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# A Commodified Faith: Theodor Adorno's Culture Industry and Evangelical Catholicism

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A Commodified Faith:  
Theodor Adorno's Culture Industry  
and Evangelical Catholicism

An Essay Submitted to the  
Office of Graduate Studies  
College of Arts & Sciences of  
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in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

By  
Francis Boccuzzi  
2019

The essay of Francis Ocean Boccuzzi is hereby accepted:

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Date

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## Introduction

“What’s the purpose of your life? Who are you meant to be? What are you looking for? ... Don’t be afraid. Dive into the deep. *Encounter something more.*” This is the tagline for SEEK2019, a five-day festival held in Indianapolis, Indiana, in January 2019. SEEK2019 is catered to the youth, has an attendance cost of up to \$499, and preaches a traditionalist view of Catholicism. It is part of a larger Catholic movement known as Evangelical Catholicism. Evangelical Catholicism, whose most visible spokesperson is Bishop Robert Barron, attempts to spread a counter-cultural Catholicism through the cultural schemas of our society. Implicit in Evangelical Catholicism is an ideology that both promotes clericalism and supports the current ways of the world. Evangelical Catholicism offers a commodified form of Catholicism, where faith begins to look like a concert, a Ted Talk, or a YouTube video.

The Catholic Church is an imperfect organization of imperfect people. Recent controversy has led many Catholics to close themselves off from the world at a time when the church should be opening its doors. Today the church should be in dialogue with the world; yet, with its emphasis on personal conversion, Evangelical Catholicism works to shut church members in. In a time when theologians push the church toward greater understanding of the experiences of *all* humans, Evangelical Catholics reaffirm the “Truths” of traditionalism, forbidding progress. Evangelical Catholicism supports the *status-quo* of society and sells young Catholics a commodified faith, adopting tactics of the world in order to turn the church away from it.

The work of the German critical theorist Theodor W. Adorno sheds light on the dynamics of commodification inherent in what he calls the modern “culture industry.”

His analysis can help illuminate the phenomenon of Evangelical Catholicism, which in its own way attempts to standardize and distribute Catholic culture. The essay will begin with a description of Theodor Adorno's treatment of the culture industry. This examination will show how culture is commodified and advertised for mass consumption. It will also show how the culture industry produces an ideology that supports the *status-quo* of society through a schema of command and obedience. Adorno's analysis of the culture industry will aid us in understanding how Evangelical Catholicism contributes to the commodification of Catholicism. As Evangelical Catholicism uses modern culture to spread its message, it begins to produce its own ideology of Catholic triumphalism over and against the broader society. This ideology is taught through a schema of command and obedience that is supported by clericalism and creeping dogmatism.

### **THEODOR ADORNO AND THE CULTURE INDUSTRY**

Theodor Adorno will be helpful in understanding why this Evangelical Catholicism is what it is. He would describe our current reality as the particular elements and utopian ideal of the world as the general idea. Within the context of Catholicism, Evangelical Catholicism represents the particular elements and the reign of God on earth as the general idea. The process of viewing our reality as a sobering acknowledgement of how we can reach utopia is known as Social Physiognomy.<sup>1</sup> In line with Adorno, we can best assess how Evangelical Catholicism is far from the ideal through his understanding of the culture industry.

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<sup>1</sup> Physiognomy is the process of determining the characteristics of a person by their outer appearance. In the same way, social physiognomy entails studying the outer appearance of a cultural object or experience to denote the characteristics and intent of the object/experience.

Theodor Adorno (1903-1992) was a social theorist and a leading scholar of the Frankfurt School. Adorno's early career was spent in Germany, where he built connections with other critical theorists and worked at the Institute of Social Research in Frankfurt. As the Third Reich grew in power, Adorno faced harassment from the state due to his Prussian and Jewish heritage, as well as his critical scholarship. After the Nazis disrupted and searched his home and office, Adorno, like other Frankfurt School philosophers, was forced into exile. Upon moving to the United States, Adorno began writing *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* with a close contemporary, Max Horkheimer. As Adorno wrote, he was alarmed by reports from his parents and his colleague, Walter Benjamin, about increasing harassment and prejudice in Europe. As the United States entered World War II, Adorno faced restrictions on his ability to travel, having been classified an enemy alien. It was during his time in the United States that Adorno lived in Los Angeles and had close contact with the culture of Hollywood, leading to his critical theories on cultural production. Adorno's context is vital in understanding Adorno's relationship with the state, culture, and fascism.<sup>2</sup> Adorno's confrontations with restrictive state power contextualize his polemic writing style about the impending doom that state capitalism and the culture industry bring to the world.

In talking about the "culture industry," Adorno intends to highlight how culture becomes standardized and distributed in commodified form, ultimately serving to perpetuate the *status-quo*. For Adorno, culture has specific characteristics within late

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<sup>2</sup> Alex Thomson, *Adorno: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Continuum, 2006), 93-96.

capitalism.<sup>3</sup> First, Adorno argues that culture is tied to a material base. Culture is not solely a form of ideology but is instead influenced by our material world. Second, Adorno connects culture to the dominating forces within a society. Adorno watched the rise of state-capitalism in the fascist regime of Nazi Germany, and he saw similar tendencies in the United States. If culture is influenced by our material world, and if the state is the dominating force of our material world, then culture becomes a tool for the state to control others. In this way, culture is complicit in the injustices that occur within the world; culture is itself a tool of domination. However, Adorno did think that culture is not wholly submissive or always dependent on material reality. Culture is semi-autonomous, and this semi-autonomy allows it a certain freedom from the functions of the economy, opening up the possibility for culture to radically change society.<sup>4</sup>

### *Commodification*

To understand Adorno's treatment of the "culture industry," we must first discuss the Marxist understanding of the use and exchange value of a commodity. All human artifacts, that is, commodities, contain the materialization of labor. This means that a commodity incorporates labor and displays the intentions of both the labor and the artifact. In other words, intrinsic to a commodity is the understanding that it was created through intentional labor for an intentional end. Within our society two distinct concepts denote the value of a commodity: use value and exchange value. The use value of the

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<sup>3</sup> Late capitalism describes capitalism after World War II and is known for an increase in mass production and a concentration of production power into the hands of a few.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Apostolidis, *Stations of the Cross: Adorno and Christian Right Radio* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2000), 33-34.

commodity is signified by the materialization of labor within the commodity and signifies how useful the object is, either for an individual or collective. The use value of a commodity correlates to how the object serves a need. Conversely, the exchange value of a commodity depends on both the utility of the object and the institutional conditions of the economic market (i.e. copyrights, patents, supply and demand, etc.). Today, the exchange value of an object is defined by the price of that object, which in turn is determined by both the utility of the object and market conditions. Furthermore, the creation of a commodity signifies a reified and embodied meaning, since commodities serve a specific need that reflect aspects of society.<sup>5</sup> The purpose and popularity of a commodity may show an outside observer what a society demands and what it values.

Commodities are judged on a spectrum, with significance on one end, and utility on the other. The spectrum helps us understand why an object is used or cherished by the individual and the society. On the spectrum, gasoline would fall on the side of utility while a painting would be closer to significance. Gasoline serves a practical purpose, like powering a car, while a painting may aid individuals in contemplating life. While gasoline may contain artistic significance, and a painting does have some utility, like covering an ugly hole in a wall, objects typically fall within a specific area on this spectrum and rarely fluctuate. Most cultural commodities are perceived as containing significance, with some marginal utility.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Gordon Welty, “Theodor Adorno and the Culture Industry” (Lecture, Wright State University, Dayton, Ohio, March 1984).

<sup>6</sup> Apostolidis, *Stations of the Cross*, 36.

Within late-capitalism, cultural objects and experiences become commodified. These commodities are presented as objects that are unique and capable of fulfilling our desires. The act of purchasing a commodity within late-capitalism makes a commodity fungible, allowing exchange-value to overpower use-value. Within late-capitalism, objects are purchased with money, which consists almost entirely of exchange value.<sup>7</sup> To trade money for a commodity necessitates that both objects are valued by their ability to be exchanged, not the actual labor that went into the creation of the object. Instead of purchasing an object for its value or quality, the quality of an object is judged by its price or its “cultural rating,” such as the reviews on a website. When we value a commodity by its price, we undermine the labor that went into an object and the distinction between use and exchange value.<sup>8</sup>

Within late-capitalism, the commodification, standardization, and ideology of culture begins with the culture industry. The term “industry” here does not denote a specific group or organization that is producing culture. Instead, industry signifies that produced culture is standardized in its promotion and distribution. As Adorno states, “the expression ‘industry’ is not to be taken literally. It refers to the standardization of the thing itself—such as the Western, familiar to every movie-goer—and to the

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<sup>7</sup> At times, money may appear as having artistic aspect, and therefore a use value, as seen in coin collections or songs about money. But, economically, money only has exchange value and all artistic representations of money derives from this. Artistic depictions of money, such as coin collections, are valued because their history of exchangeability. In this case, use value proceeds from exchange value.

<sup>8</sup> Welty, “Theodor Adorno and the Culture Industry,” 99.

rationalization of distribution techniques, but not strictly to the production process.”<sup>9</sup>

Since all culture is produced with the intention of attaining profit, all cultural commodities are standardized. When it comes to the production of culture, there is still a scent of individuality, since individuals are somewhat able to express themselves creatively in production. This form of artistic individuality stands in opposition to the owners of cultural production, who have the final say when it comes to the production, distribution, and standardization of the final product. The power of the executive to standardize production overpowers artistic individuality.

While the culture industry makes all cultural commodities and experiences exchangeable, it also obliterates the use value of a commodity. Prior to late capitalism, cultural commodities were able to make a promise that the world would become better. Often times, cultural commodities, such as stories, dances and art, had morals and themes that were aimed at making life better for the viewer. The culture industry abolishes this through standardization, forcing consumers to evaluate cultural commodities by its cultural rating. Therefore, Adorno asserts that the products of the culture industry promise fulfillment, but instead stimulate desire and force the consumer to find value in that stimulated desire.

Since cultural objects do not offer satisfaction, consumers begin to consume objects with greater appetite and anxiety. The culture industry attempts to guarantee fulfillment by confessing that their productions are not art. Instead the legitimacy of cultural commodities is demonstrated by ticket sales or movie reviews. In this way, the

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<sup>9</sup> Theodor Adorno, *The Culture Industry* (London: Routledge), 100.

culture industry celebrates and flaunts its capitalist ideology, which justifies the travesty of producing poor-quality objects.<sup>10</sup> The culture industry attempts to make all objects and experiences exchangeable, but objects that confess a radical, non-conforming culture can counter this. If an object or experience uncompromisingly resist redeployment by the culture industry, it is able to resist the ideology of the culture industry, changing the *status-quo*.<sup>11</sup>

### ***Ideology of the Status-quo***

The culture industry produces an ideology that subdues consumers to where they willingly accept standardized and repetitive cultural commodities. This allows the culture industry to continue producing standardized and repetitive culture. This ideology stands at the core of the culture industry. Existing in a dialectical relationship with the material conditions of society, culture is supposed to bring change to the world. All human beings have a purpose in life and are oriented towards being good. Therefore, when someone creates a cultural commodity, they are usually creating it to make the world a better place. But, when it comes to the culture industry, ideology acts as a reinforcement of the *status-quo*. The culture industry intentionally depicts the current state of the world as ideal. For the culture industry to continue preaching about the beauty of the *status-quo*, it must prevent individuals from seeing that the world can be a better place. If individuals are unable to see the difference, they will not be motivated to change how the ill parts of the world function.

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<sup>10</sup> Apostolidis, *Stations of the Cross*, 42-43.

<sup>11</sup> Apostolidis, *Stations of the Cross*, 42.

The culture industry maintains the *status-quo* by creating a facade for the consumer that depicts the world as good. The culture industry does this through advertisements and cultural productions. Advertisements depict happy couples in love and scenic boat rides through blue seas, creating a false idea that the world need not change. Dialectically, the culture industry also produces the dark and gloom of the nightly news, which stokes fear among the public and paralyzes any hope of changing the world. Through depictions and storytelling, the culture industry is able to paint the world as both beautiful and unchangeable. The ideology that maintains the *status-quo* is not intentionally curated by the owners of cultural production but is instead a symptom of producing mass culture within late capitalism. For a cultural object or experience to be exchangeable, it must be produced to a certain standard, as discussed above. It is therefore only natural that the produced culture be deemed beautiful and all-good, even if both of these attributes are falsely defined by the culture industry.

Through the standardization of production and distribution, all cultural objects become means to an end: profit. This differs from “authentic” forms of culture, which are ends in and of themselves. Adorno demonstrates this distinction through music. Popular music is marked by its standardization and repetition, which allows individual parts of a song to become interchangeable. A clear modern example of this can be seen in Ariana Grande’s “7 Rings.”<sup>12</sup> Within the song, Grande has taken the rhythm and style of “My Favorite Things,” which is about finding comfort in our favorite things, and has turned it

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<sup>12</sup> Arianna Grande, *7 Rings* (Republic, 2018), single song.

into a song about profit.<sup>13</sup> For Grande, and the culture industry at large, stealing the schema of a song and replacing its content with lyrics about sex and money is common. In contrast to popular music, Adorno identifies “serious music” as music that is itself a concrete totality. Each detail within the musical composition derives its meaning from the totality of the piece, while also standing as a unique aspect of the composition. Within serious music, if a detail or portion is removed, the totality of the musical piece falls apart, showing that the totality is a combination of particular details.<sup>14</sup> For Adorno, authentic culture can be identified by how the individual details of a composition work towards the totality of the cultural object.

Standardization functions to force the consumer to the conformity of repetitive existence. Repetitive and standardized existence permeates much of reality and is best seen in the relationship between work and leisure. Within late capitalism, work and success is measured by how much money an individual makes, which allows all work to be assigned worth through its exchange value. Leisure, which is a realm controlled by the culture industry, acts as the only escape from the grinding nature of work. In Marxist terms, leisure enables the individual worker to “reproduce” themselves, or to gather the rest and energy needed to return to work the next day. The owners of production orchestrate and dictate when a worker is allowed to rest and reproduce themselves by controlling the schedule of the worker. Since reproduction is necessary, leisure acts as a tool by the culture industry to indoctrinate the worker through ideology, making leisure

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<sup>13</sup> Julie Andrews, *Favorite Things* (RCA Victor, 1965), song included in a soundtrack.

<sup>14</sup> Welty, “Theodor Adorno and the Culture Industry.”

the shadow of work.<sup>15</sup> People escape the office, where they sit and observe screens all day, just to go home, and sit, observing another screen all night. The regimented lifestyle of work follows the worker. Deadlines and meetings suffocate working hours, while soccer practice and the “deadlines” for when a show appears on televisions cloud life outside of work. As leisure begins to mirror work, the worker begins to accept the structure of work as *status-quo*, forgoing any hope of change.

As we enjoy culture at home, the amusement we receive from consuming culture fails to satisfy our desires, instead stimulating our appetite for more. Amusement becomes boredom, since the culture industry falsely assumes that amusement should not require effort. This allows cultural products the ability to follow the paths of previous cultural productions. The television shows of today follow the same plot, the same humor, the same cultural grooves of television shows of the past.<sup>16</sup> The culture consumed in leisure prescribes our emotional responses and does all the thinking for us. Reactions are prescribed through signals. Within sitcoms, humor is prescribed by the stereotypical deliverance of a joke, followed by a ubiquitous laugh track, and each plot point is only directly connected to the last. The plots of shows like *Star Trek* are forbidden from developing, with each episode standing on its own. This prevents shows from having a

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<sup>15</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 109.

<sup>16</sup> With the introduction of original television series, and book adaptations, the argument about the repetitive nature of television shows does not hold. Adorno’s argument is not completely compatible in this way. In another way, repetition still reigns as popular cultural tropes and story elements are reused.

sense of totality or an overarching idea.<sup>17</sup> Instead, television begins to mirror life of the worker, as episodes mirror the repetitiveness and standardization of the workers life.<sup>18</sup>

### *Command and Obedience*

Seeing the way Nazi Germany used mass culture as a tool to demonize the Jewish people and to foment hatred, Adorno believed that the culture industry was susceptible to the needs of the state to manipulate and subdue the public. Therefore, Adorno believed that the culture industry anticipates a fully formed system of state capitalism, where the state plans and controls all facets of the economy. Influenced by the work of Friedrich Pollock, who argued that social relations change under state capitalism, Adorno mapped these same changes within the culture industry.<sup>19</sup> Within state capitalism, the profit motive is superseded by the “power motive” as the state attempts to dominate the public and all facets of reality. Interactions cease being governed by profit and are instead facilitated to attain power.

Adorno’s assertion that the culture industry functions as a tool of coercion and dominance can be seen in his understanding of advertisements. The ubiquity of advertising within the cultural landscape installs into the masses what Pollock calls

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<sup>17</sup> While the television industry has greatly grown from the time of Adorno, in which television shows have “seasons” that dictate the continuity of a plotline, it is important to note that there are many television shows that strive not to have a plotline connecting one episode to the next.

<sup>18</sup> Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 109.

<sup>19</sup> Within monopoly capitalism, which precedes state capitalism, private relations were mediated by the market. Within state capitalism, private relations are mediated through dominance, so that within economic transactions, individuals do not approach each other as peers, but instead as commander and commanded.

“Command and Obedience.”<sup>20</sup> Advertisement functions to stimulate false desires, while also celebrating the commodification of objects and commodity fetishization. Ultimately, this deprives the masses of any meaningful choice in the culture they consume. Since advertisements are a large source of funding for cultural production, advertisers dictate which cultural products survive and which die. In this way, advertisements are able to command the production and distribution of culture. Advertisement stokes false demand into the consumer, allowing the culture industry to rig the vote of economic production. Individuals believe that they have a voice in choosing to purchase products, but this voice is guided by advertisements.

If the culture industry regulates the standardization and distribution of cultural products, then it uses pseudo-differentiation to market the same products in different forms. Pseudo-differentiation is when the culture industry advertises the same object as different, creating false competition. Examples of this are seen throughout our economy, as cars with nearly identical attributes are marketed as being “unique” from their competitors, enabling companies to charge a higher cost for the same car. Pseudo-differentiation also appears in the plethora of sitcoms or movies released that recycle the same plots, the same characters, and the same themes. Pseudo-differentiation functions to incorporate all individuals more effectively into the schema of mass culture, since the differentiation between products is fictional, a trick of advertisement. Does a true difference appear between a sitcom about a middle-class Hispanic family, a wealthy white family, or an impoverished black family? All these sitcoms depict the same

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<sup>20</sup> Apostolidis, *Stations of the Cross*, 40.

pointless plotline, directing all classes and identities of society into consuming the same, standardized product and following the same ideology, which in the end makes all the individual consumers the same.

Adorno's critique of the culture industry was directly targeted towards the cultural production of both fascist regimes and Hollywood corporations, but his critique can illuminate the way in which culture is produced within Evangelical Catholicism. What does the culture produced by Evangelical Catholics tell us about who we are as Catholics and how we envision the future of our faith?

### **EVANGELICAL CATHOLICISM**

Before we critique the cultural productions of the Evangelical Catholic movement, it is vital to understand who Evangelical Catholics are and why they matter.<sup>21</sup> Evangelical Catholicism is an individualistic, emotional, and traditionalist movement that attempts to understand "how the church can be church in the modern world."<sup>22</sup> In "Here Come the Evangelical Catholics," religious historian William Portier details how after the Second Vatican Council, the American Catholic subculture, which was supported by generations of immigrant families and their traditions, began to diminish. As it dissolved, a new form replaced it: Evangelical Catholicism.<sup>23</sup> Evangelical Catholics are "neither

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<sup>21</sup> This paper is not explicitly referring to The Evangelical Catholic organization but about Evangelical Catholicism as a movement that was a product of Pope John Paul II's "New Evangelization."

<sup>22</sup> Robert Barron, "Bishop Barron's CATHOLICISM Trailer," Word on Fire, Des Plaines, IL, December 4, 2009, 2:01, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RzowCr\\_5Qlk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RzowCr_5Qlk).

<sup>23</sup> William Portier, "Here Come the Evangelical Catholics" *Communio* 31.1 (Spring 2004): 39.

liberal or conservative,” but rather are those Catholics who refuse “to separate orthodoxy from social justice ... are interested in Catholic specific issues ... love the pope [and] are pro-life.”<sup>24</sup> Evangelical Catholics search for a return “to history, liturgy and a sense of church as a visible witness.”<sup>25</sup> Theologically, they stress a personal conversion to Jesus Christ, view the Bible as the center of life and faith, and feel called to publicly witness.<sup>26</sup> On an ecclesiological level, Evangelical Catholics view the church as a voluntary structure, as compared to an institutional church.<sup>27</sup>

Portier warns that it is not fitting to imagine the relatively small group of Evangelical Catholics as seeking to recreate a Pre-Vatican II church. Evangelical Catholics are “postmodern consumers of Catholicism” who have never experienced the church before Vatican II, and therefore cannot be classified as “restorationist.”<sup>28</sup> Evangelical Catholics are the most active in showing the world why Catholicism is the best religious option among others, therefore emphasizing evangelization. In this way, according to Portier, the fervor of Catholic evangelical faith will pave the way for the future of Catholicism.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Portier, “Here Come the Evangelical Catholics,” 37.

<sup>25</sup> Portier, “Here Come the Evangelical Catholics,” 38.

<sup>26</sup> Portier, “Here Come the Evangelical Catholics,” 44.

<sup>27</sup> Portier, “Here Come the Evangelical Catholics,” 42-43. A volunteer church emphasizes that individuals who were once Catholic, or were never Catholic, should be evangelized in adulthood. This compares to an institutional church, where individuals are born into their faith and guided to a faithful life through the institutions of the church.

<sup>28</sup> Portier, “Here Come the Evangelical Catholics,” 55. While Portier may be correct to a degree, Evangelical Catholics learn their theology from others, which may include restorationist/conservative theologians.

<sup>29</sup> Portier, “Here Come the Evangelical Catholics,” 66.

A prominent leader within Evangelical Catholicism is the Auxiliary Bishop of Los Angeles, Robert Barron. Barron is popular on social media, with 138,000 Twitter followers, 185,000 YouTube subscribers, and almost 1.7 million Facebook followers. He is also known for publishing books and DVD's, including the widely distributed "Catholicism" documentary.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, Barron is the founder of WordonFire.org, a non-profit website that contains lectures, homilies, and resources used by Evangelical Catholics. To understand the impact of Barron, we will observe his "Catholicism" documentary and his large repertoire of YouTube videos.

Another hub for the Evangelical Catholic movement is the Fellowship of Catholic University Students, also known as FOCUS. FOCUS was born out of the "New Evangelization" movement of John Paul II and works to evangelize and teach college students in over 170 locations. Every year, FOCUS hosts nationwide conferences, the largest of which is SEEK, that emphasize socialization and education.<sup>31</sup> In the argument below, we study the SEEK2019 conference as a producer of Catholic culture. In the case of both Barron and SEEK, the paper illustrates the way in which Evangelical Catholicism uses the cultural means of contemporary American society.

### ***The Commodification of Catholicism***

In *The Culture Industry*, Adorno wrote that "No homeland can survive being processed by the films which celebrate it, and which thereby turn the unique character on

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<sup>30</sup> "Robert Barron (Bishop)," Wikipedia, last modified April 4, 2019, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert\\_Barron\\_\(bishop\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Barron_(bishop)).

<sup>31</sup> "Fellowship of Catholic University Students," Wikipedia, last modified February 26, 2019, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fellowship\\_of\\_Catholic\\_University\\_Students](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fellowship_of_Catholic_University_Students).

which it thrives into an interchangeable sameness.”<sup>32</sup> In the same way, Catholicism cannot survive if it is processed and commodified by the culture industry of our time. The unique characteristics of Catholicism, its call to love God and our neighbor, is lost when Catholicism is fit into a commodity.

Using social media, such as YouTube, advertising, and “live” forms of culture, such as concerts and “witness” TED talks, Evangelical Catholicism has entered the arena of economic exchange. This creates a commodified form of Catholicism. Catholic culture produced on a stage begins to become exchangeable with all other forms of entertainment created on a stage. When Catholic culture becomes a ten-hour documentary series, it becomes comparable and exchangeable with other types of documentaries. The witness on the stage of SEEK2019 and presenters at TED begin to look similar, as both passionately present information, not faith. As Catholic culture grows in exchange value, it shrinks in use value, becoming a commodity among others.

Three examples will be highlighted to show the commodification of Catholic culture: the promotional advertising used for SEEK2019, the Mass at SEEK2019, and the “Catholicism” documentary series.

#### *Promotional Advertising for SEEK2019*

SEEK2019 has grown in popularity due to its masterful use of advertising. While this has succeeded in recruiting members, it has created a problem. Due to its nature, advertisement creates false demand so that individuals may purchase a commodity. Advertising highlights the exchange value of an object, since it asks consumers to trade

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<sup>32</sup> Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, 103.

money for an object, while also defining the use value of a commodity. To foment false demand, advertisements highlight a particular aspect of a commodity that would be useful and then coerces the viewer into wanting that object for that particular reason. To advertise its events, SEEK2019 had to “sell” their experience to others. This leads to SEEK2019 adopting a standardized and repetitive model of advertising, which harms the values of Catholicism.

To outline the commodification of Catholicism through advertisement, two separate videos will be critiqued: “Encounter More” and “SEEK2019 Recap.” “Encounter More” is a promotional video for SEEK2019 that supports an ideology of Catholic triumphalism. The first half of the video asks the viewer if they feel empty and long for something more in life, accompanied with quiet, reflective music. The obvious implication is that society offers an empty existence that only God can fill. The video then shifts to its second half, showing scenes of young adults dancing within a party environment and concludes with a lineup of speakers who will witness at the event. Within the second section, the video’s music become louder and turns into popular dance music. Aesthetically, the video has a modern art style, and shifts between shots of nature and the conference.<sup>33</sup>

“SEEK2019 Recap” begins with quiet music that slowly gets louder, accompanied by images of participants enduring a wide range of emotions, from laughter in dancing, to crying in contemplation. Throughout the video, shots shift to prominent speakers claiming that SEEK2019 is necessary because society is empty:

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<sup>33</sup> Focus Catholic, “Encounter Something More,” FOCUS, Denver, Colorado, June 28, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=owxbKEaKILo&t=6s>.

We are engulfed in a society that breeds an ever-continuous drive towards innovation, toward pleasure, towards what the world describes as necessary and says is the source of earthly happiness. But for this ever-driving source for false happiness, we are driven closer and closer to emptiness, to despair. If we truly understand the purpose of our existence, if we could truly comprehend the God who longs for us. The one who calls us for an unfathomable joy united in him, we would not despair. For within us, we awaken a longing, a desire for that which this world cannot provide, cannot contain. That which he alone can give. And with this desire, he plants a seed. A seed that begins humbly yet contains within its substance for unimaginable growth. I tell you know, we are not called to despair. We are not called for the empty promises of this world. We are called to strength.... We are called to be a generation of prosperity in Christ.... How will you answer the call?<sup>34</sup>

A third of the way into the video, a clerical shift occurs, as a flow of images shows priests processing, holding a large monstrance. Scenes continue switching back and forth between the laity and the priest, depicting traditional values, such as bestowing the communion on the tongue, a focus on the censer, and golden vestments. In the middle of the video, baskets of hosts are shown, and silence ensues. The video slows down to display a priest lifting up the Eucharist, before the bass drops and the music grows in

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<sup>34</sup> Focus Catholic, "SEEK2019 Recap Video," FOCUS, Denver, Colorado, January 31, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0XSJKZJCz7E>.

volume. A final shift occurs, as multiple shots of the Eucharist are shown, interrupted by images of priests and laity worshipping.<sup>35</sup>

Both videos begin by asking the viewer to question society. Throughout the videos, it is made explicitly clear that society creates an empty experience through its demands. Society celebrates lust and greed and Catholicism can fill the hole that is left empty. In a certain way, we should applaud SEEK2019, for they correctly outline some aspects about the countercultural nature of Christianity. Lust and greed are idols manufactured by our society, and Christianity can help in tearing down these false gods. But in another way, this advertisement does a deep disservice to Catholics. Due to the standardized time of an advertisement, at under two minutes or less, SEEK2019 sets itself up for failure. It is not possible to properly outline the amazing, countercultural power of Catholicism within a two-minute video. The advertisement is forced to sell a watered down ideology of Catholic triumphalism. Instead of outlining how Catholics could properly engage the world to find fulfillment, they are sold a commodity.

Catholicism is commodified into Catholic triumphalism and then sold with appeals to traditional values. After finding that society is vacant, viewers are promised comfort by the traditionalist values of Catholicism, present in a keen clerical and eucharistic focus, bound up in modern dance parties. Both videos contain clericalism, highlighting popular Catholic priest-speakers, but “SEEK2019 Recap” exudes

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<sup>35</sup> Focus Catholic, “SEEK2019 Recap Video.” The final third of “SEEK2019 Recap Video” acts as a pseudo-form of eucharistic adoration. More attention is given to the Eucharist than to any other aspect of the Catholic faith.

clericalism.<sup>36</sup> The latter two-thirds of the video presents the clergy in positions of power. In two separate shots, a priest is shown placing communion on the tongues of members of the laity. Throughout the entirety of the conference, communion was given on the tongue solely to other priest or seminarians, while a majority of communion was given by hand to the laity. Furthermore, within most Masses held, the bishop presiding over the Mass was not dressed in gold vestments. The placement of communion on the tongue and the gold vestments draws attention and power to the priest. If the priest dresses in magnificent vestments and is the only who can handle the host, then he is seen as superior. The priest, who should be the servant of the laity, becomes their master. To show two consecutive shots of the laity receiving communion on the tongue, coupled with the oddity of gold vestments, shows a traditionalist intent in the manufacturing of the film. As detailed above, the ideology of *status-quo* is strongest when it is presented by those in power. The videos focus on the clergy and the Eucharist is meant to provide comfort to the viewer, while also indoctrinating them to the traditionalist views. In the end, the Mass at SEEK2019 that emphasizes the beauty and mystery of faith but leaves the laity in darkness.

Both advertisements include modern, techno soundtracks and a continuous stream of young adults dancing, experiencing deep emotion. This is how advertisement “sells” young individuals the Catholic experience. The advertisement wants to present Catholicism as appealing and enjoyable, and therefore makes itself exchangeable with a dance party. The presentation of SEEK2019 as both a concert and a TED conference

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<sup>36</sup> Clericalism should be understood as an overemphasis on the power and authority of the clergy, to the detriment of the laity.

engrain the exchangeability of Catholicism as a commodity. For an advertisement that preaches about the emptiness of the society, SEEK2019 betrays itself by using the very tools it condemns.

*The Mass at SEEK2019*

SEEK2019 contains scenes from five separate Masses.<sup>37</sup> Every Mass functions on the same schema as a concert.<sup>38</sup> The Masses in the video contain the same rituals and practices but are redesigned with the ornaments of modern technology. When participating in these liturgies, participants seem to feel the joy and excitement of going to a concert. The faithful sing along with the live band in the same way that fans sing along with their favorite songs. Spotlights swerve through the dark room, highlighting the band, the priest, or the Eucharist, coercing the viewer into paying attention to certain aspects only. The priest and the tabernacle sit on an elevated stage lit up with spotlights, while the laity sit in darkness, mirroring the performers on stage. As the presenters warrant all attention, the crowd watches in darkness and passivity, creating a power dynamic of command and obedience. This is worsened by a large section of seats closest to the stage that are occupied by the ordained, like the privileged few who enjoy the first rows of a concert.

In relation to the Mass, SEEK2019 tears the Mass away from its ecclesial context and damages the communal aspects of the liturgy. The context of the Mass, as an event where a community comes together to remember Christ and celebrate their faith, is lost.

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<sup>37</sup> SEEK2019, “Schedule,” <https://seek2019.com/schedule/>, accessed March 4, 2019.

<sup>38</sup> Focus Catholic, “SEEK2019 Recap Video.”

Thousands of strangers attend this concert-like Mass and stare at a band of priest with microphones, and then thousands of strangers leave. Community is lost when a priest you do not even know serves you the Eucharist alongside strangers in a concert hall you paid to be in. The Mass begins to take an individualistic feel, as discrete, disconnected individuals focus their attention on the stage, ignoring those around them. Furthermore, for Catholics who may not know or enjoy all the aspects of the Mass, the sacramentals of the church disappear. Gone are the paintings of saints, the light filtering through the stained glass and the arches of architecture. These are all traded in for a television screen and an ornate stage. The liturgy becomes a concert.<sup>39</sup>

*Catholicism the Documentary*

Shifting to Bishop Robert Barron's "Catholicism" video series reveals that the commodification of Catholicism is not unique to SEEK2019. "Catholicism" falls into the schema of mass culture characteristic of broadcast media. A single source, Bishop Barron, orates his understanding of Catholic history throughout the entirety of the documentary. Information flows from one speaker to many. The culture industry strives for standardization, and this presents itself in the documentary. Like secular, mass media documentaries, the episodes of "Catholicism" last about an hour and span ten episodes. Similar to other documentaries, "Catholicism" showcases the beauty of the world and the people who inhabit it, without ever allowing the viewer to interact with the world. Like many documentaries, the orator of knowledge is an expert, a figure of authority, mirroring Adorno's understanding of command and obedience. As the listener enjoys

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<sup>39</sup> Focus Catholic, "Day 2 Livestream SEEK2019," FOCUS, Denver, Colorado, January 4, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-t0mLOCdfNM>.

“Catholicism” in leisure, Barron dictates doctrines and dogmas of the church, commanding the listener to believe his interpretations, forgoing any individual interpretations of the Catholic tradition. The documentary does all the thinking for the viewer.

In the culture industry, executives dictate what is important and what is not. The same occurs within “Catholicism.” In producing ten one-hour length episodes, Barron forces himself to describe what he deems are the best aspects of Catholicism. While Barron tries his best, and presents some aspects well, the structure of the cultural commodity forbids the possibility of properly describing Catholicism. Viewers are not privileged to experience parts of the Catholic faith if it is only present on a television screen. This prevents viewers from making their own meaning from the Catholic faith. In the same way that the Gospel accounts of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus fail to encapsulate the entirety and beauty of Jesus Christ, “Catholicism” cannot possibly show us how beautiful Catholicism really is.<sup>40</sup>

Bishop Barron claims that he wants to give Catholics an avenue to present their own understanding of the church.<sup>41</sup> A documentary does not allow the Catholic viewer to present her or his understanding so, in the end, Barron’s documentary is only able to dictate his view of Catholicism. The structure of the documentary forbids individual interaction with Barron, his setting, or any aspects of Catholicism. As individual viewers watch “Catholicism” during their time of leisure, any real form of evangelization will not

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<sup>40</sup> *Catholicism*, directed by Matt Leonard (Skokie, IL: R.R. Donnelley, 2001), DVD.

<sup>41</sup> *Catholicism* DVD.

occur, since the individual's conversion cannot be commanded by any human agent, not even Bishop Barron.

When Catholicism is distilled into a documentary format, the truth and history of Catholicism become commodities that can be purchased and exchanged. Catholicism as a faith tradition has infinite use value and no exchange value. "Catholicism" as a documentary has a particular use value, that of leisure, and an exchange value of \$100.<sup>42</sup> Once the exchange value supersedes the use value, standardization sets in. "Catholicism" becomes a documentary among others, as viewers weigh the value of "Catholicism" against the value of other documentaries and films. The structure of the documentary is made to captivate the viewer for the totality of the showing. Value begins to be attributed to the cultural rating and sales success of "Catholicism" as a documentary, overshadowing the truth Catholicism as a faith has to offer.

### *The Status-quo of Evangelical Catholicism*

Adorno wrote that "[t]o take the culture industry as seriously as its unquestioned role demands, means to take it seriously critically, and not to cower in the face of its monopolistic character."<sup>43</sup> The same applies to both the church and the Evangelical Catholic movement. As Evangelical Catholicism uses the tools of the culture industry to commodify Catholicism, Evangelical Catholicism has also become its own culture industry with its own ideology. This ideology supports the *status-quo* of the world and ignores the marginalization of women and the poor.

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<sup>42</sup> Word on Fire Catholic Ministries, Store, Accessed March 6, 2019, <https://store.wordonfire.org/products/catholicism-series>.

<sup>43</sup> Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, 103

Barron states that “the Catholic story is being told but being told by the wrong people in the wrong way. We need to tell our own story. We need to get the message out, so as to draw people in.” Here he is attempting to redefine how Catholics identify themselves.<sup>44</sup> At the heart of the Evangelical Catholic movement is an attempt to understand and define Catholicism within a context of American culture and late capitalism.<sup>45</sup> Evangelical Catholics identify themselves with particular markers, such as “the Eucharist, the Pope, and Marian devotion,” opposition to abortion, dedication to the sanctity of heterosexual marriage, specific gender roles, and maintaining select Catholic doctrine.<sup>46</sup> At its core, Evangelical Catholicism attempts to identify itself against society. This opposition to society has led to the belief that Catholic culture must be superimposed onto society, leading to an ideology of Catholic triumphalism. Catholic triumphalism necessitates the belief that the world is in disarray, and that Catholicism has the perfect answers. But Catholicism is not perfect. It does not listen to the voices of the marginalized. It does not listen to the experiences of women and those suffering from poverty. But the ideology of Evangelical Catholicism cannot accept this, because it would have to admit that the Catholic Church is as imperfect as the wider society is.

Examples abound of Evangelical Catholicism telling the world that it is empty. A clear example of this is visible in Barron’s video, “The Heroic Priesthood.” Throughout the flashy, beautiful video, both Barron and a group of seminarians attempt to redefine

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<sup>44</sup> Barron, “Bishop Barron’s CATHOLICISM Trailer, 2.01.

<sup>45</sup> Portier, “Here Come the Evangelical Catholics,” 54.

<sup>46</sup> Portier, “Here Come the Evangelical Catholics,” 55.

the priesthood. Barron claims that society has misunderstood and mischaracterized what it means to be a priest, and it is up to Catholics to correct society's misperception. Barron explains that basketball is a great metaphor for understanding what it means to be a priest. In society, basketball is an end in itself, but within the priesthood, all activities, including basketball, are a means to reaching God. This rather odd analogy implicitly suggests that Catholicism has a better understanding of society, even when it comes to sports. If only society were to understand what it means to be human, what it means to a priest, and what it means to play basketball, if only society understood this, people would understand that the priest is a hero who has come to save an empty world.<sup>47</sup>

The traditionalist ideology critiques current Catholic teachings and movements, hoping to revert to Pre-Vatican II conceptions of the Catholic Church in the world. This ideology understands the church as against the world, and views evangelization as superimposing their ideology on the world. This ideology is highly clerical, ignores the experiences of the marginalized, and focuses on "evangelization." Accompanying this ideology is a withdrawal from ecumenism.<sup>48</sup> Since Vatican II, a popular metaphor for how the church acts in the world is that of "dialogue." At times, the church teaches the world and at other times the world teaches the church. As Catholics begin to experience

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<sup>47</sup> Robert Barron, "Heroic Priesthood." Word on Fire, Des Plaines, IL, August 4, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TaoqKz4m5E>.

<sup>48</sup> To understand the basis for my criteria on an ideology of traditionalism and the *status-quo*, see Richard P. McBrien, "The Catholic Coup," *The Baltimore Sun*, December 10, 1991, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/bs-xpm-1991-12-10-1991344148-story.html>.

other cultures, the Catholic Church learns from the world and is changed.<sup>49</sup> Catholic triumphalism does not seek to engage the world in this form of dialogue. It does not dialogue with the marginalized, or with those who attempt to push the church in a new direction. Instead, it works to close Catholics off from the world, only engaging the world from a position of dominance. It preaches that if the world followed the Catholic way of life, the world would be perfect overlooking the fact that the church and her teachings are not all perfect.

### *The Role of Women*

Evangelical Catholicism rejects the legitimate aspirations and voices of women. Instead, the world it construes presumes that the role of women has already been determined by the church and should never change. Two separate lectures from SEEK2019 can aid in highlighting how Evangelical Catholicism ignores the aspirations of women and instead defines womanhood for them. On the second day of SEEK2019, Lisa Cotter, a Catholic author, lectured on how a Catholic woman should express Catholic femininity.<sup>50</sup> Cotter's lecture relies on John Paul II's understanding of complementarity within *Theology of the Body*, and argues that society has incorrectly defined women throughout each generation. To resolve this, the Catholic Church must impose its understanding of Catholic sexuality over and above society's understanding.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> An example of this can be seen in the Second Vatican Council's permission to use the vernacular during the Mass.

<sup>50</sup> Lisa Cotter, "Who is Lisa Cotter and where did Made to Magnify come from," madetomagnify <http://madetomagnify.com/about-lisa-cotter/>.

<sup>51</sup> To be counter-cultural, Catholics must maintain and live lives that uphold vital Christian truths in a society that denies them. But the question of sexuality struggles to fit

Cotter does not ask Catholics at SEEK2019 to dialogue with the world in order to better understand why the definition of womanhood has changed. Instead, she highlights the lives of a few women, Mother Mary and Chiara Corbella Petrillo, and commands all Catholics to standardize their lives according to her examples.<sup>52</sup>

Cotter forgets that the Catholic Church's understanding of sexuality is doctrinal, not dogmatic, and preaches as if her understanding is the only correct interpretation of that doctrine. Cotter's understanding of femininity is based in complementarity, where women are men's helpers and belong in certain predetermined roles. This perpetuates the *status-quo* of the church. Adorno's fear that ideology pacifies the progression of society rings true in Cotter's description. Cotter defines the question of women's role in the world as already resolved, deadening any chance of dialogue with the world.

Evangelical Catholicism's disregard for the aspiration and experiences of women is also seen in two of Barron's YouTube videos about the role of women within the church: "Why Won't Catholicism Allow Women Priest?" and "Bishop Barron on Women in the Church." In both videos, Barron discusses the role women play within the church. In the first video lecture, Barron responds to a parishioner asking about the ordination of women. Barron responds to the question by redefining the premise of the question, arguing that the question of women's ordination is a question about power. He then redefines power within Catholicism not as "institutional power" but as saintly power. For Barron, power is attained through sainthood, as saints are able to surrender

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this definition of counterculture when copious amounts of research and writing have detailed the secondary status of women within our world.

<sup>52</sup> Focus Catholic, "Day 2 Livestream SEEK2019."

their lives to Christ, allowing him to “work powerfully” through them. The role of the priest is to serve the laity, to make them holy. For Barron, women should not search for institutional power, but should instead “search for [saintly] power first,” forgoing any real discussion about actual experiences of women. Barron finishes his video by stating that anyone can become a saint today by simply willing it, placing the burden of powerlessness on women.<sup>53</sup>

In his second video, “Bishop Barron on Women in the Church,” Barron discusses the current role of women within the church by reflecting on *America Magazine*’s survey.<sup>54</sup> Barron’s video consists of five responses to observations made by the survey. The first two points deal with the number of women leaving the church and the church’s focus on family.<sup>55</sup> Barron’s third observation is important for our argument, since it discusses the role of women within the church and the ordination of women. Barron is presented with the survey’s data that only 18% of women agree that women are part of decision-making processes within the church. Barron counters this point, stating that “women are pretty massively involved in what should be termed decision making. Think

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<sup>53</sup> Robert Barron, “Why Won’t Catholicism Allow Women Priests (#AskBishopBarron),” *Word on Fire*, Des Plaines, IL, May 19, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CuT8yTakq54&t=57s>.

<sup>54</sup> A series of articles dedicated to the survey on women’s attitude towards the church can be found in *America Magazine* 21.2 (January 22, 2018).

<sup>55</sup> The other points in the video deal with the church’s overemphasis on the family, the importance of evangelization and Mass attendance, and the decrease in women experiencing sexism within the church.

of parish staffs, think of parish teams and chancery offices.”<sup>56</sup> For Barron, the role of women is to evangelize and continue supporting parish life, since they already have decision, making power within the church. Barron admits that a male priest will be the one who has final say, but for him that is not power. Instead of addressing the feelings of powerlessness that the surveyed women felt, Barron responds by stating that women already have power within the church.

In the above examples, Cotter and Barron both present the church’s teachings on women’s role within society and within the church as finalized. When women aspire for a greater role within the church, Evangelical Catholicism pushes back, outlining that they already have a role that is not capable of change. The everyday experiences of women within society are devalued by both Cotter and Barron. Instead of listening to the experiences of women, Cotter states the role of a women is solely within a system of complementarity. When women ask how they can be involved within the church, Barron states that “women are pretty massively involved.”<sup>57</sup> They should aspire for what Barron identifies as the role of women, and not for what they aspire to be. Both Cotter and Barron perpetuate the *status-quo* by defining that the current role of women within the church is the only possibility.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Robert Barron, “Bishop Barron on Women in the Church,” Word on Fire, Des Plaines, IL, April 5, 2018, <https://www.wordonfire.org/resources/video/bishop-barron-on-women-in-the-church/>.

<sup>57</sup> Robert Barron, “Bishop Barron on Women in the Church.”

<sup>58</sup> I am not advocating the ordination of women as the answer to the question about the role of women within the church. However, I am arguing that the role of women in the church should be decided, in part, in response to the experiences and aspirations of women.

### *The Place of the Poor*

If an ideology of the *status-quo* is to be perpetuated, it cannot display the ills of the world. But the world is ill, filled with poverty and suffering. Evangelical Catholicism simply ignores this and works to undermine the church's teachings on how it should be present within the world. The ideology of the Evangelical Catholic movement ignores the Catholic call to care for the poor, because working with the poor does not fit into their worldview of a perfect Church.

In the entire lineup of the SEEK2019 conference, not one of the speakers presented on helping and loving the poor. Presenters may have spoken about loving your neighbor, but for these speakers, interacting with your neighbor is done through evangelization and witness, not helping the poor.<sup>59</sup> Both "Catholicism" and Barron's YouTube channel also downplay the necessity of helping the poor. In the "Catholicism" documentary, for example, the second episode describing the teachings of Jesus is the closest it gets to highlighting the need to help the poor. Barron begins the episode with an individualistic understanding of the beatitudes, highlighting Matthew's "blessed are the poor in spirit." When talking about social justice, he highlights non-violence protest figures and, in the end, dedicates five minutes to a discussion about helping the poor.

On his YouTube channel, the same problem occurs. Barron's YouTube career spans many years and includes hundreds of videos. Within the hundreds of videos

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<sup>59</sup> I am not stating that SEEK2019 had no aspects about helping the poor, since the conference did have booths where students could sign up for volunteer service. It is important to emphasize that no presenter decided to present on the universal call to help the poor, and that therefore no culture produced by SEEK2019 was about helping the poor.

produced by Barron, few videos discuss Catholic Social Teaching or those experiencing poverty. “Bishop Barron on Social Justice and Evangelization” and “Pope Francis and Catholic Social Teachings” are two examples of this.<sup>60</sup> The former video discusses evangelization in relation to the poor, with the example of Saint Peter Claver. Barron explains that Claver should be the ideal when it comes to social justice, since Claver helped the poor and then worked to convert them.<sup>61</sup> Barron states that the church has three functions “worshipping God, helping the poor, and evangelizing”—but he only advocates for the poor in the context of evangelization. In this way, he sees addressing poverty as a means to an end, not caring for the poor because of their dignity. Barron finishes his video by outlining that the poor are more than the material poor, but also include the spiritual poor. Barron’s shift at the end of the video exposes how he is undercutting the care for the poor by broadly defining poverty and emphasizing evangelization.

Barron’s “Pope Francis and Catholic Social Teachings” video lecture describes work on a structural level. He claims that Catholic Social Teachings embrace market capitalism. Barron only talks about the poor in the last minute in the video, when he quotes Pope Leo XIII about giving excess wealth to the poor. But even in this context, Barron uses this example to support his overall argument about a regulated market. The

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<sup>60</sup> *Catholicism DVD*.

<sup>61</sup> Robert Barron, “Bishop Barron on Social Justice and Evangelization,” Word on Fire, Des Plaines, IL, November 30, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5KaDSS-kK0w>.

economy should be regulated through laws and fostered within a moral environment, but he never really addresses structural problems that cause poverty.

In a video that is directly about the church and the poor, “Why Doesn't the Catholic Church Give Away Its Riches?” the same problem arises. When asked why the church does not give its riches to the poor, he remarks that the riches of the Vatican and the vestments of the Pope stand as metaphors for the riches and beauty of Christ. If the church gave away all its money, how could it portray the beauty of Catholicism? Barron then takes an odd turn at the end, describing that the church has riches because “the poor need beauty as much as they need food and drink.”<sup>62</sup> Barron asserts that the splendors of the church are as important as the call to care and feed the impoverished.<sup>63</sup> Barron justifies the riches of the church by claiming that it already serves to feed a spiritual hunger of the poor, ignoring the real hunger of those beneath him.

By downplaying the importance of caring for the poor, Evangelical Catholicism forfeits the possibility of changing the world. The ideology of Evangelical Catholicism redefines love for neighbor as witnessing and conversion, not helping the needy. When presenters at SEEK2019 celebrate by saying, “We are here to evangelize!”, it makes sense that Evangelical Catholics think that evangelization should supersede love for the

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<sup>62</sup> Robert Barron “Why Doesn't the Catholic Church Give Away Its Riches? (#AskBishopBarron),” Word on Fire, Des Plaines, IL, May 5, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EOaJTObCsLs>.

<sup>63</sup> Barron “Why Doesn't the Catholic Church Give Away Its Riches?”

poor.<sup>64</sup> The reorientation of the Catholic Church's mission away from caring for the poor ingrains the *status-quo* of the world into the minds of every Evangelical Catholic. Furthermore, broadly defining poverty as spiritual poverty serves to take precious resources away from individuals who are suffering from hunger and poverty. If Evangelical Catholics do talk about helping the poor, it is in the context of evangelizing, as seen with Barron's video. Helping the poor becomes a means to an evangelical end, which forgoes seeing the humanity of the poor. The horrors of war and poverty are normalized, and the need to evangelize supersedes caring for the poor.

### ***The Command and Obedience of Evangelical Catholicism***

The two previous sections are sprinkled with references to Adorno's conception of command and obedience. In order that the culture industry can teach consumers the ideology of *status-quo*, it must assume a position of authority. Authority and clericalism abound within Evangelical Catholicism since the primary mode of communication is in the schema of mass media: one orates to many. When a speaker enters the stage or when Barron produces a new video, they assume a role of authority. Within society, speakers who present in front of a camera or on a stage are automatically assumed as authoritative, even if they are not an expert.

Within the tools of mass culture, the separation between the viewer and the speaker denotes a sense of experience and knowledge. The speaker is active; the viewer is passive. The schema of command and obedience allows the ideology to be perpetuated

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<sup>64</sup> Brantly Millegan, "Serious Catholics Are Evangelical," *Christianity Today*, March 6, 2013, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2013/march-web-only/weigel-counter-reformation-is-over.html>.

since individuals are taught to respect and listen to authority. This authoritative role is an inevitable outcome of using the cultural structures of the culture industry. Furthermore, information presented about morality and doctrines is perceived as dogmatic to the untrained eye. When Barron or Cotter are orating about their understanding of Catholicism, they do not allow any form of concessions. If an ideology is authoritative and triumphant, then it must be presented as dogmatic.<sup>65</sup>

While the dogmatic lecturing of Evangelical Catholicism is troublesome, Evangelical Catholicism deliberately projects authority through clericalism. This is present within Barron's "Heroic Priesthood" video.<sup>66</sup> Barron's video is transparently clerical, since it continually describes the vital formation and sacrifice of a priest, portraying the priest as the hero of the world. The video is also filled with visual symbols of clericalism. Multiple times throughout the video, seminarians are shown wearing cassocks and collars, as if they have already been ordained, while the ordained are shown wearing full vestments. Shots linger on a priest lifting up both species of the Eucharist, with no explanation for as to why this is shown. Throughout the video, priests distribute communion on the tongue to other priest and seminarians, affirming the holiness of the priest and a traditionalist communion. Within the entire video, a member of the laity is only shown once. But within this short segment, a seminarian, in cassocks and a collar, is shown bending over the homeless individual. This scene is accompanied with a voiceover

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<sup>65</sup> Most speakers do not intend on presenting information as a dogmatic truth. As discussed above, the ideology of the culture industry is usually not intentional, but yet, the ideology still exists.

<sup>66</sup> Command and Obedience was explicitly discussed during SEEK2019's promotional videos and scenes from the Mass.

of the seminarian saying that as priest are lifted up in holiness, no job becomes too low, even the job of caring for the poor. In clericalism, caring for the laity is a job beneath the priest. But, as a holy priest, they are the only ones who can care for the sheep.<sup>67</sup>

## CONCLUSION

At the core of Christianity is a call to change the world and “prepare the way” for reign of God. There is also a need for Catholics to listen, to weep, and to feel the pain of the world. As Pope Francis said when visiting Lampedusa, “We are a society which has forgotten how to weep, how to experience compassion— “suffering with” others: the globalization of indifference has taken from us the ability to weep!”<sup>68</sup> Evangelical Catholicism has also forgotten how to weep, how to feel compassion, and how to listen to the world. The globalization of indifference has crept into Evangelical Catholicism as it has become indifferent to the plights of the marginalized and to spirit of the world.

At the end of *The Culture Industry*, Adorno writes:

Even if [the culture industry’s] messages were as harmless as they are made out to be—on countless occasions they are obviously not harmless...the attitudes which the culture industry calls forth are anything but harmless. If an astrologer urges his readers to drive carefully on a particular day, that certainly hurts no one; they will, however, be harmed indeed by the stupefication which lies in the claim that advice which is

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<sup>67</sup> Barron, Robert, “Heroic Priesthood”.

<sup>68</sup> Pope Francis, “Visit to Lampedusa: Homily of Holy Father Francis,” July 8, 2013, [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130708\\_omelia-lampedusa.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130708_omelia-lampedusa.html).

valid every day and which is therefore idiotic, needs the approval of the stars.<sup>69</sup>

To the ways of the world, Christianity is harmful. Christianity demands the world to fundamentally change: to tear down idols of greed and lust, to treat all humans with dignity and to stand in amazement for an incomprehensible God. But for the future of Catholicism, Evangelical Catholicism can also be harmful. When Bishop Barron walks on the stage at SEEK2021, he will begin to act as the astrologer. Evangelical Catholicism teaches young Catholics that the world is in decay, and that Catholicism holds the only key. Evangelical Catholics can never experience metanoia, or a personal and spiritual conversion, if they perceive themselves as perfect. The commodity, or “advice,” of Evangelical Catholicism will lead to the “stupefication” of Catholics, as they will be unable to act or feel in the way the world needs them to. They will not hear the cry of pain from the poor, or the calls for justice shouted by all women. As the world changes how the church acts, the Catholic Church has the same ability to change the corrupt ways of the world. But instead, Evangelical Catholicism works to stupefy Catholics with a commodified faith that claims to “come from above” yet supports the *status-quo*.

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<sup>69</sup> Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, 105-106.

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