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

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Antonio Eduardo Alonso. *Commodified Communion: Eucharist, Consumer Culture, and the Practice of Everyday Life*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2021. 188 pp. \$25.00 Paper. ISBN 9780823294114.

Liturgical theologians easily make grand claims about the power of liturgy to enact a more just way of living in the world. One trope is to name liturgical celebration as offering an alternate way of living that helps participants resist or counter competing cultural forces like in individualism and consumerism in the United States.

Antonio Eduardo Alonso, Aquinas Assistant Professor in Theology and Culture and director of Catholic Studies at Emory University's Candler School of Theology, names the problem: "Liturgical and sacramental theologians have not taken up the discrete category of consumer culture with the precision and substance of ethicists or political theologians" (20). Rather, they align themselves with "their disquiet for its degrading power" (20) on Christian practices and their turn to the Eucharist as a remedy. According to the received narrative, "Celebrated faithfully, however, Eucharistic practice has the power to resist the sinfulness of culture and shape ethical living in the world" (20–21). Yet, if what these theologians claimed about liturgy's power were true, Christian life ought to look very different than it does.

In this 2021 [HTI Book Prize](#)-winning work, Alonso seeks to chasten this received grand narrative of liturgy's power to help us resist adverse cultural forces. At the same time, he demonstrates how we can find within the liturgical celebration, itself always already implicated by those forces and a site of consuming and consummation, the hope for imaging a new way of being in and through these forces. His vision is solidly sacramental in its scope.

To develop this vision, Alonso gathers the accounts of representative theologians of both culture and liturgy. While at times this review of the literature can weigh down his argument, he

demonstrates the weakness of the metanarrative by recognizing that consumer culture has insinuated itself stealthily into all our everyday practices—including theological production and Eucharistic celebration itself.

Alonso first turns to the work of Geoffrey Wainright, a Methodist liturgical theologian, and two Roman Catholic theologians of culture and politics, William Cavanaugh and Vincent Miller. Alonso broadly shows the ways each responds to the “degrading power that consumer culture has over Christian thought and practice.” Alonso discerns a common shape to the three theologians’ diverse responses: “The central task of theology vis-à-vis consumer culture is to respond, resist or reshape it” in what he names a “prophetic register” of resistance (40). For each thinker, the central practice of the Eucharist is a means to inspire and sustain such resistance (44). But here is Alonso’s conundrum: Ultimately, we cannot resist because we are always already caught up in consumer culture.

Alonso seeks an alternative response by reading the “theological significance of the materiality of everyday life” in a way that reclaims or recovers an ability to speak of the activity of God in and through consumer culture (54). His attending to the “practices of everyday life” is a direct appeal to the work of Michel de Certeau. Alonso’s expansive reading of de Certeau’s own subversive use of tactics and strategics is an important contribution of Alonso in his constructing a framework to speak of a tactics beyond resistance as a response to consumer culture. Alonso takes up de Certeau’s notion of a *cry* that breaks out “in the form of tactics on the borders of every discourse” (61), a resistance that exists in the “gaps, the losses, and excesses” offering hope that human experience “cannot be reduced to the places prepared for them by the strategies of the structures of the world” (61). From de Certeau, Alonso presents a “tactics of hope beyond resistance” that allows the church to speak through the forms of the world of which

it is a part (76). Our posture should be one of listening for the cries of hope in the very distortions and delusions of consumer society (77).

With the help of Walter Benjamin, Alonso leads his reader to reflect "on the activity of God in a commodified world" (76). Alonso then develops his notion of a tactical cry of hope from within cultural strategics, how the very materiality of the Eucharist roots its celebrants in the practice of an eschatological hope. The celebration fosters listening to the fragile but real longings "for redemption and deep desires for alternatives to the world as it is" (101). These alternatives will be humble and incomplete but can come in a way that, while always within, are never completely dependent on the commodified culture since they are rooted in a promise of redemption.

What then of Eucharist as a central Christian practice, one that is always already imbricated in a culture of commodity? Alonso turns to liturgical theology, with particular emphasis on the contributions of the late Mark Searle and his attention to the place of empirical verification of the claims made by scholars of liturgy. Of course, the catch is, how can one measure with qualitative and quantitative means the kind of transformation, resistance, and outcomes that many liturgical scholars claim liturgical practice can accomplish? Here, Alonso puts a spin on a concept that developed in the western theological tradition of the objective effectiveness of sacramental practice, that sacramental grace is made available *ex opere operato*, through the very doing of the rite according to the church's intention and directive. Alonso points to how this concept also leads us astray because it fosters an understanding that "if the liturgy is done right—according to a particular prescription, era, or style—it will magically shape better and more ethical consumers" (105). Alonso enlists French sacramental theologian Louis-Marie

Chauvet to analyze grace as beyond calculation, outside of the market economy, to bolster his argument against a consumerist reading of *ex opere operato*.

What Alonso does not account for in his attention to the distortions of sacramental efficacy is the other side of the scholastic attention to the objective offer of grace, namely the subjective appropriation of that grace, the *opus operantis*. This remains a future trajectory for Alonso to address—the always-already implicated subject—particularly as Alonso is seeking a way of exposing the limits of arguing the Eucharist as an antidote to or escape from, or a certain means of resistance to, consumer culture, when the celebration “is often captive to the logic we so want to resist” (106).

In a way that serves his constructive approach, Alonso “resists” offering definitions up front of consumer culture and of Eucharist. Readers need to be patient with Alonso as he prefers to leave rather fluid his own definitions of consumer culture, commodification, and even Eucharist, which never actually receives explicit definition. Eucharist is presented as central Christian practice, a ritual pattern of word and table, a communion in material bread and wine, a doxological practice that can both shape and misshape its celebrants. The Eucharist is developed in both an ecumenical and a more specific Roman Catholic register.

Four provocative self-reflexive interludes punctuate Alonso’s theoretical movements: the first, from his Cuban self-location, offers a thick description of his *abuelita’s altarcito*, which he describes under the rubric of camp. A second looks at the role of hymnals and the world of hymnal publishing, in which Alonso is both a consumer and a producer—as a well-known composer of liturgical music and a Latin Grammy award nominee. Third, he looks at his own Apple computer and the marketing strategies of the company, its thinking differently of itself in the “orthodoxy of market logic” and its production of strategies of resistance that end up looking

like what they are trying to resist (84). The fourth takes up the very “bread” used for eucharistic celebration, showing the move from the production of hosts by women religious to commercial production by a major company and the shifting trends in styles of hosts for communion.

Alonso’s critical interpretation of strategies of daily life and regular liturgical celebration in these interludes offers concrete accounts of his tactics of eschatological hope. In short, “the hope of the eucharist, then, is found neither in a gnostic flight from the materiality of the world nor an imagined purity in what we offer but instead in an intensification of the materiality of the world” (123).

Alonso’s *Commodified Communion* offers a provocative way to interpret daily living and liturgical practice with a deeply sacramental and prophetic conviction. This book would make a particularly solid contribution to courses in liturgy and culture and as a dialogue partner in wider discussions of theology and U.S. culture looking for constructive ways of considering the imbrication of liturgical practice and the pervasive consumer culture of the USA.

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