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JOSÉ ALABY AND HUGO ERNESTO QUIROGA CONSUMERISM: A CHALLENGE FOR CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP?

Introduction

This article is motivated by an academic work and a field research project developed by Hugo E. Quiroga (2012; personal communication, 2015) on *oneomania* as a challenge for Christian leadership. Our intention is more to raise questions than to provide easy-sounding answers. The term *oneomania* may not be well known in theory, but its practical effects are recognized around the world.

Oneomania, from the Greek *onéo* = to buy + *mania* = insanity, mental disorder (Taylor, 1950), is the scientific and technical term for the disease of consumerism, for the compulsive desire to shop, which is a progressive addiction to shopping and going into debt due to buying unnecessary things. It is also referred to as compulsive shopping, compulsive spending, shopping addiction, shopaholism, and Compulsive Buying Behavior (CBB). In Brazil, where we live, it is called Compulsive Buying Disorder (CBD).

According to the non-profit organization Debtors Anonymous (<<http://www.debtorsanonymous.org/contact-us/>>), shopping may lead to serious indebtedness and can ruin someone's life. As debt grows, compulsive shopping may become a more secretive act; then the addiction affects the mental and emotional well-being of the person.

How prevalent is this addiction?

Although Maraz, Brink and Demetrovics (2015) state that there is “very little data currently available regarding the prevalence and validity of compulsive buying disorder,” Black (2007) says that “compulsive buying disorder (CBD) was first described clinically in the early 20th century by Bleuler and Kraepelin, both of whom included CBD in their textbooks” (para. 1). Bleuler's

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Textbook of Psychiatry was published in 1930 and Kraepelin's *Psychiatrie* was published in Germany in 1915. Black (2007) goes on to state that the phenomenon is worldwide and cases have been reported in the United States, Canada, England, Germany, France and Brazil. However, we recognize that these few countries hardly demonstrate a "worldwide" phenomenon and that it is unlikely the behavior has been described in the many places of the world where people are living on a subsistence level with barely enough money for food or clothing.

At any rate, according to Koran, Faber, Aboujaoude, Large, and Serpe (2006), an estimated 1.8% to 16% of the adult U.S. population are affected. Others suggest that *oneomania* affects perhaps as many as 8.9% of the American population (Ridgway, Kukar-Kinney & Monroe, 2008). Earlier studies in the United States, published by Faber, O'Guinn and Krych (1987), Edwards (1993), and Magee (1994), suggest 5% to 6% of men and women present consistent symptoms of compulsive buying behavior (CBB). There appears to be sufficient evidence that CBB is a critical problem with serious emotional and financial consequences (Benson & Gengler, 2004, p. 251).

What are the forces driving this addiction?

Although it is likely there are many forces driving this addiction, we mention only one here—aggressive production and marketing. It is not a coincidence that in most business schools, in the course on Marketing and Sales, the strategies of *marketing* are usually taught before those of sales. It is also intentional that the *marketing warfare*—in combination with the production of goods—is based on at least the following three strategies:

- A "programmed" durability of goods: An object is programmed to last only a short period of time.
- A "programmed" obsolescence of goods: Connected with the former strategy, marketing strives to give the consumer a feeling of being outdated if he or she owns an "archaic" or "anachronic" object.
- "Invented" superfluous needs: Marketing seeks to convince consumers that they really need the product.

According to the Hungarian-American economist Karl Polanyi (2001), the market logic of the capitalistic economic system is to maximize profits, minimize investments and shorten terms on a global scale and without any concern for ecology. The "great transformation" he refers to is a previous time when economies were built on reciprocity and redistribution rather than a dedication to maximizing the economy for the purpose of profit (p. 47). From then on everything became a "Big Mac" placed on the market counter of health, culture, the mass media, and even religion.

People—instead of consuming to live—start living to consume. In the market society, everything is about to be reduced to markets to be reached for the domination-power to accumulate in an unlimited form, of which “garage sales” and a “waste society” are visible signs. In his book *The Waste Makers*, Vance Packard (1960) criticizes the *planned obsolescence* of products and argues that people consume a lot more than they should and are harmed by their consumption (or their consumerism). Ries and Trout (2005) aptly name these aggressive marketing strategies as “warfare.”

It seems that Shakespeare’s “to be or not to be” is being replaced with “to have or not to have.”

Do we have any data describing this addiction in the Seventh-day Adventist church?

Yes. Quiroga (2012; personal communication, 2015) conducted a survey in the metropolitan area of Campinas, SP, Brazil. His first survey took place from February to August 2011; the second one was from September 2012 to August 2013. It is important to note that both Campinas and Curitiba are target populations advertising agencies use to test the demand of new products to be put into the marketplace.

As a Christian leader of his Conference, Quiroga’s main concern and motivation was to guide the Adventist church members to be not only good citizens of heaven but also good citizens on earth. The purpose of his research was to detect possible *oneomaniacs*—compulsive buyers—in the church, to alert them against the dangers of this disease that has destroyed the lives of individuals and their families, and then to help them to prevent it as well as control it.

This article reports the second and more recent Quiroga survey, which encompassed eight Adventist churches with 345 respondents. Quiroga’s research instrument contained 15 questions developed by Debtors Anonymous—a non-profit organization that offers hope for people whose use of unsecured debt causes problems and suffering in their lives and the lives of others. Quiroga’s findings showed that about 9.5% of the respondents (8.92% of males and 10.17% of females) revealed a strong tendency towards *oneomania* (answering “yes” to 8 or more of the 15 questions).

How do Christians view poverty and wealth?

There has been a variety of Christian attitudes towards materialism and wealth. However, the teaching of Jesus is clear: “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth” (Matt. 6:24,

NASB). And the wise man wrote that “he who loves money will not be satisfied with money; nor he who loves abundance with its income” (Eccl. 5:10, NASB). Although these verses are quite well-known, there is a fairly strong movement in Christian churches called the “prosperity gospel” or the “theology of prosperity.” This is a “religious belief among some Christians that financial blessing is the will of God for them, and that faith, positive speech, and donations (possibly to Christian ministries) will increase one’s material wealth.” This thinking is often promoted in large non-denominational churches, although there is also some criticism of it (Prosperity theology, n.d.).

Other Christians, including Seventh-day Adventists, believe and practice Malachi 3:10 (“Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in My house, and test Me now in this,” says the Lord of hosts, ‘if I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you a blessing until it overflows,’” NASB) and other scriptural passages that provide instruction on how to manage finances and give joyfully.

Does it make any sense for Christian leaders to address this disease?

We only reference one Christian leader, Christine Roush (2009), who most poignantly calls for action in churches today. She presents some interesting facts related to American culture:

- Half of all new marriages dissolve within the first five years. Over 85% of those divorcing say their number one problem was money.
- Children ages 8-17 average slightly more than a dozen trips to the mall each month and individually spend about \$3,600 there each year. Meanwhile, three billion people on earth live on less than \$2 a day.
- Home sizes grew from an average of 750 square feet in 1950 to 2,000 square feet in 1989.
- While personal bankruptcy rates reached all-time highs during the past decade, personal savings rates reached all-time lows since the Great Depression.
- The average U.S. household owns 2.8 cars.
- The number of home foreclosures increased 75 percent in 2007, followed by record numbers in both 2008 and 2009.

Despite all this, Roush (2009) gives this indictment of the church:

The church remains remarkably silent on issues of consumerism and stewardship. While God understood the misery wrought by consumerist tendencies, God’s church seems reluctant to challenge the assumptions of our culture. Pastors themselves struggle with managing their finances, and an alarming number of recent seminary graduates seem to wrestle with God’s Word on giving personally.

The church must address these issues. The never-ending quest for the newest, the best, and the boldest has driven large numbers of pew sitters to work more hours, owe more money, and spend less time on the things that God says matter: our families, our communities, and the world's poorest residents. (para. 6-7)

Based on Romans 12, Roush urges for a “movement aimed at transforming us from the cultural values of consumption and accumulation to a renewing of our minds toward God’s values and God’s priorities” (para. 11).

How might Christian stewardship remedy consumerism?

One of the most important contributions of Quiroga’s (2012) study refers to the role of leaders as Christian stewards in the face of consumerism. It is a role of dignity because their Lord trusts leaders with the responsibility for the use of everything: life, body, time, talents and abilities, material possessions, opportunities in favor of other people, and the knowledge of truth (White, 2008). The spirit of stewardship is full of life principles; it is a remedy against greed; it provides mental health to face real needs; it values the *being*, so that the *having* is viewed as that which does not belong to us. “Watch out!” says Jesus. “Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions” (Luke 12:15, NIV).

Moreover, Christian stewardship is also a remedy against anxiety: “Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? (Matt. 6:27, NIV). And the Apostle Paul reminds us that “we must help the weak,” and that Jesus said that “it is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35, NIV). Ellen G. White (2010), talking about “receiving” and “giving” on a balance sheet, says that everybody must learn how to take notes of their expenses. Some people neglect it. All the expenses must be exactly registered with accuracy.

Questions for further discussion

1. How can Christian leaders respond to the problem of consumerism? How might it affect their church family?
2. In what ways do consumerism and compulsive shopping undermine Christian faith? See the article by Guy Sayles (2013), “Where Consumerism and Christianity Clash,” and also the article “From Lord to Label: How Consumerism Undermines Our Faith” (2006). See also Max Weber’s (2003) *The Protestant Ethic and the “Spirit” of Capitalism*.
3. How would Christian leaders describe the difference between essential *consumption* and *consumerism*? How should we understand the minimalist attitude of Jesus Christ—when He sent “the Twelve together . . . taking noth-

ing for the journey . . . healing people everywhere” (Luke 9:6)? Moreover, why did Christ mention essential needs when He talked about the last judgment (Matt. 25:31-46)? Notice also that He establishes a strong contrast between consumerism and his own mission: “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10).

4. Should Christian leaders be anti-consumerists? *Anti-consumerism* is a socio-political ideology opposed to such a consumerism that encourages an ever-growing purchasing and consumption of unnecessary material possessions. Anti-consumerism activists express concern over modern corporations or organizations that pursue solely profitable goals at the expense of environmental, social, or ethical concerns; these concerns overlap with those of environmental activism, anti-globalization, and animal-rights activism.

5. Are there analogies between *oneomania* and the parable of the prodigal son? What are the similarities and the differences between the *prodigal* son (an extravagant person who spends money or resources too freely to live a life of pleasure and extravagance) and a poor *oneomaniac* who does not have a rich father? Note that the prodigal son returned to his father humbly, willing even to be one of his humblest workers. In contrast, a poor *oneomaniac* has the illusion of a system of credit “given” to him for a period of time (usually short) while he or she can pay the debt! How can a poor shopaholic be saved?

6. Should Christian leaders promote alternative lifestyles? What alternative lifestyles can Christian leaders personally adopt in order to help save society and people from *oneomania* and ecological disasters? Would simple living, minimalism, or intentional communities be alternative lifestyles for Christians?

7. How do Christians make sense of poverty and starvation in the world today?

8. Watch the video *What Would Jesus Buy*, a documentary produced by Morgan Spurlock (2007) which focuses on the issues of the commercialization of Christmas.

9. Is there any help available for compulsive buyers? According to specialists, there is treatment for *oneomania*, or Compulsive Buying Behavior (CBB), through psychotherapy and self-help groups such as the *Devedores Anônimos-DAs*, in São Paulo, SP, Brazil (Anonymous Debtors: ADs). For further information, visit <http://www.devedoresanonimos-sp.com.br/site/>. Quiroga (2012) personally visited one of those ADs that have the periodic assistance of psychiatrists from the Hospital das Clínicas, one of the largest public hospitals in Brazil. Also, see *Consuming Passions: Help for Compulsive Shoppers*, by Catalano and Sonenberg (1993).

10. Some further resources to aid the dialogue:

a. Annie Leonard's (2010) book and film, *The Story of Stuff*, makes a deeper exploration of the causes of the problem of consumerism. She points out that industries intentionally develop new products based on a linear production system where the natural resources are utilized and returned to the environment under the form of toxic agents. (See her story at <http://storyofstuff.org/movies/story-of-stuff/>).

b. Another scholar is Jared Diamond (2011). His book *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* explores the geographic and environmental reasons why some human populations have flourished. *Collapse* uses the same factors to examine why ancient societies, including the Anasazi of the American Southwest and the Viking colonies of Greenland, as well as modern ones such as Rwanda, have fallen apart. Listen to his TED Talk (https://www.ted.com/talks/jared_diamond_on_why_societies_collapse).

c. Aldous Huxley's (1958) *Brave New World Revisited* is an update of his 1932 *Brave New World*. In an age of accelerating over-population and over-organization and ever more efficient means of mass communication, how can we preserve the integrity and reassert the value of the human individual? Huxley criticizes the wholesale mind-manipulation of crowds and isolated individuals. He says in the fable of his *Brave New World* that whenever anyone felt depressed or below par, he would swallow a tablet or two of a chemical compound called *soma*. Huxley died in 1963, but in 1958 he wrote that "it is now a historical fact that the means of production are fast becoming the monopolistic property of Big Business and Big Government. Therefore, if you believe in democracy, make arrangements to distribute property as widely as possible."

11. The following self-assessment instrument may be used to evaluate your personal buying habits. If you have eight or more yes answers, you are in danger of becoming a compulsive buyer and incurring the debt resulting from your habits.

Personal Buying Habits: Self-assessment

You may answer yes or no to each question.

Are your debts making your family life happy?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Is the pressure of your debts taking your attention from your daily work?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Is your reputation being affected by your debts?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Are your debts making you despise yourself?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Have you ever given false information in order to get credit?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Have you ever made unrealistic promises to your creditors?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Does the pressure of your debts make you careless with the welfare of your family?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No

Do you fear that your employer, family or friends will find out about the size of your indebtedness?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
When you face a difficult finance situation, does the prospect of a loan gives you an uncontrolled sensation of relief?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Does the pressure of your indebtedness cause difficulty in sleeping?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Has the pressure of your indebtedness ever made you consider getting drunk?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Have you ever borrowed money without adequately considering the interest that you will have to pay?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Do you usually expect a negative answer when you are submitted to a credit check?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Have you ever developed a rigorous plan to pay for you indebtedness and, later on, under pressure, you have just not accomplished it?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Do you justify your indebtedness by telling yourself that you are superior to other people and that, when you get your turn, you will get free from indebtedness in just one day?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No

Figure 1. Survey developed and used by Anonymous Debtors (ADs). Source: Debtors Anonymous, General Service Office, P.O. Box 920888, Needham, MA 02492-0009 (<http://www.debtorsanonymous.org/contact-us/>)

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