumers will naturally and inevitably consume, it is more effective to turn the act of consumption itself into a charitable act than to rely on voluntary donations, even if only a portion of the revenue is actually donated – ethical goods make at least some contribution where conventional goods do not. This notion of free justice at the point of sale is less applicable to Fairtrade items, which are generally more expensive than comparable conventional products; nevertheless, these products are also priced competitively, and sell accordingly. Commodification is therefore defensible and indeed desirable, since it garners enormous financial support for various justice initiatives. To ignore or fail to capitalise on the market’s potential is to leave a significant resource for the cause of justice untapped.


\(^{13}\) http://www.joinred.com/Learn/HowRedWorks.aspx
Certainly these arguments are compelling, and with the support of empirical data – an analysis which is beyond the scope of this paper – a strong case can be made for the practical efficacy of the commodification of social justice. But can this commodification, and the conspicuous consumption of self-validating brand identities that it entails, be justified from a Christian perspective? What are the theological implications of turning justice into a product to be bought and sold in the developed world?

In *Consuming Faith*, Tom Beaudoin argues that product branding, a key mechanism of commodification, is a sort of “economic docetism” in which the human reality of a product is diminished in favour of an immaterial brand image.\(^{14}\) Branding assigns extrinsic value to a product by associating it with an abstracted, unrelated, and socially and ethically disconnected identity, which replaces the original identity or “human reality” of the product. All products have a human reality insofar as they have human producers and means of production; when brand identities are applied to these products, however, the connection between the producer and the product is severed by the brand, and the significance of the human aspect of the production process is diminished or even entirely overlooked. As a result, both the producer and the product are dehumanised and reduced to being functions of the market.

For Beaudoin, this denial of the human reality of branded products is “docetic” in the same way that Christological docetism denies the fully human reality of Christ. Even ethical goods can be docetic in this sense: while their brands are infused with principles of social justice, if these brands somehow diminish or deny the connection between product and producer, the human reality of the product has been ignored. Such a docetism is

\(^{14}\) Tom Beaudoin, *Consuming Faith: Integrating who we are with what we buy* (Lanham: Sheed & Ward, 2003), 74-75.
incompatible with an incarnational Christology which claims, in Christ’s fully divine and human incarnate nature, a special dignity for the bodily and human reality of our existence.

Like all other brands, Fairtrade and (PRODUCT) RED can be seen as economically docetic insofar as they privilege identities and principles over the relationship between the product and producer. However, an essential distinction must be drawn between these two ethical brands. Fairtrade branding achieves its objectives of justice within the market, infusing its products with an ethical dimension that directly reflects on and affects their producers and means of production. In this manner the Fairtrade brand strongly emphasises the human reality of these products, even as it introduces an extrinsic brand identity. (RED) products, on the other hand, effect change outside of the market, and are in no way related to the initiatives they support; instead, they associate clothing, beverages, and accessories with a disembodied, abstracted, and dehumanised concept of the fight against HIV/AIDS in Africa. (PRODUCT) RED is thus doubly docetic: not only does it deprive products of the meaning of their own production, but it also commodifies the social principle of the “fight against AIDS” and dissociates it from the underlying human reality of the crisis in Africa.

Strictly speaking, however, this critique of ethical branding on the grounds of docetism is not comparable to the orthodox theological rejection of Christological docetism. Whereas the latter affirms Christ’s finite humanity in his incarnation without diminishing or denying his immaterial divinity, the former privileges the material “human reality” of a product over any immaterial identity or meaning. This elevation of the material at the expense of the immaterial is a sort of inverse docetism, and is incoherent with an incarnational theological view which maintains the equal importance of these two dimensions of existence. It therefore seems inappropriate, and indeed problematic, to
follow Beaudoin in using the theological category of docetism to analyse the phenomenon of commodification.

Beaudoin’s analysis does, however, draw attention to the central problem of the commodification of social justice: the dehumanisation of both the producer and the ethical cause which the product supports. Without referring to theological concepts of docetism and incarnation, we might still consider this problem in light of the second of the greatest Christian commandments, to “love your neighbour as yourself.” In Christian social thought, this commandment is often embodied in the principle of solidarity, which entails a relational bond born out of a common humanity and mutual identification. Pope John Paul II, who stressed the necessity of the principle of solidarity in his encyclical, *Solicitudo Rei Socialis*, explains that solidarity is not “a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people,” but rather a determined commitment to the common good, grounded in a recognition of the interdependence of all people. This commitment bridges the social, economic, and geographical divides between people and compels the powerful to share their resources with and take responsibility for the powerless, who in turn must actively contribute, in their own capacity, to the common good. Solidarity is ultimately grounded in a recognition of the “other” as a person, as a neighbour, “on a par with ourselves”; as such it is fundamentally opposed to the dehumanisation which is characteristic of commodification. Even ethical goods, then, are incompatible with the principle of solidarity and the commandment to love if they fail to properly convey the humanity of their producers and beneficiaries.

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15 Mark 12.31, Matthew 22.39
16 *Solicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 38.
17 *Solicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 39.
As we have already seen, there appears to be a strong correlation between Fairtrade products and the “neighbours” behind them, making these products a suitable channel for establishing solidarity. Because of the nature of the fair trade movement, producers of Fairtrade are at the same time the beneficiaries of its ethical action. Thus, by choosing to purchase a Fairtrade product, the consumer can become directly involved in the producer’s social and economic situation, and can thereby consciously engage in an act of identification and solidarity with the producer. By contrast, (RED) products can hardly serve to engender solidarity in the same manner: purchasing a branded product does not allow the consumer to find a tangible common ground or mutual identity with Africans afflicted with HIV/AIDS, and moreover the product’s producer is wholly overlooked. Instead, disembodied notions of AIDS and Africa, which have been dehumanised and attached to wholly unrelated commercial products, become the basis for an abstracted moral appeal – the “feeling of vague compassion” which John Paul II describes – and true solidarity, emerging out of a shared identity and actualised in direct, relational action, does not occur.

It seems, then, that Fairtrade products satisfy the commandment to love by effectively engendering solidarity between consumers and producers, while (PRODUCT) RED dehumanises both its producers and the AIDS victims it supports. We must note, however, that solidarity through the consumption of ethical goods is in part determined by the consumer’s own understanding of the product and the act of consumption. If, for example, a consumer objectifies the fair trade initiative – as an abstracted movement or “cause” – in place of the human producer’s wellbeing as the ultimate goal or end of the purchase of a Fairtrade product, then this purchase has failed to establish solidarity and to fulfil the Christian call to love in its truest sense. The same could be said of any ethical initiative, but consumers, who are so heavily bombarded with advertising, brand images, and
other powerful social and cultural forces, are especially susceptible to developing such misunderstandings. Thus, and while we can still speak of the potential of ethical goods to satisfy theological mandates such as the commandment to love, it remains difficult to draw a decisive theological conclusion about the merit of ethical commodification and consumption.

In spite of its pragmatic potential, then, the commodification of social justice remains a problematic issue from a Christian theological perspective. It is, at best, a precarious balancing act between practical efficacy and moral-theological compatibility. Should commodification therefore be avoided entirely? Perhaps not: certainly, initiatives such as Fairtrade, which aim through commodification to bring about drastic and permanent changes to existing structures of injustice, have merit and ought to be encouraged. Nevertheless, these initiatives should be seen as temporary measures, as stepping-stones to still greater and more radical changes. The ultimate objective of ethical commodification must be the final abolition of the structures of injustice which so fundamentally shape our social and economic relations. It is only with a view to this telos that commodification can have a place in the Christian struggle for social justice.
WORKS CITED


