

God, Robin Hood, and the Uber Woman: Fair Trade Narratives in Christian Publications

Arthur Bamford, Shu-Ling Chen Berggreen

University of Colorado, Boulder, USA

Since its origins as a grassroots movement in the 1960s, the fair trade movement has found a consistent, reliable base of support from various Christian churches, ministries, and organizations. This article reviews coverage of fair trade in several of the most prominent, U.S.-based Christian publications between 2006 and 2016 to identify the distinct ways in which Christian themes and language are interpolated within broader framings of fair trade. In particular, it addresses certain tensions between Christian concepts like “global missions” and “evangelism” in relation to a market-driven framing of fair trade as a Robin Hood-like means of redistributing income from the consuming [global] North to producers in the South. The article also describes the unique role of gender throughout the coverage in these publications. Finally, it explains how a particularly pro-capitalist Protestant formulation described as “Calvinist social piety” informs the ways in which Christian publications frame fair trade.

Keywords: activism, Calvinism, Christianity, consumerism, fair trade, gender, globalization, marketing, religious media

Introduction

Beginning as a grassroots movement in Europe, fair trade evolved in the 1960s with a mission to improve Southern worker livelihood by assisting producers in the establishment of direct and sustainable relationships with Northern markets. Christian organizations and groups were among the first supporters who helped keep the movement viable through selling fair trade goods in church fund-raisers and other similar events (Low & Davenport, 2005).

More than half a century later, fair trade has shifted from its original status of “an alternative” to “the mainstream”. While many factors have played a role in this transference, the media certainly have been a significant and influential force in public discourse and the subsequent embrace of fair trade. As part of a large-scale study that explores the interaction between media narratives and the public’s conceptualization and consumption of fair trade products, this study seeks to understand how Christian publications perceive and promote fair trade.

Background

Fair Trade

Fair trade can be traced back to a grassroots movement in Europe in the 1960s. Its mission was to

Arthur Bamford, Doctoral Student, College of Media, Communication and Information, University of Colorado.
Shu-Ling Chen Berggreen, Ph.D., Associate Professor, College of Media, Communication and Information, University of Colorado.

“alleviate poverty in the South by building direct, sustainable relationships with disadvantaged producers and providing fair access to markets in the North, using a strategy of ‘trade, not aid’”. Several NGOs came together and developed fair trade supply chains, selling hand-made goods and some food products to stores managed by cooperatives and staffed by volunteers (Poret, 2010). By the 1970s, Fair Trade Organizations (FTOs) created a network of developing countries that were part of this conscious consumer market and sold products in alternative venues, like “health food shops, church organisations, women’s organisations, student and political groups, craft fairs, local bazaars and markets, church groups, membership lists, networks of ‘third world’ shops sited in increasingly prominent and accessible locations, and more sophisticated mail order operations” (Low & Davenport, 2005, p. 495).

Later, collaboration between Mexican farmers and a Dutch NGO resulted in the establishment of Fair Trade Labelling Organizations (FLO) in 1997. It has now become the certification program that is most widely recognized by consumers. The emergence of FLO allowed many fair trade labeling initiatives to be put under one umbrella. Consequently, this “certified channel” enabled mainstream distribution of fair trade products and gave small Fair Trade-labeled companies greater access to mass consumption (Poret, 2010).

With the effort to being labeled as fair trade products, the messages that promote the idea and movement of fair trade began to change. As Renard (2003) observes, the marketing strategy and messages for Fair Trade have adjusted “to broaden the spectrum of the public interest in buying these products, it was necessary to appeal more to humanitarian sentiments than to political convictions” (p. 90). Fair trade was initially developed on political grounds. It rejected the unfair structures of international trade and proposed an alternative that was explicitly counter-mainstream. However, the message now is less grounded on politics and trade structures. It has more to do with charity through alternative consumption and in which fair trade, in a way, becomes a new activism. It could be seen as a new or almost anomalous form of activism where justice could be achieved through more consumption, not necessarily through fundamental structural change.

This kind of ethical consumerism is reinforced in the mind of the public by media narratives, especially market messaging. While influencing consumption, the guilt-driven marketing messages of helping struggling women and children in poor countries in some ways also create a sense of virtue. This is not to devalue the importance of helping people out of poverty. The discussion here is about how that message is now used as a key promotional strategy. Corporations also participate in the moral economy, either largely or in part, to stand out against competitors and market their brand as “green, responsible, progressive”—qualities that activist consumers are seeking more and more in products. Indeed, fair trade products are often wrapped in packaging with images of happy workers, close to the source of the product that’s in the package. The sensational story that appeals to subjects who identify themselves as “moral” will pull potential buyers in. Or, the sensational story will provide corporations with material to pass along to their clientele, promoting ethical consumption through a link from their “corporate responsibility” tab on a drop down menu. Ironically, some of the first large companies to embrace the Fair Trade Certified logo include Starbucks, Sara Lee, Nestle, and McDonald’s. They are the epitome of mainstream global corporations, yet all of these companies began selling Fair Trade Certified coffee, “the flagship of this approach” in the late 1990s (Poret, 2010). With the labeling practice and changing promotional strategies in the late 1990s and the subsequent corporate giants’ participation, Fair Trade achieved unprecedented “mainstream” respectability by the early 2000s (Low & Davenport, 2005).

While greater distribution is beneficial to the mission of the initial movement, in some ways, the Fair Trade label has blurred the vision in representing what it originally sought to reject. At its onset, fair trade’s

mission was to establish a commercially viable alternative in exact opposition of the conventional mainstream distribution system in order to stabilize and enhance living conditions of struggling farmers. In fact, Goodman (2004) sees fair trade as “a modern-day market-based ‘Robin Hood’ …, redistributing income from the consuming North to producers in the South” (p. 897). Further, with corporations being beguiled by fair trade’s newfound status and beginning to participate in this once alternative economy, it has insidiously contributed to a rhetoric of “shopping for a better world” in the mainstream marketplace, a structure the fair trade movement rejected and set out to change (Low & Davenport, 2005, p. 496).

This commodification of fair trade is an interesting paradox. In effect, the process has turned a “mission-driven” message into a “market-driven distribution”. Unfortunately, this shift might have lessened the chance of the public’s full understanding of the actual mission of the movement. Reflecting on this shift, Goodman (2004) concludes that the struggles “for a sustainable agriculture and society are [now] as much about the competition for the ‘hearts and minds’ (and purchases) of consumers through the discursive tactics of language and symbols as they are about agroecological production” (p. 897).

The commercialization and mainstreaming of fair trade could potentially have profound implications. For example, will Fair Trade begin to benefit large corporations at the expense of the farmers it was designed to protect? Has the original mission been lost in the turbulent seas of fair trade mainstreaming? What’s the public’s current understanding of the movement and its mission? What are the actions, inactions and consequences as a result of those understandings? Media narratives and messages on fair trade hold a crucial role in the consumer’s psyche. They contribute to the public discourse and understanding (or misunderstanding) and their subsequent actions, which could affect the ultimate outcome of the movement’s original mission.

Media Narratives

It’s common knowledge that media narratives interact and intersect with people’s interpretation and understanding of social realities. Lippmann (1922) observes this phenomenon long before the heydays of television, let alone today’s social media. He contends that the world is far too complex for us to accurately perceive and interpret. To remedy this, people construct “pictures in their heads”. These pictures are mental images of the condensed and edited versions of the world outside and represent pseudo-environments that tend to be subjective, biased, and incomplete. In his view, because our actions are grounded at least in part on these perceptions, these pictures in our heads—in all practical senses—serve as our reality. Many scholars, such as Mills (1956) and Greenberg (1972), have continued this line of pursuit in their research. Almost a century after Lippmann first espoused this view, his general assessment of media still holds true. However, agreeing with his overall idea of the media’s influence is not a denial of audience agency. Audiences should not be viewed as passive information-receivers. In fact, especially with the rise of digital media, our participatory capabilities in information and cultural production are infinite. Nevertheless, in our active construction of social reality, we also seek out media sources to help us understand the world outside through the pictures in our heads.

In this sense, the media’s role in our construction process conceivably becomes even more prominent in today’s “post-modern market-place”. Underwood and Ozanne (1998) argue that we have entered such a marketplace as the world is increasingly connected (or disconnected) globally and technologically and consumers are flooded with information through countless channels of print, electronic, and digital media.

Ostensibly, it appears that we now have greater access to more knowledge than ever before. However, information is not knowledge. They are related yet distinctive. In fact, the proliferation of post-modern marketplaces of information might potentially confound rather than educate info-consumers. In this new, rich, yet quite elusive information marketplace, the framing of media narratives becomes almost indomitable in the configuration of the pictures in our heads. Narrative frames have the potential to shape our perceptions of issues and events and, consequently, guide our actions and behaviors.

Framing Theory

Frames are the structure narrators use to represent reality. It is a process of selection and salience. By highlighting certain items, the framing process privileges particular aspects of events or situations and makes them “more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to the audiences receiving those bits of information” (Kendall, 2005, p. 9). In addition, by prioritizing certain aspects of reality, frames also work to draw the audience’s attention away from other aspects. Consequently, absence is as important as presence in any framing. Framing is, therefore, “a way to describe the power of a communicating text” (Entman, 1993, p. 293).

Furthermore, the concept of framing can also be examined through two primary categories—*episodic* and *thematic* frames. According to Iyengar (1991), episodic frames are “event-oriented”. Rather than context, event-oriented narratives focus on “concrete instances”, such as specific events or particular cases. Thematic frames, on the other hand, provide a broader and deeper understanding of the social context of an issue by including background information of an issue, such as social conditions, causes, consequences, and attributions of responsibility (p. 14). For example, in discussing fair trade, articles that are episodic in nature would focus more on the success or failure of a particular fair trade farmer, while thematic coverage might explore current economic structure and its relationship with the triumph or struggle of the social movement. While narratives generally include elements from both frames, “in most cases one frame or the other predominates” (Gilliam & Iyengar, 2005, p. 62).

Research Questions

In light of the vital importance of media narratives and their framing in the construction of our social reality and the continued urgency of building a sustainable fair trade structure, we have embarked on a large-scale project to examine the boundless interactions between and intersections of media narratives and the public’s conceptualization and consumption of fair trade products. As part of this research, the current study seeks to understand how Christian publications perceive and promote fair trade.

Christian publications are valuable in this inquiry because Christian groups were among the very first to endorse and participate in fair trade and continue to be strong supporters of the practice. In addition, among all the cacophony of infinite information and misinformation in this post-modern information marketplace, people tend to follow the sources that are congenial to their own views, philosophies, or faiths (Underwood & Ozanne, 1998). Faith publications often serve as their followers’ regular, if not primary, media source. Therefore, even though they might not be as extensively-circulated as some well-established and widely-recognized national publications, Christian publications are significant when exploring the relationship between media narratives and public perception of fair trade. What’s the nature of the fair trade discourse in Christian publications? What are the predominant narrative themes and frames? Through textual analysis, this study aims to discover possible answers to these questions.

Data Collection

Sampling the Publications

This study used a combination of two purposive sampling strategies: critical case and landmark timeframe sampling. Unlike probability sampling where every case has an equal chance of being selected, critical case sampling deliberately chooses only the most important cases that can “yield the most information and have the greatest impact on the development of knowledge” (Patton, 2015, p. 276). Accordingly, based on the establishment status within the Christian communities in the United States and the circulation figures, six Christian publications are included in this study.

Next, slightly more than 10 years, from February 2006 to November 2016, were defined as the time span for the textual analysis. The release of the fourth edition of *The Conscious Consumer: Promoting Economic Justice Through Fair Trade* in February 2006 could motivate some Christian writers to revisit fair trade issues, as the book has been praised as “an excellent” source about fair trade by the Christian community (Dillion, 2006). February 2006, therefore, was earmarked as the landmark date to begin the 10-year timeframe for our analysis, which ends at the most recent publication cycle, November 2016. With the publications selected and a timeframe set, “fair trade” was used as the key term when the databases of all six publications were searched. This method yields 20-some feature-length articles discussing various aspects of Fair Trade. For reasons stated in the section below, only 17 articles were textually analyzed for this study.

The Six Christian Publications

1. *Christianity Today* was founded in 1956 by Rev. Billy Graham, a well-known and prominent evangelical leader. This monthly magazine is comparable in style and format to *Time* or *Newsweek* but with a distinct emphasis on “the social, cultural, and theological trends, issues, and opportunities facing thoughtful Christians” (<http://www.christianitytoday.org/ministry/history/>). In the past few decades, *Christianity Today* (or *CT*) has expanded into a brand that includes a variety of more narrowly targeted niche publications, websites, and social media assets.

Trammell (2016) has described *CT* as “remarkably prominent” and a “respected voice in the evangelical subculture” due in part to the fact that roughly 80 percent of the magazine’s audience are Christian pastors, ministers, and church leaders (p. 4). *CT* also has on-going relationships with a number of Christian colleges and universities, which advertise in *CT*’s publications and websites, and whose faculty members are frequent content contributors.

Currently, *Christianity Today* magazine reaches roughly 600,000 readers worldwide, while the full slate of *CT*’s online content reaches approximately eight million readers per month (including impressions, site visits, followers, etc.). The magazine seeks to be news-oriented, impartial, and relatively neutral in terms of any political or theological bias. Within the timeframe of this study, eight articles were collected from this magazine.

2. *Relevant Magazine* was launched in 2002 and describes itself as, “the leading platform reaching Christian twenty- and thirty-somethings [sic]” (<http://www.relevantmagazine.com>). *Relevant* is extremely similar to *CT* but with a much more youthful orientation in terms of its content and aesthetics. If *CT* is like *Time* or *Newsweek*, then *Relevant* is comparable to *Wired* or *Fast Company*.

Relevant Magazine serves as the flagship publication for the Relevant Media Group, which was founded in 2000 as “a self-contained, for-profit business not affiliated with any other companies, denominations or

organizations” (<http://www.relevantmagazine.com>). This is noteworthy because *CT* is a *non-profit* organization with various informal ties to Protestant and evangelical denominations and institutions (primarily through board members and trustees, advertisers, contributors, and so on). Despite *Relevant*’s claim that it is unaffiliated with any other institutions, it is worth noting that Relevant Media Group’s founder, Cameron Strang, is the son of *Charisma Magazine* (see below) publisher Stephen Strang, who has appeared on *Time* magazine’s “25 Most Influential Evangelicals” list (Sandler, 2006).

Compared with the other publications in this study, *Relevant* would be considered the most liberal or left-leaning in terms of its theology and social-political views, but this is largely a reflection of generational shifts between the target audiences for these publications. Therefore, *Relevant* would not be perceived as radical or controversial by readers of *CT*, and in fact, these publications likely share some overlaps between their respective audiences.

According to *Relevant*, the brand currently reaches “about 2,300,000 twenty- and thirty-something Christians a month” through their various print and digital platforms. Interestingly, this “twenty- and thirty-somethings” description appears three times in the ‘About Us’ section of *Relevant*’s website, while the phrase “our generation” appears seven times. It is abundantly clear that they are trying to reach a particular age demographic. Although *Relevant* is distributed through major retail chains like Barnes and Noble and Family Christian Stores, it is unclear what percentage of their 2.3 million monthly readers comes specifically from the print publication versus online. A total of seven articles were gathered from *Relevant* for this study.

3. *World Magazine* is the flagship publication of the World News Group, which reaches a total of about 400,000 readers in-print and 120,000 visitors online per month through various publications and online assets. *World* debuted in 1986 and is very similar to *CT* in terms of its style, format, and content. Generally speaking, *World* tends to be more conservative and right-leaning, both theologically, socially, and politically than the other publications surveyed in the current research (<https://world.wng.org>). There was significantly less coverage and discussion about fair trade in *World* than in *CT* or *Relevant*. Only two articles were gathered from *World* for this study.

4. *Charisma Magazine* was founded in 1975 by members of an Assembly of God church and identifies itself as “the main magazine of the Christian charismatic movement” (<http://www.charismamag.com>). Like *World*, *Charisma* tends to skew towards the conservative and right side of the spectrum with respect to many of its theological, social, and political views. *Charisma* claims a monthly readership of 100,000 and 1.7 million online page views (across multiple sites). However, *Charisma* has not devoted any coverage to, or made any substantive mentions of, fair trade during the timeframe of this analysis. *Charisma* was included as part of the initial review of publications for this project, since it is one of the most popular Christian publications, but nothing relevant to this research was found.

5 & 6. *National Catholic Register* and *Catholic Digest* are the two largest and most prominent Roman Catholic publications in North America (<http://www.ncregister.com> and <http://www.catholicdigest.com>). There was no coverage or discussion about fair trade in *Catholic Digest*, and relatively little coverage that dealt with fair trade in the *National Catholic Register*. The differences between this coverage, and what was found in the Protestant and evangelical publications described above, are largely attributable to differences between Roman Catholicism and Protestant Christianity. Rather than devoting a sizeable portion of the analysis to explicating the differences between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism these noticeable, but relatively small, number of articles have been omitted from the analysis.

Analysis and Discussion

Episodic framing dominates most of all the articles analyzed in this study, though four of them might be categorized as more thematic than episodic. Of the four, one questions whether fair trade is fair. It sees the fact that economics often trumps ethics as a shortcoming of the current trade system, though it doesn't delve into any background information regarding how historical factors and political forces, unfortunately, come to support such an unfair system. It also cautions readers not to rush to judgment in certain Southern workers' predicaments (such as not sending children to school) without considering the cultural, social, and economic context. It concludes that the survival of cooperatives in the South depends on the embracement of fair trade by Global North consumers and that "followers of Christ need to be at the forefront" (Smith, 2011, p. 5). The other three promote fair trade and link the concept to Christian food ethics, Christian charity, and the conscious Christian consumers respectively. While these four articles are thematic in their framing and provide more contextual information about fair trade than other articles, they still fall short in addressing the systemic political reasons and economic consequences of the unfair trade structure and the unjust labor wages and treatment. Moreover, whether it's episodic or thematic, the general message about fair trade from the articles analyzed here is more market-driven and charity-oriented than mission-driven, as Goodman (2004) has observed, though he wasn't specifically investigating Christian publications.

Overall, issue-oriented thematic framing, which focuses on social conditions, causes, consequences, and attributions of responsibility, is minimally visible. But event-oriented episodic narratives, which focus on concrete instances and particular cases, characterize publications analyzed in this study. Furthermore, these articles also epitomize the power of framing in reality representation. As detailed below, through location, gender, and theology frames, these articles highlight and privilege these particular aspects of fair trade, leaving many equally, if not more, important perspectives of the situations unsaid. In addition, through these three frames, Christian publications also reveal a unique interaction and connection between fair trade and Christianity.

From Missionaries to Fair Trade: The African Connection

Many of the articles examined in this study focused on particular fair trade businesses and enterprises. Interestingly, all of these examples were located in African countries (e.g., Tanzania, Uganda, Ghana, Djibouti, etc.) except for three: in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Honduras. This is noteworthy because fair trade was frequently described in Christian publications as a kind of extension, or contemporary reformulation, of earlier missionary efforts from North America to other parts of the world. By situating fair trade in this way, it is treated as an improvement over the kinds of cultural imperialism, or colonialism, that marked many earlier missionary projects. In this more seemingly "hands-off" approach, the people producing fair trade products are perceived as being able to generate more capital and rise above their current developing world status. Meanwhile, the people who purchase fair trade products are able to better reconcile their morally "good" charitable giving and their morally "bad" (selfish, materialistic) consumer spending.

This amounts to a seemingly harmless, non-invasive, and mutually beneficial way of indulging what Cole (2012) dubbed the "white savior complex" for Christians in the U.S. However, it also creates an interesting tension that many of these articles seem to grapple with, which is: Where's the evangelism? In the past, international missionary efforts were seen as a way of obeying Christ's exhortation to his disciples to: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the

Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19; Holy Bible: NRSV, 2007).¹ Previous mission efforts focused on "sharing the good news of the gospel" through preaching, teaching, and establishing churches. This often included ancillary endeavors like building schools (in order to teach reading, which is essential to a Protestant understanding of religious practice), or providing medical care, but ultimately, the primary goal of these efforts was religious conversion or indoctrination, and their success was evaluated or measured in those terms.

These tensions, between the various theological and political-economic considerations involved in fair trade, will be discussed further in the following sections, but the frequent focus and emphasis on African countries is important to note as a particular framing device since it plays a key role in aligning fair trade within the history and legacy of international Christian missionary work. It is also significant that, unlike parts of Asia, South America, and Europe, Africa is generally perceived in the West as lacking any historical or contemporary associations with institutionalized communism or socialism. This may allow readers of Christian publications in the U.S. to more easily envision fair trade as helping to establish a distinctly free-market, private-enterprise, capitalist economic system (Wolterstorff, 1983).

Fair Trade: By Women, For Women

Among the articles reviewed in this study, over three-quarters (13 out of 17) were written by female authors. The titles alone of several of these articles illustrate the kind of gendered framing that was found to be prevalent throughout (e.g., Sandvig's 2009, "Patchwork Sisterhood" and Tracy's 2012, "Mother's Day Goes Fair Trade"). There were noticeable differences between the ways in which fair trade was discussed by female and male writers as well.

Articles by female writers typically focused on how fair trade would help and equip women outside of the United States, who were often described as wives and mothers. Concurrently, these articles lauded fair trade as a kind of fashionable brand for female consumers in the U.S., with phrases like "fashion", "shopping", and "makeover" appearing often throughout. The types of fair trade products that were referenced included things like, "beautiful textiles", "body butter", and "bags, purses, and jewelry", and were described in terms such as "luxurious" or "scented like a garden in heaven". It seems like an attempt to bridge the gap between these two sides of fair trade transactions—the empowered women abroad and consumers in the U.S.—as writers would typically focus on how balancing the roles of wife, mother, and business owner or entrepreneur was a common ground that these women shared. The articles framed their discussion in such a way that women in the U.S. were not simply consumers or customers whose purchasing empowered women overseas. Instead, women in the U.S. would reciprocally experience a similar sense of empowerment and encouragement through the narratives and testimonials of other women "just like them" whose stories are often included with fair trade products.

For example, in a 2012 article titled "*Chocolate-Sweetened by Direct Trade*", Bethany Parry describes fair trade as, "trying to connect consumers to the story of how the product is sourced and produced—to give customers the opportunity to learn about people on the other side of the world". Similarly, in a 2015 interview (with *CT*'s Kate Shellnut), entrepreneur Jessica Honegger describes her experience of walking "a very similar journey [to Jalia in Uganda] of having to scale a business when we were young moms". This shared bond of

¹ This verse, known as the "Great Commission" is just one of the myriad passages throughout the New Testament of the Bible that refers to "going out" and preaching, teaching, and proclaiming the "good news" about Christ.

motherhood between Honegger and Jalia becomes the central focus of their relationship as it is described in the interview, and in Hongger's appeal to *CT* readers to support her fair trade enterprise, *Noonday Collection*.

This motif of learning the inspiring stories of women in other parts of the world and being inspired by them was common, but, interestingly, men were invisible or non-existent throughout these descriptions. In the example above, Honegger mentions that Jalia is married to a man named Daniel, but she is then described as being the sole provider for her family. No explanation is given as to why Daniel is, apparently, uninvolved in the family business. A 2011 article in *Relevant* titled "Is Fair Trade Fair" describes a woman named Mercedes Del Rosario Sosa whose fair trade business, "sustains her, her husband, her mother, her five children and her two grandchildren" and helps them to avoid, what is vividly described by writer Shannon Sutherland Smith, as the "rat-infested slums" of the Dominican Republic, where "raw sewage flows freely" and "people live in overt poverty". Again, Sosa's nameless "husband", who is subsequently described as "the ageing father", is mentioned as being present but there is no indication whether or not he contributes to their family's business in any way. Later in the article, readers learn that Sosa's family worked unprofitably on their farm for three generations prior to her taking on a managerial role, and that "her children and grandchildren have grown up beside the adults in the cocoa field". Readers are left to fill in the gaps and draw their own conclusions concerning the role of Sosa's husband, and the other men in their family, with respect to running the cocoa plantation and business over the preceding generations.

Kate Tracy's (2014) piece in *CT* describes a partnership between Wal-Mart and Full Circle Exchange, a "nonprofit social enterprise brand", in which the former corporate retail chain carries a special line of Mother's Day themed products that are sourced by the latter. The article focuses specifically on Mother's Day, espousing myriad reasons why consumers ought to give fair trade products (namely, those produced by Full Circle Exchange; available at Wal-Mart) as gifts for this annual holiday. Yet, this article was featured in the *Women's* section of the *CT* website, rather than as a gift-giving guide on a gender neutral page (e.g., the *Speaking Out* or *Local Church* sections) of the *CT* site. Tracy explains how purchasing these gifts can "help women rise out of poverty by finding meaningful, creative work". The women are then described as "typically mothers themselves, taking on jobs on behalf of their families", and the article later celebrates fair trade as "good news" because it puts "more money in the hands of women—and mothers" which "translates to more food on their tables, more of their children going to school, and more money poured back into communities". It is important to note here how "women" and "mothers" are used almost interchangeably. What is at stake for the women profiled in Tracy's piece, and others, is not simply running a fair, efficient, or sustainable business but rather balancing the demands of career and family—with the former existing to benefit the latter.

Fair trade is also framed throughout these articles as being a charitable, by-women and for-women enterprise that benefits women in the U.S. by generating an emotional, rather than political or economic, outcome. For female consumers in the U.S., the value in supporting fair trade is derived largely from the feelings of altruism, personal satisfaction, and identification with working moms overseas that they experience through their purchasing decisions. There is no discussion about fair trade as a principle or concept that may be equally applicable to the countless other products sold by Wal-Mart, or as a political action that might lead the U.S.-based retail conglomerate to offer fair trade products regularly, rather than as a seasonal, featured collection for Mother's Day. Moreover, the women producing fair trade products are touted as not simply finding work, but rather *meaningful, creative* work—suggesting that the perceived affective value of fair trade products is mutual, rather than one-sided. Tracy's article concludes with Full Circle Exchange's co-founder

describing the goal of her business by saying: “We want to see more women dancing”. Thus reinforcing the notion that fair trade’s value ultimately resides in its ability to produce feelings of happiness and satisfaction that surpass what is normally experienced in the routine production and consumption of material goods.

The gendered framings described above touch on a number of enduring Western imaginings, or tropes, about non-Western “others”. These narratives juxtapose dubious and apparently non-contributing male characters against relatable and scrupulous female protagonists in such a way that readers are left to imagine the men as abusive, absent, or indolent, and the women as noble victims who gladly welcome the salvific interventions of Westerners as they selflessly fend for their families (Escobar, 2011). In the process, these framings gloss over the systemic political and economic causes, and potential outcomes, of fair trade both domestically and abroad. They focus instead on how fair trade infuses products with an added emotional or affective value by creating a narratively constructed bond between struggling single-mom producers and their privileged wife/mom benefactors.

This is not to say that fair trade does not uniquely involve and impact women (and children) in many parts of the world. However, the fair trade coverage in Christian publications that was analyzed typically ignored these more serious, systemic issues and framed fair trade as female because of what were tacitly presumed to be universal expressions of femininity: motherhood, caretaking, friendship, and shopping.

By contrast, the relatively few articles by male writers tended to frame fair trade as a more efficient, streamlined, or economically responsible approach to the “business” of Christian missionary, development, or relief/aid work. For example, Wydick (2015) describes, “an increasing demand for heightened scrutiny over the impact of poverty programs”, while lamenting “a tradition of relying on emotion rather than rigorous scientific scrutiny” in what he calls the “charitable giving industry”. Wydick goes on to discuss fair trade as being among “the principles and methods of effective charity”, essentially arguing that fair trade is good because it provides more accurate accounting of how charitable contributions were spent and distributed. Rather than charitable *giving*, fair trade functions as a kind of charitable *investment*, which seems to be preferable in a globalized economy.

Among the articles by male writers there was only one instance of a specific fair trade business being profiled in a more story-oriented, narrative style similar to the profiles of women discussed above. This profile appeared within a longer feature titled, “*Coffee: The Beverage that Fuels the Church*” and discussed a “vertically integrated enterprise”, called Underground Coffee (Jones, 2016). Underground was patterned after a business in Los Angeles that assists recently incarcerated men, called Homeboy Industries, and seeks to provide both entry-level employment for ex-convicts in the U.S., who “roast, weigh, bag, and deliver...fresh, single-origin, boutique roast coffee”, while also supporting the farmers who grow their coffee in “the second most violent country in the world”, Honduras. What is problematic here is not Underground’s business model, but rather the way the article seems to conflate ex-convicts in the U.S. with Honduran coffee farmers by oscillating between descriptions of the two groups. Unlike the framings of female fair trade entrepreneurs discussed above, which included the women’s names, and details about their families and experiences running their own businesses, the men who work with Underground in both Honduras and U.S. are portrayed as anonymous manual laborers. For these men, fair trade is something that affords them the means to avoid a life of violence, crime, or incarceration, but not necessarily something that will provide them with opportunities to support families through personally fulfilling, “meaningful, creative work”.

Again, it is important to note that the articles by both male and female writers discussed above have described fair trade in terms of charity rather than justice, fairness, or equality. The male writers generally

considered fair trade in more abstract, conceptual terms, and tended to weigh the pros and cons in terms of percentages, dollar amounts, or hypothetical scenarios—rather than the kind of personal stories and testimonials used in the coverage by female writers. Nevertheless, these male writers appealed to a similar sense of altruism and self-satisfaction as the primary reason why Christian consumers in the U.S. ought to support fair trade. For instance, one of the co-founders of Underground Coffee, Chris Hoke, concludes that “fair trade is better than nothing” in terms of how well it accomplishes the social and economic outcomes it sets out to accomplish. Nevertheless, Hoke acquiesces by saying, “coffee is international—why not delight in looking where your coffee is coming from?” This seems to rather strangely suggest that the ability of fair trade products to provide a sense of happiness (or assuage guilt) for American consumers offsets whatever shortcomings or faults may exist in the existing networks of production and distribution for fair trade products.

Hoke’s comment that “fair trade is better than nothing” points to a final distinction between the articles written by male and female contributors. Articles by male writers tended to be more critical in their assessments of fair trade, namely in terms of its viability and effectiveness at alleviating some of the systemic-level issues it seeks to address. Although the articles by female writers were typically more story-driven, they did not avoid addressing some practical concerns over if, or how well, fair trade might remedy global economic inequalities. However, their analyses were ultimately more positive and supportive than their male counterparts. At best, the male writers reluctantly conceded that “fair trade is better than nothing”, while at worst, they dismissed it as a “faddish movement” that allows consumers in the U.S. to feel “sanctimonious about our cup of coffee” but accomplishes very little else (Miller, 2004).

“Compassionate Capitalism”

Throughout the articles and analyses of fair trade that were reviewed in this study, a pervasive yet subtle theme was a sense of anxiety over whether or not fair trade aligns with capitalism and a more conservative political orientation. This was most apparent in a very pointed (2007) editorial in *World* magazine titled, “*Righteous Coffee*” by D.C. Innes. The article begins with Innes describing an event he attended at Princeton Theological Seminary which served fair trade coffee because, as Innes explains, the Presbyterian Church (USA) is “a politically progressive and in some ways trendy denomination”. Innes’ introduction continues sarcastically, “There was social justice in every cup … [fair trade coffee] feels especially good going down”.

But rather than focusing on this supercilious, “delight-filled”, conspicuous consumption of fair trade coffee as problematic, and beside the point of what fair trade seeks to accomplish, Innes goes on to criticize the fair trade movement as an implausible, ineffective model to “boost the living standards of those hillside people living in grass huts” or to “better the lives of coffee growing peasants” or to help “people on the bottom”. Later in the article Innes’ makes his conservative political orientation clear as he, “[applauds the] use of private initiatives and organizations” as the lone redeeming trait of the Presbyterian denomination’s fair trade initiatives. Fair trade is framed, in very explicit terms by Innes, as being a trickle-down styled model for charitable giving (or wealth redistribution) from first-world “haves” to developing-world “have-nots”.

Although Innes’ editorial was the harshest and most politically heavy-handed among the articles that were reviewed, it points to what was found to be a more pervasive anxiety among Christian writers and publications over how to reconcile the political dimensions of fair trade with the theological commitments that might compel Christians to support it. Throughout these articles, fair trade seems, on the one hand, to be a left-leaning, progressive political project, while on the other, it seems to be a movement that aligns quite comfortably with

Biblical teachings about helping those in need, global evangelism, and striving to achieve equality.² Interestingly, the solution to this dilemma can be found in capitalism. By framing fair trade as a kind of evangelistic project for free-market, free-enterprise capitalism, Christian publications are able to nudge fair trade towards the [political] right, and away from being seen as liberal project in the minds of their largely conservative and right-leaning audiences. These framings rely on a deeply-embedded, received conflation of capitalism with Christianity among Protestants in the U.S.

To contextualize this remark, it's necessary for us to first briefly outline how capitalism and Christianity came to be understood as inseparable among Protestants in the U.S., before discussing how these assumptions shape the ways in which fair trade has been framed in recent years by Christian publications. The history of Christianity's relationship with capitalism is a long and complex one that originates in the work of the Protestant reformer and theologian, John Calvin.³ Calvin formulated a unique doctrine of "election" in which certain people are understood as having been chosen or "elected" by God to prosper and flourish while others are not. This doctrine is helpful as a kind of theoretical construct with regards to addressing certain theological concerns, but in practice Calvin's doctrine of election leads to the development of, what Max Weber famously described as the "protestant work ethic and the spirit of capitalism". Material wealth and privilege come to be understood among Protestants as divinely ordained blessings, and therefore are a reflection of one's status as elect. Accordingly, anxieties about who is, or is not, "among the elect" become embedded in the psyche of Protestants in such a way that they develop a uniquely industrious disposition. Despite Calvin's theological claim that election is solely determined by God, many come to believe that they can earn and sustain material assurances of their status as elect through hard work, frugality, and an ascetic lifestyle.

According to Woltersdorff (1983), a Reformed Calvinist philosopher, a key component of this Protestant "psychological formulation" is something he describes as "Calvinist social piety", which is comprised of "restless disciplined reformism, or guilt for not being restlessly reformist" (p. 20). Social inequalities are seen as both evidence of some moral or spiritual deficiency on the part of those with less capital (i.e., not among the elect), as well a site where those who believe they are elect (i.e., those with more capital) can go about the biblically-mandated work of reform—in a theological sense of the term, reforming the world according to how God intended prior to humanity's original sin—and/or assuage their guilt. However, because of human sin, inequality is tacitly accepted as being inevitable (or "according to God's plan") and it is widely assumed that societal inequalities cannot be eliminated in lasting or substantial ways. This results in capitalism, as a political and economic system, becoming virtually impossible to disentangle from a Calvinist/Protestant worldview. As Weber explained, a powerful symbiotic relationship emerges whereby Protestantism fuels capitalism and capitalism feeds Protestantism. The accumulation of capital comes to be understood as both evidence of one's own election, and as the primary means through which reform is enacted.

This presupposed unity of Protestantism and capitalism can be seen throughout recent coverage on fair trade in Christian publications. Fair trade is framed as a means through which the efforts of those possessing a strong, or seemingly Protestant, work ethic will be divinely rewarded with the accumulation of capital. Concurrently, fair trade allows Christians in the U.S. to convert their labor of consumption into reform-oriented

² It is debatable whether fair trade ought to be understood as a charitable and/or evangelistic project—we are referring to the fact that the writers of these articles perceive it in those terms.

³ See: Calvin's *Institutes on the Christian Religion*, originally published in 1536. Saint Augustine of Hippo (4th century CE) has also been credited as having played a role but his work was cited extensively by Calvin, whose own popularity generated much of the renewed interest in Augustinian thought following the Reformation.

work, rather than a source of guilt. This is perhaps best captured in the following statement by Jessica Honnegger, co-founder of *Noonday Collection*, in her interview with *CT*:

I'm a capitalist. I call it compassionate capitalism. So it's not that fair trade isn't capitalism. There are really talented people living in resource-poor areas of the world, and all they need is access to a marketplace. And I'm going to start something for them. It was creating market access to underrepresented people and ensuring that as these artisans build their business, it's being done in a beautiful way.

There are several key phrases worth highlighting in Honnegger's statement. First, she very explicitly aligns herself and her fair trade enterprise with capitalism. Then, she specifies that this is "compassionate"—a moral, religiously-coded term that suggests an emphasis on the perceived spiritual outcomes of work over the material or financial ones. Next, Honnegger describes a contrast between "talented people"—a phrase implying that certain people have been endowed, through divine providence, with the necessary abilities to generate capital—and "resource-poor areas". Together, these phrases suggest that there is latent potential in these areas for reform which can be enacted through the hard work of its indigenous people. What is needed, according to Honnegger, is access to the free, capitalist market, a market that is presumed to be guided by an invisible/divine hand. Finally, Honnegger adds a few aesthetic flourishes by referring to "artisans" and businesses being built in a "beautiful way", thus driving home the notion that the economic development of these communities doesn't just involve the flow of capital; it reflects a more transcendent project of reform.

Another *CT* article titled, "*Buy the Product, Not the Sob Story*" (2015) similarly conjoins capitalism and Protestantism in its formulation of fair trade. In this profile of a "social enterprise" called Magdalene Community (which produces products under the brand Thistle Farms), writer Leah Wise emphasizes the fact that Magdalene "takes no federal or state funding [emphasis added]" and that Thistle Farms products "don't need a sob story to sell...customers would buy it even without a photo of the artisan attached" because the quality of the products themselves meet the high standards of U.S. consumers. Rather than "sob stories", Wise argues that Magdalene "prioritizes sharing narratives of redemption and hope" in which entrepreneurs overcome their difficult situations by successfully competing in the free-market economy. The operational logic of fair trade that undergirds Wise's analysis is similar to what has been described above: the free-market honors the hard work of "artisans" (reflected in the quality, market value, and sales of their products) by providing them with capital, and the means to continue earning more. This self-earned socio-economic upgrade is then described using the theologically-weighty term "redemption", implying that the free-market acts according to metaphysical guidance and can be interpreted as reflecting a transcendent reality. More simply put, redemption is delivered to humanity by and through the invisible hand of the market.

An additional, slightly different, example of this was found in a 2011 *Relevant* piece by Nathan George titled, "Fair Trade Churches". Rather than looking at producers and consumers as individuals, George focuses instead on the role of churches and appeals to the idea that fair trade might serve as a large scale reform project. He posits the provocative question, "What would happen if the Church in America began seeing itself as the conscience of the free market?" George goes on to describe the kind of collective market conscience he envisions in more detail, depicting it not as political engagement or activism, but rather as "buying products we need that they [people living on less than \$2 a day worldwide] make for us". Similarly, George argues that: "Charity does not fix poverty—jobs do ... The absence of work, particularly among the poorest of the poor, is a missions issue. And thanks to the wonders of international trade, you don't have to be a missionary on the other

side of the world to live and act missionally [sic] to someone there". Again, fair trade is described as being a reform project through which divine providence might be manifested, or materialized, as the result of both productive and consumptive labor on opposite sides of the world.

Reflections

In a somewhat oversimplified stroke, "lack of context" might be used to characterize these articles. As discussed previously, publications analyzed here employed primarily episodic frame in their consideration of fair trade. As a result, a somewhat incomplete picture of fair trade emerges from these publications. For example, hard working female farmers in the South, deservedly so, are portrayed as superwomen, engaging in an uber-like micro economy and single-handedly supporting their entire multigenerational households. Also, female entrepreneurs and consumers of the North, who are depicted as sharing the common bond of motherhood and sisterhood with the workers in the South, are modern-day Robin Hoods resourcefully redistributing the wealth from the North to the South. What's lacking in this framing is the historical context, long-standing trade and economic policies, and cultural and social conditions that place these struggling women and families in poverty and that necessitate the reincarnation of Robin Hood embodied in Christian (especially female) entrepreneurs and consumers. But until the systemic structural faults are recognized, debated, and amended, Robin Hood alone can't save the day. To be fair, this style of narrative might not be characteristic only to Christian publications. A very preliminary review of secular press seems to reveal the same pattern (Berggreen, 2016). Obviously, a systematic comparison between the two will be conducted in a future study. As for now, this incomplete narrative of fair trade might not be a symptom unique only to Christian publications.

Therefore, what is perhaps most interesting about the fair trade discourse in Christian publications is their ambivalence over the moral, or theological framing of fair trade, which seems to straddle several distinct categories of Christian discourse. First, fair trade seems like "charity" to the extent that those with more wealth are able to spend money in a way that helps those with less. But the money is spent as part of a consumer transaction, not given (as in the style of Robin Hood), which undercuts any claim to self-sacrificial altruism for its own sake. Second, fair trade could be construed as "missionary work", comparable to the earlier efforts of missionaries who built schools, hospitals, and so on. But this is easily refuted as well on account of the large geographic distance (and lack of direct interaction) between consumers and producers, the presence of numerous non-Christian fair trade enterprises and groups doing the exact same things and the absence of any evangelistic preaching or teaching. Finally, fair trade could be situated within existing discourse about "social justice", but this brings to mind historically-rooted associations with liberalism and progressivism—both of which are viewed by a majority of conservative-leaning Protestants in the U.S. with suspicion or derision on account of their purportedly anti-capitalist, non-Calvinist socio-economic views. Moreover, the social justice framing would entail a potentially unsettling process of self-assessment and critique among those who have benefitted most abundantly from global capitalism to date: U.S. consumers.

Despite the lack of a clear formulation regarding how to situate or understand fair trade within a Christian moral or ethical framework, an informal understanding that hybridizes the categories described above is apparent throughout the coverage on this topic in Christian publications. Fair trade is "charity" to the extent that it allows those who have more wealth or capital to intentionally use those resources in ways that benefit others who have less. Fair trade can also be situated within the existing discourse and literature on Christian

missionary work because of how it relates to international relationships and networks through which Christians in the U.S. are connected with men and women in developing countries. Also, in more practical terms, it is true that many Christian fair trade enterprises were born out of existing international relationships and networks that were previously cultivated by missionaries (Wallis, 2005). Finally, fair trade can be seen as a new articulation of “Calvinist social piety” that is both pro-capitalism and conservatism, and pro-social justice, in which Christians participate through thoughtful purchasing and consumption in the preordained, divinely guided machinations of free-market capitalism as it rewards the hard work, frugality, and asceticism of both them, and the people producing fair trade goods.

This analysis also raises interesting questions about how contemporary Christians understand the nature of divine action, intervention, revelation, and so on in our contemporary globalized context. Many of these articles seem to be feeling around for an adequate theological explanation for where, why, or how God may be somehow involved amidst complex international markets. It is intriguing how Calvin’s nearly 500-year-old systematic theology is still being relied upon to interpret the ways in which global citizens are now interacting with one another through highly sophisticated, technologically advanced, networked infrastructures. Interestingly, a passing reference was made in one article (Jones, 2016) to what is known as “liberation theology”, a body of scholarship that was developed in Latin America around the 1960s and interprets the biblical theme of liberation as applicable to contemporary social, political, and economic forms of oppression (Gutierrez & Inda, 1988). Perhaps innovative theological frameworks like this, and contemporary phenomena like the fair trade movement, will prompt Christians in the U.S. to look beyond the West for more than just coffee and cocoa.

References

- Berggreen, S. L. C. (2016). *Fairing the fair trade: Media narrative, alternative consumption and the example of Fair Trade Tea*. Proceedings from *The Annual Global Studies Conference*, Los Angeles, CA.
- Cole, T. (2012). *The white-savior industrial complex*. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/>
- Dillion, H. (2006). *The conscious consumer*. Retrieved from <http://www.relevantmagazine.com/life/current-events/op-ed-blog/2296-the-conscious-consumer>
- Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, 43, 293-300.
- Escobar, A. (2011). *Encountering development: The making and unmaking of the Third World*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- George, N. (2011). *Fair Trade Churches*. Retrieved from <http://www.relevantmagazine.com/reject-apathy/magazine/archives/issue-02/statements/26153-fair-trade-churches>
- Gilliam, F. D., & Iyengar, S. (2005). Super-predators or victims of societal neglect? Framing effects in juvenile crime coverage. In K. Callaghan, & F. Schnell (Eds.), *Framing of American Politics* (pp. 148-166). Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Goodman, M. (2004). Reading Fair Trade: Political ecological imaginary and the moral economy of Fair Trade foods. *Political Geography*, 23, 891-915.
- Greenberg, B. (1972). Children's reactions to TV Blacks. *Journalism Quarterly*, 49, 5-14.
- Gutierrez, G., & Inda, C. (1988). *A theology of liberation: History, politics, and salvation* (pp. 23-24). In C. Inda, & J. Eagleson (Eds.). Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Holy Bible: NRSV. (2007). *New Revised Standard Version*. New York: Harper Bibles.
- Innes, D. C. (2010). *Economy: Righteous Coffee*. Retrieved from https://world.wng.org/2010/08/righteous_coffee
- Iyengar, S. (1991). *Is anyone responsible? How television frames political issues*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Jones, M. W. (2016). *Coffee: The beverage that fuels the church*. Retrieved from <http://www.christianitytoday.com/local-church/dispatches/coffee/coffee-beverage-that-fuels-church.html>

- Kendall, D. (2005). *Framing class: Media representations of wealth and poverty in America*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Lippmann, W. (1922). *Public opinion*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company.
- Low, W., & Davenport, E. (2005). Has the medium (roast) become the message? The ethics of marketing Fair Trade in the mainstream. *International Marketing Review*, 22(5), 494-511.
- Miller, V. J. (2004). *Consuming religion: Christian faith and practice in a consumer culture*. New York: Continuum.
- Mills, C. W. (1956). *The power elite*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Parry, B. (2012). *Chocolate Sweetened by Direct Trade*. Retrieved from <http://www.relevantmagazine.com/reject-apathy/poverty/features/26295-chocolate-sweetened-by-direct-trade>
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & Evaluation methods*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Poret, S. (2010). *Mainstreaming fair trade: A discussion through the Lipton Tea Case*. Retrieved from <http://www.louisbachelier.org/sites/default/files/pdf/Mainstreaming%20Fair%20Trade%20A%20Discussion.pdf>
- Renard, M. C. (2003). Fair trade: Quality, market and conventions. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 19(1), 87-96.
- Sandler, L. (2006). *Righteous: Dispatches from the Evangelical Youth Movement*. New York: Penguin Group.
- Sandvig, Z. (2009). *Pathwork Sisterhood: A New Washington Boutique is bringing hope to Africa and to the Capital*. Retrieved from https://world.wng.org/2009/09/patchwork_sisterhood
- Shellnut, K. (2015). *Noonday collection: Where fashion statement meets mission statement*. Retrieved from <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015/december/noonday-collection-where-fashion-statement-meets-mission-st.html>
- Smith, S. S. (2011). *Is Fair Trade Fair? A look at the movement's actual impact on farmer's lives*. Retrieved from <http://www.relevantmagazine.com/reject-apathy/worldview/fair-trade-fair>
- Smith, S. S. (2012). *How Fair is today's chocolate?* Retrieved from <http://www.relevantmagazine.com/reject-apathy/poverty/features/26142-is-fair-trade-fair>
- Tracy, K. (2014). *Mother's day goes fair trade*. Retrieved from <http://www.christianitytoday.com/women/2014/may/mothers-day-goes-fair-trade.html>
- Trammell, J. Y. (2015). "Homosexuality is bad for me": An analysis of homosexual Christian testimonies in *Christianity Today Magazine*. *Journal of Media and Religion*, 14(1), 1-15.
- Underwood, R., & Ozanne, J. (1998). Is your package an effective communicator? A normative framework for increasing the communicative competence of packaging. *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 4, 207-220.
- Wallis, J. (2005). *God's politics: Why the right gets it wrong and the left doesn't get it*. San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco.
- Wise, L. (2015). *Buy the product, not the Sob Story*. Retrieved from <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015/october-web-only/buy-product-not-sob-story.html>
- Wolterstorff, N. (1983). *Until justice and peace embrace: The Kuyper lectures for 1981 delivered at the Free University of Amsterdam*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing.
- Wydick, B. (2015). *Book Review: Welcome to the golden age of global charity*. Retrieved from <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015/february-web-only/welcome-to-golden-age-of-global-charity.html>