Antonio Eduardo Alonso, *Commodified Communion: Eucharist, Consumer Culture, and the Practice of Everyday Life*

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Ever since the prophet Amos thundered warnings about God's preference for the rolling waters of justice over the sacrifices, feasts and musical offerings of religious hypocrites, theologians and liturgical scholars have been parsing the relationship between worship and ethics. In recent decades, the prophecies of contemporary scholars have shared a common theme: namely, that consumer culture has corrupted Christian thought and practice, and that the central task of theology vis-à-vis the processes of late Western capitalism is to call for resistance. For evidence of the commodification of Christianity, one need look no further than churches with coffee shops, pastors who style themselves after television talk show hosts and amplified worship music fit for a concert stadium. For many scholars, the best for hope for a corrective lies in the eucharist: the sacrament *par excellence* which, when properly celebrated, inspires and sustains the church's ongoing resistance against the antagonistic forces of culture and consumerism.

Antonio Eduardo Alonso, Assistant Professor of Theology and Culture and Director of Catholic Studies at Emory University's Candler School of the Theology, is sympathetic to this vein of thought. However, his groundbreaking book, *Commodified Communion: Eucharist, Consumer Culture, and the Practice of Everyday Life*, offers a different way forward. Alonso knows that people interact with religious commodities in complex and even beautiful ways; he worries that, by overemphasising resistance, theologians lose the ability to talk about the activity of God within a consumer culture. Alonso cites the example of his grandmother's *altercito*: a collection of crucifixes, rosaries, votive candles, prayerbooks and plastic flowers arranged atop on a dresser. 'Her faith was not articulated apart from these objects but through them … [They] reveal a theology practiced and embodied in and through the limitations and possibilities of a culture that resists even narratives that would measure them by their lack of ability to resist the market' (p. 16). From hymnals to communion hosts, Alonso details how the stuff of Christian worship is inextricably enmeshed in the marketplace. He acknowledges the distortions and deficiencies of this commodification, but emphasises that we must also remain attentive to the ways that God works *through* consumer culture, rather than simply apart from it.

The author is also sceptical of claims that if the eucharist is done 'right' it will magically shape better and more ethical consumers. He wryly notes that conscious attempts to bend eucharistic practices towards ethical resistance generally result in a celebrations 'that, upon close scrutiny, neatly conform to the tastes, expectations, and cultural configurations of the dominant ethos' of the liturgical leader (p. 124). More problematically, if the eucharist is measured against its ability to fund cultural resistance, then '*ex opere operato* resurfaces under the guise of ethics: Grace depends on us' (p. 105). (This

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bold and controversial claim will no doubt spark debates within the guild of liturgical studies for years to come.)

Alonso's constructive proposal invites readers to listen for the cry of hope in consumer culture. Although they will never be able to deliver the salvation they promise, commodities like WWJD wristbands, *#blessed* coffee mugs and Lourdes water testify to our craving for redemption to new life. Drawing on the work of Walter Benjamin and especially Michel de Certeau, Alonso invites scholars to look for this redemption 'not through an imaginary world purified of fallen human complicities, desires, and things … [but] in the mundane and even sinful practices of everyday life that rarely capture the seriousness, attentiveness, and compassion of our theological gaze' (p. 124).

Alonso's primary interlocuters are Geoffrey Wainwright, William T. Cavanaugh and Vincent Miller (chapter 1), Walter Benjamin and Michel de Certeau (chapter 2) and Louis-Marie Chauvet (chapter 3). Interspersed between each of the book's five chapters are four narrative 'fragments', wherein the author reflects on objects of personal significance: his grandmother's *altarcito,* the hymnals of his childhood, a series of discarded Apple products and commodified communion hosts. These personal vignettes alone are worth the price of the book. More than engaging illustrations of an otherwise academic argument, they are the constructive heart of the project, stirring readers to think more deeply about the relationship between liturgy and culture, and about the myriad ways that God's generous presence overflows into the world in ways that exceed the boundaries we so often set for it. *Commodified Communion* is Alonso's first word on the intersection of liturgy and consumer culture, and I certainly hope it will not be his last. I recommend it highly.

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Joshua Mauldin, *Barth, Bonhoeffer, and Modern Politics* (Oxford: OUP, 2021), pp.ix + 165. $85.00

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I write this on the anniversary of the storming of the US Capitol in the attempt to overturn ratification of the 2020 Presidential election. What better evidence is there that '[m]odern democracy is in crisis' (p. 1)? To understand what is happening Joshua Mauldin aims to 'focus on how the work of Barth and Bonhoeffer can inform contemporary discussions regarding dissatisfactions with and criticisms of political liberalism' (p. 3). It 'is a project in the field of social ethics rather than history' (p. 3). To give some orientation, Mauldin identifies himself at the outset with a tradition of 'pragmatism' influenced by the work of Jeffrey Stout, Richard Rorty and others, in which economic structures are regarded as human practices that 'carry with them moral norms' (p. 4). From Barth and Bonhoeffer Mauldin seeks 'theologically inflected answers to questions that are of interest well beyond circles of theological and ecclesial concern' (p. 4).

After a brief overview of 'critics of modern politics', Mauldin turns to Barth's response to the First World War, in which his 'early political theology' was