Freedom, Person and Community: towards an authentic freedom

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The second half of the twentieth century was characterised by an unprecedented global preoccupation with freedom as a fundamental human right. The peoples of the old colonial empires, including Africa, gained political freedom as their right. Categories representing freedom as a norm of the social order, such as “the free market”, “free speech”, “free elections”, “freedom of religion”, have become commonplace in international discourse. Everyone is talking about freedom and everyone agrees that it is a good thing.

There is, however, surprisingly little discussion about just what this good thing, called freedom, really is. It is generally taken for granted that freedom is something that anyone will recognise when they see it. Yet, in practice, it is clear that everyone does not agree on what constitutes freedom.

For example, we commonly see large numbers of people exercising what they see as their civic freedom to protest against an international gathering in their city. The city authorities, however, often deny that this constitutes a legitimate exercise of freedom, taking vigorous action to restrain the protesters.

While there does exist a general consensus about the boundaries of freedom that holds good most of the time, conflicts such as this founded in differences over the practical meaning of freedom are occurring with increasing frequency around the world. Clearly, everyone does not recognise freedom when they see it.

When it comes to the broad contours of a free society, Western societies are widely regarded as providing the model of freedom, with other societies being judged to be free so far as they match the norms of these societies. These norms are promoted as universal values that are readily recognisable by all right minded persons. On this basis, the political leadership of these societies put pressure on the leaders of other societies to institute reforms that remodel the society in the image of the free, Western societies. While those pursuing an agenda of social change in these other societies confidently look to the Western societies, and particularly the most powerful of the Western societies, as the models of the freedom they seek.

This image of contemporary Western society as the model of freedom is so influential in today’s world that it can seem absurd to question it. Yet, if we look closely behind the image, we find that the reality does not always match the image.

The image is one of political freedom in which political power belongs to the people. The reality is an increasing political disillusionment because the people feel politically powerless. Effective political power belongs to the few who control the powerful political organisations that dominate political life. The right to vote, the great symbol of democratic freedom, gives the people little real choice other than a choice between the look-alike alternatives prepared for them by these powerful organisations. Anyone else can talk about an alternative political agenda but the dominating power of the existing political interests ensures that, in political practice, they are marginalised and demonised as right or left wing extremists.

The image is one of economic freedom in which the market is a competitive environment open to the participation of all. The reality is that the market is increasingly dominated by a few immensely powerful commercial interests, the power of which is being exponentially expanded by the current drive for globalisation. The economic power of the five most powerful commercial interests already exceeds that of any African country (UNDP, 1999, 31,32). Economic freedom has become primarily the freedom of consumers to choose between products offered by these interests, or, at best, to function on the fringes of economic life.

The image is one of freedom of speech and information in which ideas and information are able to flow freely throughout the society. The reality, as documented by Schiller (1996), is one in which the mainstream of communications media through which ideas and information flow is tightly regulated by the private commercial
interests that control these media. Anything else is pushed aside into a shadow zone with minimal influence in the mainstream of society.

There are many good things about modern Western society. It is a comfortable place, on the whole, for most of those who live in it, not least because of the significant degree of freedom it provides. However, the reality of this freedom not only falls short of the rhetoric but, more significantly, offers a basis for social relationships hinders rather than promotes human wellbeing.

There is no doubt that freedom is a good thing. God created us to be free and has redeemed us for freedom—Galatians 5:1. It is too important for us to risk accepting everything that is presented to us in the name of freedom as the genuine thing. We need to test every claim to freedom to ensure that it is an authentic freedom. As Neuhaus puts it (1991, p. vii) there is a need “to discipline our culture’s frequently loose talk about freedom”.

Defining freedom
This discipline must begin by developing a working definition of freedom. The freedom of which we speak in the present context is human freedom. For this purpose, I propose that we should understand freedom as \( \textit{the state of existence in which humans are able to act in ways that fulfil the meaning of human life.} \)

A mere absence of restraint on our actions is, at best, a meaningless freedom. To let an elephant loose on the Antarctic ice is not setting it free in any meaningful sense. It is consigning it to a painful death. The same would apply to an Antarctic penguin let loose on the inland plains of tropical Africa. To have any meaning, freedom for any living creature must have the possibility of fulfilling the life of that creature. Human freedom, then, must be defined in relation to the fulfilment of the meaning of human life.

Neither can freedom be satisfactorily understood as a total absence of restraint on action. Freedom can exist only within a framework of appropriate restraints. The legal restraint that confines the flow of traffic to one side of a road depending on the direction of travel is not an impediment to freedom but an important factor in facilitating freedom of movement on public roads.

A state of freedom, therefore, is one in which there is an absence of those kinds of restraints that prevent the fulfilment of human life. However, it is meaningless to say that I am free to do something because there is no active restraint that prevents me if I lack the power necessary to do it. I am not free to go to the moon, even though nothing is acting to hold me back, if I lack the necessary power to get there. A state of freedom, then, is one in which we are appropriately enabled to do whatever is needed to fulfil the meaning of human life.

It is common to speak of a diversity of freedoms (Neuhaus, 1991). On this view, freedom is defined as a series of rights each of which is, in principle, absolute. This leads to the problem of a conflict of freedoms when the interests of one right conflict with those of another (Gastil, 1991). We avoid this if we think of freedom as one, the unity of which is given in the unity of meaning of human life which freedom serves. We may then helpfully distinguish different facets of this one freedom but the question of conflict does not arise. In an authentic freedom, each facet functions in harmony with all the others to fulfil the one meaning of human life.

In order to fill out this understanding of freedom we need to explore three issues in more detail:
1. The nature of the human person;
2. The meaning of human life;
3. The relation between power and freedom.

The nature of the human person
The dominant view of freedom in modern Western societies assumes an individualist view of the human person (Neuhaus, 1991, p. vii). The basic principles of this individualism are clearly articulated in the influential work of the seventeenth century English social theorist, John Locke, and again, in slightly different form, by the eighteenth century Genevan, Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Locke (1924) and Rousseau (1992) both argued that the primary state of humans—the state of nature—is one in which each individual orders his own life. Locke argued that the individual is governed in this by reason, which he calls the law of Nature (1924, p. 119). Rousseau is somewhat more vague on this point, but it is clear enough that
for him also there is a law built into the nature of the human individual by which he is able to order his life in appropriate ways.

A human society comes into existence as a group of these autonomous individuals enter into an agreement, or contract, by which they each individually surrender their natural right of self-government in order to gain the mutual benefits of collective action. This agreement creates a state with a government as the primary social organisation.

On this view, the human person by nature is an autonomous individual. Communal life is not part of human nature. It is created only as and when individuals agree to unite together for common ends. The only exception is the family, but this is a special case that exists only for the purpose of the nurture of individuals until, having reached maturity, they can assume the individual autonomy that is their most basic right as humans (Rousseau, 1992, pp. 29,30).

There is another strand in the Western tradition that takes a very different view of the human person and society. It is represented in the work of the German Reformed political theorist, Johannes Althusius, which appeared nearly a hundred years before Locke. Like Locke and Rousseau, Althusius regarded communal life as an integral feature of human life, something that belongs to human nature itself. Hence, while, like them, he regarded democracy as the political norm, he saw human communities, rather than individuals, as the primary constituents of the democratic state.

The individualist views of Locke and Rousseau became the dominant Western view. However, as Carl J. Friedrich points out (Althusius, 1964, p. xii), the view of Althusius has been influential in shaping the political and social order of the Netherlands and Switzerland and has strong echoes in Sweden. In today’s debates about democracy it offers a significant alternative to the individualist models of democracy commonly regarded as the norm-represented by the United States, France and Britain. It is an alternative, furthermore, that has provided the foundations for some of the world’s most enduring and stable democracies.

The individualist views of person and society that dominate modern Western thought are also challenged by the African tradition. Menkiti (1979, p. 157) argues that the dominant view of the human person in the African tradition is that the person is defined, not by some quality of the individual but “by reference to the environing community”. He quotes Mbiti’s summary of this view: “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am.” He concludes that “as far as Africans are concerned, the reality of the communal world takes precedence over the reality of individual life histories”.

It should be noted that Menkiti is not saying that there is no place for the individual in the African tradition but that the human community is primary. We may debate the details, but there seems no doubt that the dominant view of the human person in the African tradition is a communalist one, in contrast to the individualist view that dominates modern Western thought.

A communalist view does not require the obliteration of the individual. It says that the community is primary and definitive of the human person with the individual deriving meaning from the community. Similarly, an individualist view does not wipe out all forms of communal life. It says that the individual is primary and definitive of the human person with communal life deriving its meaning from the collective will of individuals.

These distinctions are not always appreciated in discussions of Western individualism. For example, in a discussion about individualism in America, Gastil argued (Stallsworth, 1991, p. 117) that the reality of American society is strongly communalist. In support of this he offers the evidence that it is “a society of joiners, of people who belong to a wide variety of organizations.” He was supported in this by Neuhaus with the observation that the American reality “is more attuned to a communal form of life” than to individualism. Similarly Novak (1989) argues for a communal interpretation of American culture on the basis of the important place that social organisations have in American life.

Arguments of this sort reveal the fundamentally individualist thinking of those concerned. Their view of communities as social organisations to which individuals belong because they choose to join is a decidedly individualist one. The individual is primary and definitive, with the community deriving from the free actions of these autonomous individuals. On a genuinely communalist view, such as is described by Menkiti, a community is not an organisation that we join because we choose to do so. It is a relationship to which we belong because of who we are.
Individualism blurs the distinction between community and organisation by seeing communities as collectives organised by individuals. No community can function without some kind of organisation, formal or informal, to order communal affairs. But the organisation is not the community; it is an organising of a communal life that is founded in the nature of the human person.

The American, Vincent Donovan, records how he only came to understand the possibilities of genuine human community when he immersed himself in the communal life of the Masai of East Africa. Of his earlier experiences he observes (1978, p. 141) that “the strange, changing, mobile, temporary, disappearing communities of America can leave one without any experience of what community is.”

Unfortunately, the experience and understanding of community is being lost in Africa. The drive for modernisation, the adoption of Western patterns of education and the dominant role of Western ideas in the communications media is conditioning the peoples of Africa to see Western individualism as the norm of human life. All too often the label “African communalism” is being used to justify patterns of social relations that serve the interest and convenience of the individual without any of the responsibilities that a genuine communal life involves. If Africans allow this erosion of practical communal values to continue, they will lose one of the richest insights that their tradition has to offer the modern world.

While Scripture undoubtedly affirms human individuality it just as clearly affirms communality as a fundamental constituent of the human person. Each of us belongs to others so that our own humanity cannot be fulfilled unless we live in ways that acknowledge that belonging—Romans 12:4.

This does not mean that we should embrace communalism as an alternative to individualism. Neither communalism nor individualism does justice to the biblical revelation. The human person is defined neither as an autonomous individual nor as a member of a community. The human person is defined by the creative word of God that constitutes us as God’s creaturely image. This image of God is not some quality that we have. It is who we are. The human person is an individual, but is also more than an individual. The human person is a member of community, but is also more than a member of community.

Individuality and communality are aspects of our humanness that must be recognised equally if there is to be a full human development. Neither is primary or definitive. A healthy individuality will express itself in a vigorous communal life. A healthy communal life will nurture and affirm the individuality of each person. To break this connection by making either individual or community primary and definitive distorts human life. However, the dominant influence of individualism in today’s global society requires us to focus sharply on this particular form of distortion if we are to achieve an authentic freedom.

A freedom based on an individualist view of the person, that subordinates communal life to individual interest, is inevitably destructive in its tendencies. It is notorious that a lion, or an elephant, if cut off from the communal life of the pride or herd, tends to become a destructive rogue. Lions and elephants are created to live in communities of their own kind. Their character becomes distorted when they are cut off from that communal life. In a similar way, when the communal bonds of the human person are weakened in the name of the freedom of the individual, the human person is distorted with destructive effects on both the individual person and communal life.

It should be noted that, in the modern society, communal life is differentiated. There is no single community that embraces the whole of human life. Any one person will belong to several communities, each of which covers a different area of life. Among the different kinds of communities we may think, for example, of familial community, political community, educational community, worshipping community, recreational community, commercial community, artistic community.

Menkiti (1979, p. 167) draws attention to an important aspect of this issue when he points out that, whereas Western individualism leads to a focus on the rights of the individual in social relationships, the African view of the person leads to a focus on the duties that the individual owes to the community.

There is no doubt that individuals do have rights, or entitlements. As a law-abiding citizen of Australia I have the right to a passport and to use this to travel where I choose. I also have a right to vote in the elections of governments in my home country. More broadly, as a human person I have a right to expect respect for my life from the communities within which I function.

However, a rights-based approach to freedom, deeply rooted as it is in an individualist view of the human person, leads to a distorted freedom that undermines rather than advances human wellbeing. Firstly, defining freedom as a
right tends to detach the exercise of freedom from the discipline of communal responsibilities that is essential to a responsible exercise of freedom, and, for that matter, of right.

Secondly, the definition of freedom in terms of a series of discrete, and, in principle, absolute, rights leads to inevitable conflicts between the claims of different freedoms, in which, in the end, the claim of one must lose to the other—note Stallsworth (1991, p. 130). Much of the social conflict in today’s societies is rooted in this conflict over the competing rights of competing freedoms.

While the responsible exercise of freedom requires the discipline of communal responsibilities, it is no more satisfactory to base freedom on responsibilities than on rights. An authentic freedom will be “a freedom with purpose” (Stallsworth, 1991, p. 139). Such a freedom must be linked to the meaning of human life.

The meaning of human life

Freedom is not a good thing in itself. Its good is in the purpose that it serves. Rural Africans with little education will usually show more interest in freedom to grow and sell their own crops without interference than in the political freedom that is so eagerly sought by their educated urban fellow citizens. One freedom serves a clear and important purpose in their lives, while they fail to see what purpose the other will serve.

Possession of a set of keys and an access code will give free access to a bank vault. This is a good thing while it serves legitimate purposes. However, when this freedom serves the purposes of a bank robber it is no longer a good thing.

This does not mean that freedom is only good if those concerned see the good. It may serve a good purpose even though this is not recognised by those concerned. The point, however, remains that we can only judge the good of freedom by the purpose that it serves.

Unlike other creatures, humans choose the purposes that they will pursue. A zebra or giraffe fulfils its creaturely purpose by following its in-built instincts. Humans must choose from a wide range of possibilities and accept responsibility for these choices. The biologist Charles Birch observes (1990, p. 2) that the choice of purposes is the most powerful of all influences in human lives. When life seems to have cheated us, the fault, in the end, is that “we have failed to choose purposes that could fulfil life.”

People desire freedom for a variety of purposes. Sometimes the desired purpose is being able to do what I want to do. In other cases the purpose is access to the centres of social power. Or, sometimes freedom is regarded as a desirable end in itself.

An authentic freedom can only be one that serves the purpose of fulfilling the meaning of human life. A freedom serving any other purpose is an empty, meaningless freedom that, in the end, can only be destructive in its effects. It is a dehumanising freedom. This leaves the question: What is the meaning of human life?

For the Christian the only answer to this question can be the service in love of God and neighbour. We are not created for self-gratification or the exercise of power for its own sake but in order that, in love, we may be the creaturely image of the God who is love. As those redeemed in Christ we have been given a freedom that is not to be seen as an opportunity for self-indulgence but that we may “through love become slaves to one another”—Galatians 5:13. If we depart from this all-encompassing purpose of love, our freedom will become a destructive force for ourselves and for others—Galatians 5:14,15.

This leads us to a view of freedom that is in direct contrast to the dominant view of our age. As a rights-based freedom the dominant view focuses on what the society owes me; it is directed towards obtaining my entitlements. It leads to conflict and alienation as the right claimed by one party conflicts with the right of another. It divides society into factions each fighting for its perceived rights.

A redemptive view of freedom, directed towards the service of love, focuses not on what others owe me, or us, but on what I, and we, can do for others. It takes our Lord’s words seriously when he said: “It is more blessed to give than to receive.”—Acts 20:35. It acts in accordance with the mind of Christ that looks not to our own interests “but to the interests of others”—Philippians 2:4².

It will require some courage to adopt this view of freedom in today’s world. It is a world that believes passionately in the fulfilment of human life through a freedom for each individual to pursue his or her goals and interests. Concern for others has a place but only so far as it does not interfere with the pursuit of our own goals and
interests. It is a world in which quality of life is not measured by how much we give but by how much we get. Giving to others has a place, but only so far as it has no more than a marginal impact on what we get for ourselves. Yet, if we are to achieve the transformational living of which Paul speaks in Romans 12:1,2 we must be ready to resist, by word and deed, conformity to this dominant view of freedom. We must pay more than lip service to the redemptive message of the God who took the form of a slave in his love for his rebellious creatures—Philippians 2:5–8. We must show that his mind is in us by living in a way that shows freedom as a calling to become slaves to one another through love. Note that this is not the slavery of external coercion that is the ultimate denial of freedom. It is a freely chosen slavery governed by love that is the ultimate affirmation of human freedom.

The relation between power and freedom

It is clear that power can be used to deprive us of freedom. A person armed with a gun can hold others hostage. Yet power can also be used to secure freedom. Other persons with sufficient power can free us by using the power to disarm the person holding us hostage. The failure to use power can also affect our freedom. If I have the power to free the hostages, but fail to do so, I contribute to their deprivation of freedom.

It follows from this that the freedom people enjoy in a society is directly related to the way power is used, or not used, in society. The relation between social power and freedom is often seen in terms of the amount of power that different parties have. The oppressive nature of a totalitarian state, for example, is seen as the result of its having excessive power. Yet the reality is that power is never evenly distributed. Some always have more power than others. In spite of Rousseau’s ideal (1992, p. 39), a democratic society is no exception.

The real issue is not one of the relative amount of power but the way in which power is exercised. A totalitarian state is not oppressive because it has too much power but because it uses its power to restrict the ability of its citizens to act in fulfillment of their human calling. Colonial regimes in Africa were not oppressive because of the amount of power they had but because they used that power to exclude Africans from the political and commercial life of the society, thus denying them the opportunity to act in fulfillment of their human calling in these areas.

This is not to say that the amount of power is unimportant. Clearly, the greater the power the greater the potential for using that power to restrict freedom or, on the other hand, for advancing freedom. However, the decisive issue is the way power is used.

Power that is used to prevent people from acting in ways that will fulfill the meaning of being human is always oppressive. Power that is used to enable such action is always liberating.

The contemporary reality of power

It is often supposed that the decisive issue in ensuring a free society is the limitation of the power of the state. Berger (1991, p. 12), for example, argues that the freeing of economic life from the control of the state is “the necessary presupposition for democracy”, with the freedom this entails. There are two flaws in this view. Firstly, it supposes that the important question is the amount of power rather than the way it is used. Secondly, it overlooks the other forms of social power that can play as important a role as the state restricting or facilitating freedom.

In today’s global society, the power of commercial interests rivals, and in many cases exceeds, the power of the state. The annual sales of General Motors alone are greater than the GDP (total output of goods and services for final use) of Norway, Finland or Greece, four times that of Nigeria, 16 times that of Kenya, 18 times that of Zimbabwe and 42 times that of Zambia (UNDP, 1999, pp. 32,184–187). And globalisation, through mergers and global expansion of markets, is rapidly increasing the concentration of power in these commercial corporations (UNDP, 1999, p. 32).

Already, more than 60% of world trade involves multinational corporations. Somewhere around one third of all trade involves transactions between components of multinational corporations which are effectively shielded from any genuine competition. In the case of Africa, and other developing countries, multinational corporations, whose home bases are in the developed world, dominate the production, distribution and sale of many goods vital to the economies of those countries (UNDP, 1999, p. 114).

Adam Smith (1961, p. 147) argued that, despite the self-interested intentions of the operator of a commercial enterprise, he is “led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention”. While Smith’s “invisible hand” may be regarded as too mystical for today’s secular thinking, the idea persists of a benevolent
power operating in the field of commercial endeavour under the name of “market forces”. If allowed to function freely without state intervention, these “market forces”, it is argued, will override the self-interests of individuals to ensure that the effect of commercial activity is overwhelmingly beneficial.

Yet, when we examine it closely, this faith in “market forces” to regulate commercial activity for good is founded in ideology and myth rather than any empirical reality. There is no empirical reason to believe that the intentions of the humans in control of commercial power have any less impact on the outcomes of that activity than of any other human activity.

As Christians, we believe that the “invisible hand” of God does ensure that, even where the intentions are unrighteous, desirable outcomes are not altogether lost. But this is as true for the state as for commercial activity. Furthermore, this divine grace moderates but does not negate the effect of the unrighteous intention in the state, in commercial activity or any other sphere of human life.

Given the power of commercial interests in today’s world, we cannot afford to ignore the impact of commercial power when considering the question of freedom. In Africa, the issue of the inappropriate use of state power limiting freedom remains a significant issue, to a greater or lesser extent, in many countries. In Western society, however, commercial power must be the prime concern. Neither should it be ignored in the African context where its influence is already significant and likely to become increasingly so.

The role of commercial enterprise
The difficulty in attempting any kind of critique of commercial power in today’s context is that any criticism of the use of commercial power is too easily labelled as left wing radicalism advocating a discredited socialism. It is then automatically dismissed as irrelevant.

Let me, then, try to get some things straight before we proceed further. Contrary to all socialist views, I believe firmly that, on the whole, the means of production, distribution, and exchange in human society should be owned and operated by private commercial interests in accordance with commercial principles. As commercial enterprises, these constitute a sphere of activity distinct from the state and, so far as their internal operations are concerned, should be free of state control. In this most fundamental sense my convictions are decidedly capitalist.

On the other hand, there are ideas that are commonly associated with capitalism to which I do not subscribe. I do not subscribe to the now common view that all services are necessarily best delivered by commercial enterprise, nor do I subscribe to the user-pays principle in the provision of all services. There are services essential to human freedom that clearly cannot be provided on this basis. To attempt it is to deprive significant numbers of persons of the opportunity to fulfil the meaning of human life.

Also, as will already be apparent, I do not subscribe to the view that “market forces” will ensure that commercial activity has a positive, liberating impact on human life. Like any other area of human life, commercial activity is a normative activity that can be either beneficial or harmful in its impact, depending on what norms govern its practice. Critical scrutiny of commercial practice, therefore, is not to be seen as an attack on commercial endeavour as such but a necessary process for ensuring that its potential for good is realised.

For this reason, the argument that all social policy must conform to the existing commercial reality is dangerously flawed. To the extent that the existing commercial reality is governed by faulty norms, such an argument is a guarantee of social policies that undermine human wellbeing. For the Christian, it is an argument that will frustrate all our endeavours to achieve transformational thinking about the issue of our age.

Finally, I do not subscribe to the idea that the relation between the state and commercial enterprise should be one of minimal intervention. The issue is not the extent to which the state should regulate commercial activity but the nature of that regulation. In particular, I consider it to be important, and entirely appropriate to its God-given calling, for the state to regulate commercial activity in two respects: to ensure genuine freedom in the commercial market and to ensure that commercial power is not used to advance commercial interest at the expense of other human interests.

The exercise of commercial power in today’s world
There are three ways in which the exercise of commercial power shapes social reality in today’s world. Firstly, that power is used within the commercial market to secure and maintain an ever increasing market dominance for an
increasingly smaller group of giant corporations. Others are left with no choice but to operate on the market fringes, providing fringe products and services—“niche markets”. Nowhere is the dogma of Social Darwinism more entrenched than in the commercial world, where it is the norm for the strong to devour the weak and might is right. There is no greater myth than the idea that the strong triumph because they provide superior products and services. They triumph because they are more effective in the ruthless exercise of power.

Secondly, commercial power is used to put pressure on governments to adopt social policies that create the most favourable environment for commercial interests. The power of commercial interests is such that even the strongest states cannot afford to ignore this pressure. For smaller states, whose power is minute compared to that of the commercial interests, the pressure is overwhelming.

Orwa (1992, pp. 392, 393) documents how the government of Kenya has progressively amended its foreign investment legislation in response to pressure from multinational commercial interests to secure an environment that favours those interests. This contrasts sharply with King’s report (1996, pp. 32–34,200) of an extended and careful study of Kenya’s indigenous, micro-enterprises. The study shows a vibrant, innovative micro-enterprise sector that has developed in spite of, at best, “benign neglect by government” and, at worst, petty bureaucratic regulation hindering its development. This continuing failure to provide it with a suitably favourable operating environment hinders the further development of its potential for a more formal role in the national economy, including a contribution to the much needed expansion of exports.

In the case of South Africa, Marais (1998, pp. 146–172) traces the way in which the power of commercial interests was used in the early 1990s to influence a fundamental reshaping of ANC policies in ways that sometimes involved a total reversal of earlier “liberation” policies. The outcome was government policy that was congenial to the dominant commercial interests.

It is, of course, as appropriate for commercial interests, as much as any others, to contribute to debate about appropriate official policies. The reality of today’s world, however, is that the contribution they make is not just one among any number of others. Their power means that they have an access to, and influence in, the centres of political power that others do not have. Again, this is not, of necessity, a bad thing. In any society, including a democratic society, some have more power than others. The important issue is how the power is used.

Thirdly, the dominant commercial control of the mass media gives commercial interests the power to shape the values and norms of society. That this is a persuasive, rather than coercive, power makes it even more significant. Coercive power can be used only to control external actions. Persuasive power has a more profound impact in shaping society by capturing the hearts and minds of people.

The nature of today’s communications technology that allows powerful images to be transmitted instantaneously around the world makes this arguably the most powerful of all instruments for shaping public opinion.

News reports with graphic, on the spot images create the illusion that we know what is actually happening on the other side of the world, just as though we were there. It is an illusion because we are not there and what we actually see are carefully selected and edited images that do not represent the full reality of what happened. They represent the viewpoint of those controlling the transmission of the images we see.

Glossy, easy to watch dramas entertain us and, in the process, subtly, yet powerfully, shape social norms and values by presenting powerful images of “normal” human life and relationships. We listen to debates on social issues that lead us to believe that there is free and open discussion of the issues, when the reality is that we are exposed to a careful selection of views (see Schiller, 1996, pp. 14–18).

The reality is that there is no such thing as neutral communications. All communication represents a point of view, a world view. It would be extremely naïve to suppose that, where commercial interests control the means of communication, the communications received through these means will not represent the world view of these interests. If we have any doubt of this, Schiller (1996) provides extensive and compelling evidence of the way in which commercial interest controls the flow of communications in today’s mass media.

**Evaluating the role of commercial interests**

In making a critical evaluation of the role of commercial interests, it is important to note that there are many individuals of personal integrity and faith in the executive ranks of commercial corporations. Whatever may be said
that is critical of the role of commercial interests in today’s world should not be taken as a reflection on the integrity of these persons.

At the same time, it needs to be recognised that there prevails within corporate entities a corporate culture that reinforces the fundamental rightness of the way these entities function. This is as true for academic and church entities as it is for commercial corporations. Especially for those who hold positions of authority within these entities, and who are therefore immersed in this corporate culture, it is difficult to stand back and evaluate corporate activity other than in terms of the corporate culture.

It is therefore an important function of an effective Christian community that its more widely dispersed members are able to stimulate their brothers and sisters in the commercial world, as in every other area of life, in a constructively critical evaluation of commercial life by the norms of the Gospel.

We have noted already that the mere possession of power is not, in itself, a bad thing. However, the power of today’s commercial interests, that enables those interests to dominate social life and political decision making, is, at the very least, dangerous. In practice, there are three reasons for concluding that the use of this power is having a negative impact on freedom in today’s world.

The role of profit
The primary, and overriding, purpose of today’s commercial corporation is the making of profit. Chief executives are paid salaries of millions of dollars a year on the understanding that they will justify their remuneration by maximising profits. Corporate structures are rationalised and operating procedures reformed with the same end in view. The United Nations Development Programme annual report (UNDP, 1999, p. 114) summarises this situation in the context of the current globalisation:

The world is rushing headlong into greater integration—driven mostly by a philosophy of market profitability and economic efficiency.

It is often said that private commercial operations are more efficient than publicly owned organisations. While there is some truth in this, it is a broad generalisation requiring careful qualification. An important qualification, in the present global context, is that the overriding goal of commercial efficiency is the maximising of profit. Quality of product and service figure in the equation only so far as they affect the profit bottom line.

It is entirely legitimate for any commercial operation to make a profit. In the nature of the case, it must cease to exist as a commercial operation if it does not. However, when profit is the overriding goal of the operation, the result is an inevitable distortion, rather than a fulfilment, of the meaning of human life. The consequence is a social environment that inhibits authentic freedom.

Firstly, when maximum profit is the operational bottom line, the biblical norm that the ox that treads out the grain must not be muzzled is overridden by the requirement that labour costs must be minimised—1 Corinthians 9:8-10; 1 Timothy 5:18. The biblical norm does not require that all should receive the same reward, regardless of the role they play. It does require a rejection of today’s practice that determines rewards by the dynamics of labour market supply and demand. Instead, it specifies that, all, including the lowliest labourer, should be rewarded on the basis of a right to share in the general bounty of the operation.

Secondly, it restricts the supply of goods and services. In view of the array of goods and services on offer in today’s market place, this may seem to be a ridiculous claim. However, the dazzling array that undoubtedly is on offer tends to disguise an underlying restriction in supply. Because mass sales maximise profits, the emphasis is on products and services for which a mass market can be created. Other products and services are pushed to the fringes of the market where they can be found only with considerable effort and, in some cases, high cost.

Even more alarming than the restriction in the supply of consumer goods is the well documented restriction in the provision of care (UNDP, 1999, pp. 77–83). Those rich enough to pay can still gain access to high quality care. For the majority, however, the relentless pursuit of profitability is resulting in a steadily declining quality of care. Only the caring of a few dedicated people who defy the trend is preventing an even greater crisis.

Thirdly, and perhaps more profoundly, the overriding profit goal creates a distorted set of social values as all other values are subordinated to that of profit. People, including those in control of commercial operations, still hold other values to be important, including values of caring. However, in practice these values are diminished by their subordination to the overriding value of profitability. This shift in the balance of values is not confined to the
commercial world but spills over to the whole society. It turns on its head our Lord’s call to give priority to the righteousness of his kingdom—Matthew 6:25–33.

**Desires, wants and needs**

It is often said that the commercial market merely gives people what they want. One of the disciplines of the market is said to be that, if people do not want it, they will not buy it. The reality is that modern marketing strategies, facilitated by the persuasive power of modern communications technology, shape tastes and create wants in the interests of ever expanding sales.

I long wondered why Americans are so passionate about having pancakes and syrup for breakfast. I was even more mystified that they seem to prefer artificial maple syrup rather than the real thing! All was made plain when I learned that, in 1919, the makers of Domino Gold Syrup launched a highly successful promotional campaign to persuade the American public that their syrup was not just for cold winter evenings but was to be enjoyed all the year round. The sales manager of the company said: “Our belief is that the entire year is syrup season and the people must be educated to believe this is a fact.” (Clapp, 1998, p. 185). Clearly the public were so educated!

To similar effect, Crowell of Quaker Oats is on record as saying that his aim was “…to awaken an interest in and create a demand for cereals where none existed.” (Clapp, 1998, p. 185). These are but two of many examples of this kind that could be given. The modern commercial enterprise does not set out merely to satisfy existing wants. It sets out quite deliberately to create new wants and new needs by stimulating human desire.

Successful sales strategies are designed to use the power of modern technology to project an image of a product or service as something desirable that will enhance the quality of life. The aim is to persuade as many people as possible to say: “I must have this”. In this way, desire becomes need, and yesterday’s unheard of luxury becomes today’s necessity.

This generates and reinforces the value that whatever has a desirable image is good. Desire becomes the criterion of good. This, of course, is precisely the basis for the original temptation. The image of the fruit made it appear as “good for food…a delight to the eyes, and…to be desired to make one wise”—Genesis 3:6. There is nothing wrong with good food, or pleasant sights, or wisdom. The temptation was the use of an image of these things as a lure to allow human desire, rather than the word of the Lord, to be the criterion of good.

Today’s commercial culture reflects in an unmistakable way the characteristics of the world as described by John: the identification of the good with the desirable and pride in riches—1 John 2:15,16. Involving, as it does, a fundamental denial of the love revealed in Christ, it is a culture that, in spite of its often appealing appearance, can only lead to a serious diminishing rather than a fulfilling of the meaning of human life.

**The human person as consumer**

Finally, the values of today’s commercial world lead to the definition of the human person as primarily a consumer. The quality of human life, the standard of living, are measured by the amount of consumption.

The processes of production are not valued for their own sake but only as a means to consumption. We produce only so that we can consume. It is regarded as desirable to obtain what we want to consume, where possible, without involving ourselves in the process of production. Goods that we can obtain ready for instant consumption are the ideal.

The retailing analyst, Victor Lebow, writing over forty years ago, put it well (Clapp, 1998, p. 189):

*Our enormously productive economy...demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and using of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction, our ego satisfaction, in consumption...We need things consumed, burned up, worn out, replaced, and discarded at an ever increasing rate.*

The result is a fundamental undermining of the meaning of the human person. We are created to be producers and carers, not consumers. We are called to be God’s image by cultivating and caring for the earth—Genesis 2:15. The proper purpose of our cultivation is not so that we may consume more and more but a caring, loving nurturing that makes the earth a richer place in every way—not merely in terms of market value.

We do need to consume, and ought to enjoy what we consume, but consumption does not give authentic meaning to our life. That comes through productive and caring activity. The subordination of productive activity to
consumption goals and of caring activity to market constraints subverts our most fundamental humanity and, with it, our authentic freedom.

If we have the will to do it, we can find ways of freeing ourselves from the prevailing consumerist mould to find the joyful freedom for which we are redeemed. Bill McKibben (1998, pp. 40–50) tells how a family Christmas was transformed into a time of relaxed, joyful celebration by breaking with the consumerist pattern that has now become a social norm throughout the Western world, and, increasingly in urban centres of the developing world. Instead of viewing Christmas as a time for big spending and lavish consumption, the McKibben family adopted a pattern of relaxed family sharing, focused on God’s redemption in Christ and including the sharing of simple gifts made by the family members. He speaks of it as the experience of a “deep bubbling joy” that comes only as we pass up the temptation of easy but “momentary pleasure”.

**Swimming against the tide**

Perhaps the biggest obstacle to achieving the kind of authentic freedom that McKibben describes is that it requires us to adopt values that contradict the prevailing values of freedom. In the prevailing values, the unfettered consumption of the glittering array of goods and services offered in the global marketplace is a fundamental mark of personal freedom. A market of ever increasing consumption is seen as an essential ingredient of a free society.

This was dramatically illustrated in the days when the Berlin wall was crumbling with a flood of people pouring through from the East. It was clear that the focus of the celebration was not political freedom but access to the consumerist market of the West.

To adopt a lifestyle that refuses to be drawn by the allure of ever increasing consumption means going against the prevailing cultural tide. Yet, is this not what is clearly required if we are to experience the freedom that Christ has given us? Is it not what we must do if we are to avoid being conformed to the world and be transformed by the renewing of our minds in wholehearted service to our Redeemer?—Romans 12:1,2.

This does not mean that we should withdraw from participation in the marketplace. Christ has not called us to withdraw from the world but has sent us into the world by the law of love that is the law of his kingdom. What we are called to is a discerning participation that selects not on the basis of our own desires but on the basis of what will enable us to most effectively serve God and neighbour in love in today’s world.

**Towards an authentic freedom**

When critically viewed in the light of the Gospel, it is clear that the freedom that is being pursued so passionately around the world today is a flawed freedom, founded in a flawed understanding of the meaning of human life. It blocks the way to the experience of authentic freedom. To the extent that Christians adopt a way of life based on the values of this flawed freedom we are unable to live in the freedom for which Christ has redeemed us and the witness of our lives before the world is dimmed.

There is, therefore, no more urgent issue about which we need a practical understanding of transformed living that, bringing discernment of the will of God, alone leads to the genuinely good life. This calls for critical reflection on our calling in Christ that involves the whole Christian community. The fruit of academic analysis and discussion on the authentic meaning of freedom in today’s world is one of the inputs needed if this reflection is to be effective.

Let us again remember that the success of our endeavours in this, as in any other area, is not to be measured by the extent to which we are able to change the direction of society. It is to be measured by the faithfulness of our witness to the society in deed and word.

**References**


**Endnotes**

1 The masculine is used deliberately in this context because, at the time that both Locke and Rousseau wrote, the social role of women was, to say the least, ambiguous. When they spoke of the individual it was decidedly the male individual that they had in mind. Women’s role in society was tied to that of the man.

2 The translation of NIV at this point is doubtful when it says: “Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.” While this meaning is not entirely impossible, it weakens the force of the command in a way that is not consistent with the context.