A Franciscan Theology of Stuff: 
Consumerism, Human Trafficking and Franciscan Action

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Introduction

Franciscans have been working internationally at the United Nations to raise awareness about the issue of the trafficking of human persons and other contemporary forms of slavery since the 1980’s.¹ Franciscans have also been organizing advocacy efforts in this area in the United States since 2007 through the agency of FAN (The Franciscan Action Network).² And numerous congregations of Franciscan women and men have become vocal advocates for men, women and children who continue to be trafficked for sexual and commercial purposes here and around the world in record numbers.³

Franciscans are now joining the efforts of researchers worldwide who have widened the scope of their investigation from the supply side of human trafficking (what happens to the men, women, and children who are being trafficked) to the demand side of human trafficking (the businesses whose long supply chains, contractors and sub-contractors, serve up exploited and forced labor, especially of children). We notice today with great alarm the kidnapping and trafficking of tens of thousands of persons each year across borders in attempts to lower prices of production and maximize profits for some of the world’s most respected companies. Work is now being done to expose and eradicate the supply chains that provide cover and legitimacy to the practice of modern forms of human slavery.

In this article, I would like to do three things. First, I would like to describe this “demand” side of human trafficking, giving a brief overview of the scope of this growing moral tragedy, as it erupts in the cities and suburbs of America. Second, I would like to describe how we as consumers have become “complicit participants” in this worldwide economic scheme of human exploitation in the name of expedited goods at ever lower prices. Third, I’d like to discuss how a new Franciscan “theology of stuff” can begin a reversal of these trends. I will argue that the Franciscan vision of the dignity of the human person and its fraternal vision of economics postulate a fundamental re-enchantment of the world and thus calls for a re-thinking of our ordinary relation to “consumerables” and “deliverables” in the workplace.

¹ For an overview of these international efforts, cf. the various publications developed and distributed by Franciscans International, the NGO that represents the world’s Franciscans at the United Nations. Silvia Palonba and Sr. Namrata Joseph, Modern Slavery in India: Cases of Bonded Labour (Franciscans International Publications, 2012); Courtney Griffin, Anti-Trafficking in US Law (Franciscans International Publications, 2006); Yao Agbete, Handbook on Human Trafficking (Franciscans International Publications, 2004).
³ The list of congregations is too large to note here but includes among others: The Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia, the Franciscan Sisters of Allegany, The School Sisters of St. Francis (PA), the Sisters of St Francis of the Providence of God, the Felician Sisters, and the Franciscan Sisters of Peace, among many others.
Human Trafficking Defined

Article Three of the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons defines the “trafficking in human persons” in three parts.

First, there is the act of human trafficking (what is done) and that is the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of a person.

Second, there are the means (how it is done) through the use of force, coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power or vulnerability, or giving payments or benefits to a person who is in control of the victim.

And third, there is the purpose (why it is done) for the purpose of exploitation... to include the prostitution of others, forced labor, slavery or similar practices.

For the average American, human slavery would be considered an issue in the past tense, a problem humanity solved a long time ago. The reality, however, is different. Human slavery today is a larger and more complex problem than ever before, interwoven as it is with the very mechanisms of our postmodern society and economics. The numbers are troubling. It is estimated that there are about 27 to 30 million slaves suffering in the world today. And it is estimated that there are about 17,000 or 20,000 foreign nationals trafficked into the United States each year, with upwards of 200,000 “domestic slaves” living and working within the borders of the United States itself. Human trafficking is the second most profitable form of transnational crime in the world after the sale of drugs, more profitable even than the sale of arms.

Human trafficking is big business here in America and around the world. It is not simply the work of individual criminals in back alleys, on side streets, and in foreign countries. It is a diversified network of corporate enterprises that uses some of our most cherished and respected industries to advance ever more desperate forms of exploitation. The sad truth is that tens of thousands of men and women, girls and boys are forced every day to destroy their bodies in the sweatshops of Europe and Asia and to sell themselves in the massage parlors and escort services of major cities like New York and Philadelphia, Boston and Baltimore, Los Angeles and Las Vegas.

To accomplish this, human traffickers use our hotel chains, our car rental agencies, and our airlines as part of the supply chain that serves up modern slavery to the cities and the suburbs of America. A few weeks ago, the Philadelphia Inquirer ran a piece that indicated that human trafficking was one of the “dirty little secrets” of Philadelphia’s suburbs. It profiled the story of a 17 year old girl from Doylestown, PA, who had been prostituted by her grandfather at the age of seven on the streets of Texas, Oregon and Virginia. She no longer works the streets. She’s found her way into the massage parlors and escort services that serve the good folk of Montgomery, Bucks, Chester, Delaware and Philadelphia counties.

Victims of trafficking are the easily disposable labor pool tricked into accepting job offers that promise a better life. They come to America, like so many of our immigrant ancestors, hoping for

7 Ibid., p. 201-228.
an education, longing for a better future, ready to build that possibility with hard work at a decent wage. But, within hours, research shows us, they find themselves trapped in a terrifying cycle of isolation, intimidation and threat. They are forced to work without relief or compensation and they endure years of physical harm and psychological abuse.

Human trafficking’s durability is due to the fact that it is a hugely profitable business. It’s estimated that trafficked sex slaves generate $38.7 billion dollars in annual profits for those managing the human slave industry. But, human trafficking is not limited to the sex trade. It is found in almost every trade imaginable, an industry with long supply chains, using legitimate businesses that we know and respect as a cover and a shield for its criminal activities. Human trafficking is not an isolated problem. It is all around us and it implicates each and every one of us.

The Frightening Connection between Human Trafficking and Halloween

In the last two weeks of October, Americans are projected to spend upwards of $8 billion dollars celebrating Halloween. Americans will shell out about $2.87 billion on costumes, $1.65 billion on decorations and a whopping $2.35 billion dollars on candy, most of it chocolate and most of it made by the three largest American confectioners: Kraft, Mars and Hershey’s.

The chocolate comes largely from the cocoa plants of the African nations of Ghana and the Ivory Coast, which supply the world with 80% of its chocolate. In 2000, the BBC broadcast a documentary entitled, Slavery: A Global Investment, which catalogued how hundreds of thousands of children were purchased from parents or stolen to work 80 to 100 hours per week on the cocoa plantations of the Ivory Coast. These children were paid nothing, barely fed, beaten regularly all to satisfy the sweet tooth of the West at Halloween and Valentine’s Day.

In 2001, the Chocolate Manufacturers Association, which “advances, protects and promotes” the confectionary industry, signed the Harkins-Engel Protocol, named after the two American congressmen who negotiated it, that would prohibit child trafficking in the cocoa industry by the year 2008.

In 2010, Danish journalist, Miki Mistrati, went back to the Ivory Coast to see the state of child labor on the cocoa plantations. He wanted to see if there had been any dramatic change in the incidence of kidnapping for child slavery. He shares his findings in a new documentary, entitled The Dark Side of Chocolate.  

The film reveals how people in neighboring Mali were bribing children at bus stations with work and money, or kidnapping them from villages. Once kidnapped, the children were taken to towns near the border of the Ivory Coast, where traffickers would use dirt-bikes to transport the children over the border into the Ivory Coast. Then the children would be shuffled off to other traffickers who would sell the children directly to the cocoa plantations.

The documentary demonstrates how children, as young as 10 to 15, are being forced to do hard labor, are physically abused, and paid poor wages or no wages at all. They are not allowed to go to

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school. The investigation reveals that most of the children will stay with the plantation until they die—never to see their families again.

The anti-slavery coalition, *Stop The Traffik*, claims that Ivory Coast plantations have bought 12,000 child slaves since 2005. It also reveals that, the Harkins-Engle Protocol notwithstanding, these children are fed little, beaten daily and some have been punished by having their limbs hacked off for trying to escape. In a trenchant paper on child labor and the cocoa industry, Elliot J. Schrage of the U.S. Council on Foreign Relations and Anthony P. Ewing, professor at New York’s Columbia University, reported that there were more than 109,000 child laborers working the cocoa farms of the Ivory Coast, despite the Harkins-Engle Protocol and the promises of reform by the major confectioners of the world.

These researchers go on to say that the reason not much has changed and so little progress has been made in reducing the number of trafficked and exploited children in the chocolate industries of Africa is because “(C)onsumer pressure was insufficient to spark industry collaboration to address child labour in the cocoa supply chain.” and “Demand for ‘fair trade’ chocolate remained relatively small.”

That is why it is not unfair to state that the new faces of human trafficking this year are ones with whom we are all familiar. They are our nephews and nieces, our children and grandchildren, the innocent kids of America who have been made complicit in a frightening scheme that exploits other children their same age. On Halloween night, hundreds of thousands of children a continent away will be tricked and they will suffer on the dark side of chocolate, doing hard time and being beaten, so that children here can be treated with the sweet tastes of Snicker’s Bars and Reece’s Pieces. Something is dramatically wrong with this global transaction of trick or treat.

**Consumerism and the Dark Side of Human Trafficking Today**

This discussion opens up a very difficult, immensely complicated and hard to resolve dilemma that each one of us in this room faces. It is the sad fact that, without knowing it and certainly without wanting it, we are all implicated in the dynamic of human trafficking, simply because we are consumers, because we shop in a world that wants to ship cheap goods freely and indiscriminately across the globe.

Each and every day, we are, as Kevin Bales indicates, “eating, wearing, walking and talking slavery,” getting out of bed and walking on a rug hand-woven by slaves from the carpet belt of Pakistan, India and Nepal, wearing a tee-shirt made of cotton harvested by slave labor in West Africa and Uzbekistan. We sip coffee cultivated by slave labor in Africa or Latin America, with sugar harvested by enslaved Haitian workers in the Dominican Republican. We power up our cell-phones and laptops, unaware that the mineral used in these devices was dug out of the ground by

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13 Ibid., p. 110.
poor farmers indentured to armed gangs in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Again, Kevin Bales reminds us of a chilling and inescapable public truth – “Every one of us, every day, touches, wears, and eats products tainted with slavery. Slavery-made goods and commodities are everywhere in our lives.”

The truly dark side of human trafficking today is not only the personal acts between individual traffickers and victims, however deeply immoral and unethical each and every event is. No. The truly dark side of human trafficking, that which gives currency and cover to these heinous individual acts, is the ongoing corporate expression of trafficking and exploitation through the supply chains that feed modern human slavery. I am referring back to what I said previously—that the trafficking enterprise today utilizes our most respected and frequented companies to make human exploitation almost invisible. It hides inexpressible human cruelty behind our most popular logos making it hard for us to believe how our huge multi-billion dollar retail chains could ever sink to using human slaves to make our shirts, assemble our toys, and shine our laptops. But, as David T. Schwartz reminds us, “unnoticed damage is of course not nonexistent damage.”

The fact is that we have become a “consumer culture.” We are part and parcel of and indeed willing participants in a vast network of production, marketing, distribution and consumption of goods that crisscross boundaries and borders each and every day. We are players in today’s modern economic schemes. As I argued last year in my paper, “Franciscans as Consumers,” not even those of us who are consecrated religious with a vow of poverty can exempt ourselves from the moral obligations of ethical consumption. Even though Franciscans don’t often think of themselves as consumers and our vow of poverty often keeps us from identifying with the streams and currents of modern economic life, the fact is that we are indeed consumers who spend and spend considerably. In one instance, I tracked the spending of a Franciscan congregation and estimated that individual consumer activity in that particular province (which includes food, housing, transportation, apparel, health care, insurance, etc.) could be as high as $190.69 per day for each individual religious. That would suggest that Franciscan provinces could be generating upwards of tens of millions of dollars in consumer activity every year.

The question we need to ask ourselves is: “how do we begin to see ourselves as “ethical consumers?” For many of us, shopping has become just a routine. It is something we do without much thinking and forethought. It is something akin to driving, something we do with vigilance and care, but automatically. And we want it that way. There is already enough in our life that causes stress. We don’t want agida at the grocery store. We don’t want angst at the department store. We like our shopping easy with short lines, stocked shelves, pleasant cashiers and light music playing in the background.

But, what happens when we turn off the music and inspect the long chains that supply our shirts and sneakers, our tee shirts and blouses and realize that our “low prices, everyday” really come at a high price and that price is the slave labor of men, women and children? What do we do when we realize that we have become unwitting but “complicit participants” in collective wrongdoing that

produces, markets, and distributes slave-made goods, that damages the bodies, limits the potential
and shortens the lives of brothers and sisters across the globe?

And it is no small or insignificant problem we are referencing.

In 2000, McDonald’s was accused of employing Chinese “children as young as 14 (to work) 16
hours a day for 18 cents per hour, well below the minimum wage and the minimum employment
age of 16, to make Snoopy, Winnie the Pooh and Hello Kitty toys found in Happy Meals
worldwide.”\(^{17}\)

In November 2012, a fire at the Tazreen Fashions factory in Bangladesh killed 117 people.
(Bangladesh is now the second largest exporter of garment work after China. Bangladesh serves up
tee shirts to Walmart, Sears, and Target among others.) Walmart’s *Faded Glory* brand shorts were
among the clothing found in the charred remains. A 2013 documentary on the fire shows girls as
young as 14 working on “Old Navy” jeans, a product of Gap.\(^{18}\) Whether Walmart, The Gap or
McDonald’s knew that their suppliers were utilizing child labor under cruel and dangerous
conditions is unknown, but the question remains. Shouldn’t they have known? Shouldn’t a
company as rich and as powerful as Walmart know who is making, producing and transporting
their items? Thousands of garment workers in Bangladesh, making as little as $37 a month, have
been killed recently in factory fires and building collapses. Steven Greenhouse of the *NY Times*
reported last December that Walmart blocked a greater safety push for Bangladeshi factories,
ostensibly because money spent on building safety and a higher minimum wage for workers
making $1.50 a day would cut into Walmart’s profit.\(^{19}\)

Last month the *NY Times* published an extensive investigative report on the inspection and
auditing system that companies like Walmart, Apple, Gap and Nike use to monitor compliance of
its supply chains with safety standards, fire codes, child labor regulations, and fair wages for
workers. It revealed a system that was “fast and severely flawed.” The article’s authors concluded:

> An extensive examination by The New York Times reveals how the inspection
system intended to protect workers and ensure manufacturing quality is riddled
with flaws. The inspections are often so superficial that they omit the most
fundamental workplace safeguards like fire escapes. And even when inspectors are
tough, factory managers find ways to trick them and hide serious violations, like
child labor or locked exit doors. Dangerous conditions cited in the audits
frequently take months to correct, often with little enforcement or follow-through to
guarantee compliance.\(^{20}\)

The NY Times did a follow-up piece. Vikas Bajaj, who writes on business and international
economics and is on the editorial board for the NY Times, discussed his conversations with
manufacturers from Bangladesh who met in September with clothing industry executives and
American and European government officials. Here is what Vikas discovered:

\(^{17}\) Normandy Madden, “View from Hong Kong,” *AdAgeGlobal* (October, 2000), cited in Schwartz, *op.cit.*, p.34.
\(^{18}\) The document is entitled *Fault Lines* and was produced by Laila Al-Arian for AlJazeera TV.
\(^{20}\) Stephanie Clifford and Steven Greenhouse, “Fast and Flawed Inspections of Factories Abroad,” *NYTimes* (September 2, 2013).
A central problem, the first owner told me, is the rapid turnaround big retailers like Walmart demand when they put in orders for tens of thousands of T-shirts or shorts. Since his factory isn’t able to make all the garments in time, he has to send some of the work to smaller producers. “I can’t do it officially,” he said, “but unofficially, I can.”

Unauthorized subcontracting to smaller, uninspected factories is not supposed to happen, but it remains an entrenched practice. It is a primary reason safety guidelines that apply to bigger contractors have not prevented the hundreds of worker deaths in fires and building collapses in facilities like Rana Plaza, which crumbled last April killing 1,129 people.

The factory owners admitted that what they were doing was wrong. But they said Western clothing companies were also culpable because they often award contracts to manufacturers that they know do not have enough machines and employees to do the job.  

Clearly, the issue is difficult and the problems are significant. But, let’s remember the size and scope of Walmart’s enterprise. The six people who own Walmart, members of the Walton family, are reported to have more money among the six of them than the whole bottom 40% of the total American population put together. It’s not as if they don’t have the means to produce socially responsible goods.

I think it is fair to assume that Americans want to know whether the food they are eating and the clothes they are wearing are tainted by child labor and human slavery.

Sadly, human trafficking for exploited labor is an American enterprise that shows up in almost every industry imaginable, from those who pick our tomatoes to those who clean our hotel rooms. The size of the operations is no obstacle to the use of violence, threats, fraud, coercion and intimidation. Last May several of the country’s most prestigious law firms announced a collaborative and _pro bono_ project to prosecute _Signal International_, a leading defense contractor in the marine construction business in the Gulf of Mexico after Hurricane Katrina. The suit alleges multiple human trafficking violations.  

According to the complaints, Signal and its agents defrauded 500 guest workers from India out of tens of thousands of dollars in exorbitant "recruitment fees," falsely promising them assistance in obtaining permanent residence in the United States. Instead, these workers were trafficked to the company’s facilities in Mississippi and Texas, forced to live in overcrowded, unsanitary labor camps that threatened their health and psychological well-being. These workers were also threatened with financial ruin, arrest and serious immigration problems if they did not accede to the company’s strategies. The lawsuits allege that the guest workers paid as much as $25,000 to Signal and its agents for its immigration assistance, a promise of help that Signal had no intention of keeping.

The sad fact is that we live in a world that is surfeited with human slavery. The _Polaris Project_, a leading organization fighting against human trafficking and modern day slavery, estimates that there are more individuals in slavery today than at the height of the trans-Atlantic slave trade of the 17th,

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18th and 19th centuries. They estimate that there are 27 million people in modern day slavery across the world. There are more than 12.3 million adults and children in forced labor around the world. It is estimated that 9.8 million of these are exploited by private agents for labor or commercial sex purposes. Two and a half million (2.5 million) people are forced to work by the State or by various rebel militia groups. Two million children are exploited by the global commercial sex trade. Eight hundred thousand (800,000) people are trafficked across international borders every year.

Perhaps you are wondering, like I have often wondered, how it is that we have been so unaware of these modern forms of slavery. The fact is that we have been lulled into thinking that the Emancipation Proclamation, signed into law 150 years ago, eradicated human slavery from these shores. We have been trained to interpret human slavery as an old problem, a resolved social stigma, the product of a cruel and unenlightened age now surpassed. But, that perception could not be further from the truth. Human slavery touches us every day and taints many of the products we use day in and day out. We simply have to learn how to see human slavery (again) in its cruel new iterations. And we have the means to see it.

A few months ago, I went online to take my “slavery footprint.” It’s a survey of the type and quantity of products one typically uses and, based on the likely origin of these kinds of products (leather from China, computer and gadget parts from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, underwear from the cotton fields of Uzbekistan, car rugs from India and Nepal), one receives a score of the approximate number of slaves it takes to fuel one’s lifestyle.

I was crushed to learn that it now takes about 50 slaves to make my clothes, my shoes, my remote control, my soap and body wash, among other things.

Modern Slavery Interrupted

So, what can we do to see that modern human slavery is interrupted and perhaps, God willing, finally ended on the planet?

The first thing we must do is examine our consciousness with regard to the way we shop and the way we consume goods in this world.

While I was writing a companion piece to this one, one of the friars with whom I live asked me what I was writing about. When I told him “corporate human trafficking,” he stared back with a blank look that let me know that he didn't understand the concept. When I gave him some examples of how American businesses use a long supply chain of exploited labor to make and distribute their products for profit, both here and around the world, he summarized the ethical problem quite directly. He said –

Do you think Americans really care under what conditions the products they buy are made, as long as the quality is good, the goods are readily available and the price is cheap?

For more information, go to - www.polarisproject.org.
See the statistics at www.polarisproject.org.
To take the survey, go to http://blog.madeinafreeworld.com/.
Maybe it is a cynical assessment of the moral state of Americans in the marketplace that suggests that the American shopper does not really care how products get to market and who suffers in the process, as long as goods are plentiful and accessible and the price is right. Personally, I think we do care whether the goods we use and the food we eat are tainted by slavery. But, for things to change we must surmount two huge hurdles. The first is the attitude that suggests that the problem of human trafficking is too big and there isn’t much any one of us can do about it. (Simply put, it is the mantra that believes that “injustice is inevitable.”) The second goes to the very way we have come to define the “good life” and how we have come to reduce the very purpose of our lives to that of being “consumers.” A “consumer identity” is a relatively new but now powerfully embedded identity of the American citizen. What do I mean?

Long before we get to talks like these, we are children immersed in a culture of consumption, such that every aspect of our lives is touched by the “need and greed” mentality of modern aggressive consumerism. Studies show that children as young as four are now seriously and continuously targeted by marketers for their ability to influence their parents’ economic decisions, for their “consumer potential.” Children receive an endless barrage of TV messages about the connection between self-image, identity and product. Experts tell us that this “consumption mentality” is eroding childhood and evidence is mounting that children are suffering the physical, social, emotional and cognitive deficits that arise from consumerism’s assault on childhood.

What is so troubling about consumerism is that it proceeds from a reductionist philosophy of the human person, one that narrowly defines men and women by their economic potential and the satisfaction of their material wants. Consumerism reduces us to what we can earn, spend, and purchase. Consumerism turns our values upside down and inside out. Truth, beauty and goodness are no longer ordered to and measured by the divine. These values are reduced to emotional tools and slogans meant to serve largely commercial interests. In this way, as researchers, Beabout and Echeverría, remind us, wisdom, virtue, community, intimacy, happiness and the common good are inverted and made to serve the economic aspirations and financial greed of the marketplace.

Last year I presented an examination of consciousness for our activity as consumers. I repeat it here. The examination of consciousness would sound something like this:

- Do I care whether the products I buy or use are tainted with human slavery?
- Are the price, convenience and availability of goods more important to me than the possibility that these goods might be the result of child and slave labor?
- How much time and effort am I willing to invest in determining whether a product is the result of trafficked labor?
- How willing am I to make this problem of human trafficking upfront and personal in my life?

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30 Ibid.
- How willing am I to work with others to eradicate slave labor from my home and dinner table?

If the first thing to do is to examine one’s consciousness, the second thing is to start doing something concrete. One of the most insidious deterrents to the achievement of good in the world is the illusion that nothing one does will do any good or have any effect. You’ll remember that earlier I said that unnoticed damage is not nonexistent damage. Similarly, let me say that an imperceptible good is not an inconsequential good. What I mean by this is that not buying a t-shirt made by slave labor in Uzbekistan might seem like a drop in a very large bucket, but it is not inconsequential, especially when it is joined in by others, when it becomes part of concerted communal efforts, shared action, and collective work. We are reminded by the Scriptures that a few loaves and fish can be multiplied by simple folk with faith in the Lord.

But, justice is not the work of loners. If you’re going to do justice work, you’ve got to do three things. You’ve got to inspire; you’ve got to conspire; and you’ve got to perspire. First, you’ve got to keep your heart and the hearts of those around you well-oiled with joy and what the theologian, Mary Jo Leddy, calls “radical gratitude.” If you’re going to do God’s work, you’ve got to inspire others with God’s attitude. And Jesus expressed God’s attitude when he welcomed the outcast, forgave sinners, and lifted up the lowly by promising to make all things new.

Secondly, you’ve got to conspire with others. The only way to eradicate social sin from the earth, as John Paul II taught us, is by the development of solidarity or, as I like to call it, the “conspiracy of love.” Thirdly, you have to perspire. Justice is hard and complex work. You’ve got to join with others in working for new legislation and new work practices.

The kind of legislation we need is that which will target the demand side of human trafficking, going after companies that profit, even unwittingly, from trafficked labor. The supply chains that support human trafficking must be exposed and the mechanisms that promote trafficking must be dismantled. We must send the clear and convincing message that we do not want slave-tainted goods and products in our homes or on our dinner tables.

As those inspired by the Franciscan tradition, we can join in efforts to pass legislation that would put businesses on notice that customers are watching how they are performing in socially responsible ways in this area of human trafficking. Since I reported on California’s Transparency in Supply Chains Act of 2012, no other state has matched its efforts and the US House of Representatives failed to take up a similar piece of legislation. California’s efforts deserve our notice across the country.

I believe that California has given us a model with the passage of its Transparency in Supply Chains Act. Beginning on January 1, 2012, the law requires retail sellers and manufacturers doing business in the state of California to disclose their efforts to eradicate slavery and human trafficking from their direct supply chains.

Specifically, the law requires those companies doing business in California with annual worldwide gross receipts exceeding $100 million, with sales in California in excess of $500,000 to do five things:

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1. They must verify their product supply chains and evaluate the risks of human trafficking and slavery at every step. They have to disclose whether or not this verification was conducted by an outside, third-party, agent or not.

2. They have to conduct audits of all their suppliers to evaluate their suppliers’ compliance with the company’s standards for trafficking and slavery in their supply chains. The disclosure to the state (and on their company website) has to specify whether the audit was done independently and whether it was conducted unannounced. (A good model of this effort, by the way, can be found on the Hewlett-Packard website.)

3. The law requires direct suppliers to certify that the materials incorporated into the product comply with the laws regarding slavery and human trafficking of the country or countries in which they are doing business.

4. The companies must maintain internal accountability standards and procedures for employees or contractors failing to meet company standards regarding slavery and human trafficking.

5. The companies must provide training to company employees and to management, who have direct responsibility for supply chain management, particularly with respect to mitigating the risks within their supply chains of products.

California may lead the way, but it is only a first step and one reserved to a select and restricted class of companies. We need to double our efforts to extend this legislative approach across the country, so that we can be protected from coast to coast against the dangers of slave-tainted goods reaching our churches, convents, homes and dinner tables. It will not be easy. In 2011, Representative Carolyn Maloney (D-NY) introduced the Business Transparency in Trafficking and Slavery Act (HR 2759) into the U.S. House of Representatives. Perhaps to no one’s surprise, after some initial enthusiasm, the legislation (modeled on California’s well-received transparency act) stalled in committee and never made it to the full House for deliberation or a vote.

A recent article in the California Law Review Circuit indicates the way that information-forcing laws and tax incentives can encourage private sector businesses to participate in the fight against human trafficking.32 Businesses are already required to disclose a variety of information to guard against insider trading, fraud and other harmful practices. What is now being asked of companies is that they be socially responsible and provide customers with the information they need to make ethically upstanding decisions in their purchases. Other policies could require companies to disclose their socially responsible efforts in the area of human trafficking so that other businesses can use that information when considering business partnerships. These kinds of information-forcing mechanisms, already found in the California Transparency Act, would enable consumers and businesses alike to be better informed and to put their resources toward companies that want to play a significant role in combating slave labor and human trafficking.33

I would encourage religious and parish groups to profit from the great work of the Interfaith Center for Corporate Responsibility for information on ways to press for greater private sector involvement in the fight against human trafficking at both the company and industry level.34

33 Ibid., p. 93.
ICCR has been able to demonstrate convincingly that social responsibility is, in the end, good for business. A truly Franciscan dialogical approach that brings policymakers, anti-trafficking advocates, and business leaders together could embolden all sides to think more creatively about the critical role that the private sector could play in the fight against human trafficking at every link in the long supply chain of goods that make it to our homes.

On a more personal level, I would recommend new technologies that each of us who owns an I-Phone, I-Pad, or Android can use to monitor our own consumer behavior with regard to human trafficking. The first is an app called “Made in a Free World.” The second is called “Free 2 Work.”

Free2Work is a project supported by The International Labor Rights Forum and created by Not for Sale, a not for profit organization with a goal of eradicating modern forms of human slavery. “Made in a Free World” is a coalition of consumers, businesses, and governments to disrupt the system of slavery today. Both initiatives provide new consumer engagement tools that can help us monitor our own practices that either promote or disrupt human trafficking and exploited labor. Made in a Free World and Free2Work provide consumers with information on how products relate to modern day slavery. Specifically, by using the Free2Work website, you can learn how your favorite brands are working to address forced and child labor.

Both “Made for a Free World” and “Free2Work” provide mobile applications that allow us, as consumers, to scan the barcode of an item we see in a store and instantly gain access to information on the brand’s efforts to prevent child and forced labor. It allows us as consumers to use this information to understand what labor practices were used in the production and distribution of our potential purchase. For the first time, it gives us a real-time way of knowing what labor practices we may be supporting with our purchases. It provides a way to analyze our consumption habits and gives us an opportunity to make decisions as ethical consumers about supply chain workers and their working conditions. It allows us to voice our concerns about how workers are treated during the production and distribution processes, using the developing platforms of today’s social media.

A Franciscan Theology of Stuff

No one in the history of the Church has done more to inspire respect for the dignity of each and every person, no matter what class, race or culture one belongs to, than did Francis of Assisi. And no one has engendered a more positive sensitivity to and respect for all God’s creatures and, indeed, for creation itself, wrapping the entire world (as he did) in a great brotherly and sisterly embrace. What we need today to combat human trafficking born of a misplaced consumerism is a solid Franciscan theology of stuff.

Charles Taylor, the great French Canadian philosopher, reminds us that we now live in a “disenchanted” world, a world shorn of divine reference and sacred moorings.\(^\text{35}\) We look up into the heavens and see the great panoply of planets, the grand swirling of suns and stars that stretch away from us to the order of billions upon billions of light years. And, rather than being awed by what Sr. Ilia Delio recently called the “unbearable wholeness of being”\(^\text{36}\) that pulsates through all

creation in a great dynamism of love, our highly secularized culture leaves us with the “fact” that we are only the masters of the great and impersonal stuff that surrounds us in an empty but evolved construction of the material.

The late Christopher Hitchens was one of our most entertaining, engaging and militant atheists. Not long before his death, he wrote a book that shot to the top of the NY Times Best Sellers’ List. It was entitled *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything.* (I find it quite amusing how even a supposedly non-existent God can skyrocket a man to fame and make him millions of dollars in the process!) In one section of the book, Hitchens remarks how utterly incredible it is to believe that, amid all the stars and planets that stretch literally to infinity, this infinitesimally small rock called Earth might somehow be special, unique, distinct and preferred, amidst all the other zillions of stars, moons, asteroids and planets of the universe, in the mind and heart of an Almighty and All-knowing Divine Being. Hitchens sees in cosmology the absolute implausibility of a God beyond us.

A few weeks ago, NASA’s Cassini spacecraft took a picture of the earth and the moon from the other side of the planet Saturn, some 900 million miles away. The earth in this amazing photo looks like nothing more than a dot in the deep expanse of space, a piece of lighted dust in the cavernous darkness of the cosmos.

Is this not a confirmation of our insignificance and proof positive of the absolute de-centering of the human person in a mechanistic universe, as Sr. Ilia Delio suggests?

Astronomers tell us that the earth is just a speck in a universe that is filled with a 100 billion galaxies (each of which is made up of millions of suns, planets and stars) and our universe, according to cosmologist, Brian Greene, may be just one of multiple universes that could stretch to infinity. The universe is vast. The light from the furthest star that we see takes 13 billion light years to reach us – that’s how incredibly long our universe is. And, here is the fascinating part, astronomers tell us that what characterizes most of the cosmos is silence, incredible and deep silence.

Except for the random plop and sporadic noise of pulsars and quasars, hot gasses and cold dust, the long dark corridors of space have been filled for billions of years with nothing but silence.

And here is where theology and Franciscan insight about God and this cosmic silence come into play. For, at one moment in time, at one instant in history, out of the frozen silence of billions of years, God decided to speak. Listen to how John’s Gospel portrays it:

In the beginning was the Word  
And the Word was with God  
And the Word was God.  
And the Word became flesh. (John 1:1)

38 Ibid., p. 1-16.
Out of the “thick darkness” (1 Kings 8:12) and immense mysterious silence that surrounds God came a Word that created and then spoke to us, first in the book of creation and then in the Book of Scripture. And, then remarkably for the first time, the Word had a face and a voice that revealed the inner life of God, who spoke to us gently about the purposes and will of the divine, because as John’s Gospel tells us, “The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us.” (John 1:1)

My point in all this theologizing is a simple one. Human trafficking has been facilitated by a crass and course disenchantment of the world and everything in it, reducing God’s great creation to nothing more than stuff.

And stuff is simply what we buy and sell, what we collect and store, what we pitch and toss away. Stuff becomes our impersonal and disconnected refuse. It is hoarded, piled up in our closets and hidden away in our basements. It is what gets buried and made invisible in our landfills.

We refuse to acknowledge that the stuff bulging out of our closets, poking out from under our beds, rotting away in our landfills outside of town, was once creation, a divine endowment and a promissory note on future glory. Instead, our consumerist mindset has transformed creation into matter and we have made it into stuff. Enchantment has become waste management. We have done it to nature and now we are doing it to humankind.

In my book, *The Fraternal Economy: A Pastoral Psychology of Franciscan Economics*, I track one of consumerism’s most deleterious effects on the human spirit. I suggest that consumerism transforms our transcendental desire for God and commodifies it into a never-ending and never-satisfied hunger for things. We replace the infinity of God with the infinity of goods, turning the world into an unquiet city of aggressive competition for the scarce resources of an ever-more fragile universe. It is no wonder, then, that humans are bought and sold, kidnapped and trafficked, in a whirlwind of ethical amnesia. In a secular and disenchanted world, humans no longer bear the weight of the divine or possess the franchise of God’s infinite glory. They too have become stuff.

That is why we who bear the Franciscan tradition must re-enchant the world. We must retrace the lines of divine glory that have been obscured by our obsession with the commercial instincts of greed and violence.

St. Francis refused to allow his brothers even to touch coins as long as he lived. There was a holy reason behind the madness of his seraphic obsession. Coins were the means of the day by which men and women and their needs were measured on the scales of human dignity and social worth. St. Francis believed that no coin could adequately calculate the infinite dignity and immeasurable beauty of even the poorest of God’s creatures. Money couldn’t substitute for the wealth of charity and compassion required to meet the needs of the poor and the obligations of the rich.

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Recognizing this, we too must demonstrate a similar holy madness. Human trafficking is a sin against the luxurious abundance and infinite goodness of God demonstrated first and foremost on the face of every human being, and then in every nook and cranny of God’s wondrous creation.

This is the trick and this is the treat of our Franciscan politics, the work of reclaiming all God’s creatures into the superabundant and enchanted divine conspiracy of love, which we have seen and heard in Jesus Christ, who is the Lord, forever and ever. Amen!

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