

On Lessons from “The Lorax” and its relation to Consumerism and Biblical Principles

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ABSTRACT

Lessons and themes from the 2012 movie “The Lorax” are applied particularly on how the movie interacts with consumerism and materialism, and consumerism’s interaction with Christianity in general. “The Lorax” is a 2012 adaptation of Dr. Seuss’s previous book, and lessons are explored in implications to environmentalism, and how it warns of excessive consumerism. Two arguments for the incompatibility of consumerism and Christianity are made.

Introduction

“The Lorax” is a 2012 movie based off of Dr. Seuss’s earlier work. The original book is thought to advocate for environmental policies (as Dr. Seuss was an environmentalist). It also represents the anti-environmental nature of businesses’ (The Once-ler) relationship with the environment (The Trees) and environmental activism (The Lorax). Therefore, the question on how this movie relates to Biblical principles and broader relations to pollution and stewardship is asked and subsequently answered. Note that it is not businesses and capitalism in general that The Lorax portrays; it is only excessively greedy and destructive businesses, such as Shell or BP. Also, the addition of “Thneedville” represents an essentially dystopian setting, characterizing excessive consumerism, pollution, and destruction of nature.

On The State of Pollution on Earth

I would like to point out that it is not always corporations and capitalism that can cause excessive pollution, see Chernobyl and the state of pollution under communist Eastern Europe.¹ It is generally a cultural (and economic) notion that causes excess pollution, for example cultures (and businesses) that place an emphasis on buying unnecessary items. Dr. Seuss criticized

¹ See Dellapenna, Joseph W., "Behind the Red Curtain: Environmental Concerns and the End of Communism" (2010). *Working Paper Series*. 152. <https://digitalcommons.law.villanova.edu/wps/art152>

consumerism more than capitalism; this is likely because he was a liberal.² “Cultural consumerism” is defined as a cultural and social emphasis on excessive materialism (ex. Buying unnecessary water bottles due to an Internet fad) and the purchase and ownership of goods as a source of happiness and fulfillment of social status. ([Amrillah, 2024](#))

Consumerism incentivises the over-exploitation of resources to meet the growing demands of the economy, which has only gotten worse with the advent of social media, particularly TikTok. “Microtrends” (short-lived, but intense trends) in particular creates massive amounts of landfill and plastic ([Houser, 2024](#)), which then turn into microplastics. Microplastics have been found in clouds (as condensation nuclei, in which they can make up to 40% of all condensation nuclei in some extreme cases), in the human body, in Antarctic snow, and in the atmosphere to name a few examples. TikTok, a major platform for short-form commercial content, generates more Carbon Dioxide than the nation of Greece. There is a possibility that Microplastics might end up as the next leaded gasoline or CFCs, in that they have caused significant harm, but at first little has paid attention. We are at the “little has paid attention” section of Microplastics, but beginning to enter the warning stage. As a good fact, the issue of microplastics has started to gain more attention and media coverage.

Christianity and Consumerism

Consumerism, particularly Cultural Consumerism, causes the individual and society at large to value materialism and material goods all above else, or at the very least put on a higher priority than other needs and wants. An example of this being prioritizing rare or exotic material versions of a book, even if said book is freely available as an electronic version; the material aspect of said book is more valued than the book itself. Deviants from this socio-cultural norm are ostracized for “not being with the trend”. The issue of consumerism is embedded within the larger framework of the switch from pre- and modernism, to post-modernism, rise in globalization, the loss of the nuclear family, loss of community, and loss of religion and increase in secularization (Burns and Fawcett). From 1900 to 2000 alone, the number of atheists in North America has risen 717-and-a-half-fold. A loss of immaterial community and culture leads to a corresponding rise in material community and culture, thus more cultural emphasis on material goods. Even among Christians, it has been increasingly common for cultural consumerism to “seep” into thinking, with such purchases being “justified” or more aptly, excused. The switch to post-modernism is especially important in this notion of consumerism because modernism is the belief in a modern, “new” sense of thinking that proceeds the “old” sense of thinking mainly before the 1800s, with this new sense of thinking being firmly established, having clear definitions, more influence of science and empiricism, and rejection of tradition.

² By *liberal*, it does not mean left-wing or what conservatives might call “woke” policies; in this sense, *liberals* advocate for individual liberty and especially freedom for markets; classical liberalism.

Post-modernism³ is characterized by a broad skepticism, a rejection of both tradition and most “previous” political movements (particularly on nationalism, Marxism, and religion), typically happening in the 20th century. In terms of consumerism, this implies an “anything goes” notion; any type of social or consumer fad, regardless of content (other than miscellaneous appealability), is simply accepted. For example, one can see the rise of the Japanese and Chinese cultures' mainstream-ness and yet not connect the dots much with say, Japanese or Chinese nationalism.

How compatible is Christianity with (cultural) consumerism? Not at all. Obviously, the emphasis of material goods über alles is not at all compatible with God über alles (über alles is German for “above all”). Cultural consumerism and placing material goods as only somewhat more than their functional value is like having your cake and eating it; cultural consumerism is inherently, generally socially, material supremacist. Argument 1: Luke 12:15 NIV (“Then he said to them, “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.”) implies to place material goods in our life as only somewhat more than their functional value, therefore, Christianity is inherently incompatible with cultural consumerism. Argument 2: In Matthew 6:32-33 NIV (“For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”), the pagans (translated to “gentiles” in some translations) refer to non-believers. Given that “run after all these things” refers to unnecessary and excessive material goods, whereas “need them” refers to necessary goods, it can be argued that non-believers excessively prioritize cultural consumerism. Therefore, believers should not prioritize cultural consumerism.⁴

Given that material and secular notions of identity and ways of life are increasingly replacing religious identity and ways of life, it is becoming more evident that the (post-)modern secular way of life is increasingly resembling the medieval way of life, only with material possessions and whatever secular “traditions” replacing the role of God. Berger in his book “Ads, Fads, and Consumer Culture: Advertising's Impact on American Character and Society”⁵ makes a chart comparing characteristics of department stores with medieval cathedrals; I add on to this by saying that it is not just department stores and the rise of capitalism and its culture, but a broader modernist to post-modernist change. For example, in the USSR, Lenin and Stalin both held cults of personality, and the Marxist-Leninist system of government held in most socialist countries during the Cold War could also be compared to a medieval theocracy.

Final Remark: On the movie itself

³ Jean-François Lyotard is a good philosopher on this topic.

⁴ The *contrapositive* is used; let P and Q be statements, and $P \rightarrow Q$. Then $(\text{not})Q \rightarrow \text{not}(P)$.

⁵ On p. 47.

I have gone on a tangent on cultural consumerism even when the prompt was on “The Lorax” largely because the original book (the movie was simply an adaptation of the book) so heavily focuses on the ills of excessive consumerism, particularly the “material good über alles” phenomenon and its effects, particularly on the environment. Also, it is worth noting that Dr. Seuss was a Christian (Lutheran). For the relation between the environment and the movie; the “glowing kid” from the Lorax shows a direct negative effect from pollution. Thneedville represents a dystopian society in which consumer culture is the entirety of its culture, with only sparse references to the cultures of other nations (such as Italy for Pizza).

When the Once-ler says, “Because unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not,” to Ted, this is essentially representing an “environmental savior” or savior who somehow convinces the masses away from cultural consumerism. The full quote is:

Ted: So this is really all your fault. You destroyed everything.

Once-ler: Yes. And each day since the Lorax left, I've sat here regretting everything I've done. Staring at that word, "unless", and wondering what it meant. But now I'm thinking... well, maybe you're the reason the Lorax left that word there.

Ted: Me? Why would he leave that for me?

Once-ler: Because unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not.

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