

Postmodernism and the Consumer Culture – A Christian Response

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this paper is to explore the postmodern phenomenon in the light of the ever-growing consumer culture, whose origins can be traced to the Western free-market mindset. However, due to globalization and its leveling effects across the board, it has now become a feature of most contemporary societies. The thesis advanced is that consumerism is a major catalyst for the changes that are taking place in society, often labeled as “postmodern” without further qualification. In grasping this aspect of the ongoing societal changes, which are also strongly felt and widely embraced within the Romanian context, questions about the preservation of cultural and spiritual values pertaining to a people’s very identity come to the fore. It is proposed that faith communities can provide the counter-culture move that would mitigate such changes.

KEYWORDS: postmodernism, consumerism, cultural change, cultural identity, faith communities

Introduction

There has been much talk, sometimes acrimonious debates, and certainly plenty of speculation, concerning the cultural developments of the 20th century, commonly associated with “postmodernism” (e.g. Morawski 1996, 1-24). As simple bibliographic research would reveal, academics in various fields have tried to describe, utilize, or critique the postmodern phenomenon (Hariharasudan et al. 2022). Yet, it is important to note that postmodernism is not just an idea for the academy to ponder about. It is, in fact, a real cultural phenomenon that has permeated Western culture for decades (Bertens 1995, 51-78, 107-32; Hutcheon 1988, 3-104) and has now become a widespread experience, a cultural trend of global proportions (Măcelaru 2014b, 67-78). No one would deny that within the past several decades, there have been monumental changes in culture, society, and thought. However, there is little consensus concerning the contours and meaning of the so-called “post-modernity.”

In the argument developed below, we enter the debate with a short analysis of the relationship between postmodernism and the consumer culture. I argue that consumerism has been a catalyst in the development of the postmodern and the globalising effect of the marketplace has facilitated cultural changes thereof. In response to these, I argue that the fast-ongoing changes may pose a threat to the very make-up of our societies and, therefore, it is imperative that faith communities, which have historically played a role in preserving a people’s identity and traditions, continue to do so in the current context.

Postmodernism

Attempting to analyze postmodernity is problematic, to say the least. Scholars differ on almost every aspect examined under the label “postmodernism,” something which presents to the student of the phenomenon quite a confusing scenario. One aspect of the problem is the uncertainty regarding the beginning of the postmodern. For some,

postmodernity began as a radical break from modernity (Oden 1992, 27). For others, postmodernity is simply a part of late modernity, defined by decadence and mistrust (Thornhill 2000). There are also scholars who refute the very existence of “postmodernity” as a cultural phenomenon (Hebdige 1988) and others who claim that postmodernity has come and gone (Myerson 2001).

It seems that at the heart of this confusion is the difficulty of defining postmodernism. Robinson (1999, 35-36) attempts a description of postmodernism, noting that it is likely an overly concise label for a group of attitudes that appeared at the end of the 20th century, yet he admits that no one can fully explain what the term stands for. Likewise, trying for some level of clarification, Philip Sampson (1994, 29) inserts in his explanation of postmodernism an ironic self-criticism aimed at deflating attempts of absolute definition, quoting the following from a newspaper article: “The word ‘Postmodernism’ has no meaning. Use it as often as possible.” Sampson, of course, intended this as a critique of those who have been quick to seize the label “postmodern” and to use it to define nearly everything new.

Even though precisely defining postmodernity continues to be problematic, attempts to do just that have not come to a halt (e.g. Hariharasudan et al. 2022). The reason for this insistence is quite evident: although no one seems to present a precise explanation of the term, everyone must recognize the dramatic cultural changes that now affect most of the world. Thus, whatever this change may be called, it is important to recognize and analyze such trends, and to respond to the surrounding culture if we are to avoid “simply to reproduce it” – with both, its goods and its evils (Bartholomew 2000, 2). A helpful approach to the problem posed above is offered by Gene E. Veith. He begins his clarification of postmodernity by making a distinction between the term “postmodern” as it refers to a time period, and “postmodernism” as it refers to a distinct ideology (Veith 1994, 19). While Veith understands the two to be essentially related, his intention is to differentiate the complex philosophical “high” variant of the terminology present in the academia from the “low” variant evident in culture and common life.

While it is common in studies of postmodernity to trace the history of thought and philosophy, showing the progressive development of academic thought with its subsequent influence upon society, Veith’s distinction helps point out that the vice-versa is also true – social changes themselves have affected ideas (Guinness 1994, 328). That is, developments in society have changed the way of life and the thinking of common people, which subsequently spilled over into established thought patterns and education (Rotaru 2021, 87-92). So, it is plausible to attempt a definition of postmodernism by referring to social changes that have occurred, rather than venturing into the deep waters of philosophical arguments. We are aware that this approach will not result in an exhaustive description of postmodernity. However, for the purposes of the present discussion it will suffice.

There are three main characteristics we will use below to describe postmodernity: pluralism, relativism, and fragmentation. Firstly, western society, and lately the emerging democracies in other parts of the world, are becoming increasingly pluralistic, whether in ethnicity and religion, due to migration, politics, styles of life, and sexual orientation. This not only denotes the wide variety of people groups present in society, such as nationalities and religions, but also points to the multiple options available from which to choose. In fact, choice has become the defining word for all areas of life. Being a free person means having the opportunity to make both, the big choices, such as one’s own faith, political stance, or sexual orientation, and the smaller ones, such as the hair stylist, the clothes worn, and the food eaten. As Bartholomew (2000, 8) notes, in postmodernity “freedom is equated with individual choice and private life;” the consequence being that

such an increase in the number of choices one has to make can lead to moral and religious ambiguity (Rotaru 2019, 269-271).

Secondly, relativism also characterizes contemporary culture. This is often described by the idea that in postmodernity “there is no absolute truth.” Ironically, this very statement is itself kept and keenly guarded as an absolute against which to judge other concepts. All claims to truth are understood as valid so long as they don’t claim to be superior to others. In fact, one of the greatest sins in today’s society is to claim that absolute, objective truth exists – this would be looked upon as intolerant and bigoted (Leffel and McCallum 1996, 200). This is generally understood as a reaction against modernity’s failed claim to be able to discover all truth through reason, aided by the scientific method. At its most arrogant, modernity promised to solve the ultimate problems of humanity. Modernity’s failure is thus understood as creating a backlash of frustration, distrust, and despair in society at large.

As consequences of pluralism and relativism, contemporary society also experiences the loss of a coherent cultural framework to guide and inform. In other words, society has lost its “metanarrative.” That is, it has lost the overarching story that gives us orientation in the world, that forms the basis of our worldview (Eaglestone 2000, 51). The consequences are: (1) society has become fragmented into numerous groups and subcultures, each claiming its own values and truths; (2) the individual has become fragmented, unsure of her own identity in a multifarious setting. In this regard, Fidelibus (1996, 54) explains: “To be a part of contemporary society is to be part of a struggle for self-identity. To take a stand on any issue...seems arbitrary in the light of so many choices.” He then goes on to explain that the uncertainty of the self in postmodernity easily yields the individual to lose his self-identity to prevalent cultural forces, which results in an “exchange [of] consistent self-identity for a shifting cultural identity” (Fidelibus 1996, 154). Here is but another ironic, even self-contradictory, facet of postmodernity: while pluralism and tolerant acceptance of diversity seem to be essential values, the contemporary society inherently creates a dissonant environment that “fragments the individual’s personal identity and promotes isolation” (Fidelibus 1996, 146). The result is individuals who are increasingly vulnerable to being swept away by cultural trends and powers of manipulation, an aspect that decidedly discourages difference and plurality – at least on some levels.

Consumerism

One of those cultural forces that endeavor to manipulate the individual into forming his already unstable identity into an ever-changing cultural image is consumerism. Consumerism is, in short, life “mediated through markets”, through the buying and selling of products (Wenham 2000, 119). Consumerism essentially consists of two elements: a system and mentality. As a system, consumerism is led by the instrument of marketing and advertisement, which seeks to convince the public of the necessity of buying any number of various products. Ron Sider notes that the purpose of the costly advertising industry is not to simply inform, but to create desire (Sider 1990, 21). In agreement with marketing, the public gives time and money to acquire these “necessary” products. The extent to which the public accepts these products as necessary and normative to ordinary life and begins to define their lives by purchasing these necessities is the extent to which they accept the consumer mentality. About advertisements, Storkey (2000, 106) observes: “[...]viewed] every 15 minutes of people’s lives, and never subjected to critical scrutiny, they add up to near terminal indoctrination.” The public thus keeps a watching eye upon the newest “necessities” introduced by the marketing industry, and willingly discards that which becomes considered old and obsolete to buy the new. Wenham points out how the

self in the consumer society defines itself through this process, attempting “self-creation through the accessibility of things” (Wenham 2000, 119). Ultimately, the public recognizes the process of discarding and buying products as a source of meaning and personal fulfillment, becoming the main value and goal of existence.

Wenham further explains that while the consumer culture seems to offer greater freedom and individual choice, in reality it is intentionally manipulative and based upon “subtle forms of *unfreedom*” (Wenham 2000, 129). While its claim is to satisfy the customer, consumerism actually aims to keep the public ceaselessly dissatisfied. As such, business preys upon the loss of identity in postmodernity, profiting by leading the public to believe that identity is best constructed through material objects (Wenham 2000, 130). Subsequently, one could conclude that in the consumer culture, those who do not mold their lives around the acquisition of the “necessary” products will be marginalized. That is, of course, one of the major reasons why people pursue it so heartily.

Postmodernity and Consumerism

We mentioned above three characteristics of postmodernity: pluralism, relativism, and fragmentation. It is no coincidence that these same three characteristics are visible in the consumer phenomenon. Storkey rightly notes that postmodernity is most visible in the habit of ceaseless material consumption. He writes:

Postmodernism is consumption. The deconstruction and fragmentation which is often identified with changes in approaches to text and philosophy is actually buying, advertisements, TV culture, in-your-face entertainment, shopping, pressure, thing-filled living – in a word, consumption (Storkey 2000, 115).

While equating postmodernism with consumerism may be exaggerating the issue, Storkey’s point about the interrelation of consumerism and postmodernity is a valid one. Consumerism presents the public with a wide variety of options from which to purchase. The more choices, the better! Truly, consumerism is driven by the plurality of choices pervading the marketplace. Harold Netland (1994, 91) connects the plurality of the marketplace with the plurality of philosophies, faiths, and worldviews, showing that cultural consumerization fuels a pluralistic mindset. As previously noted, pluralism has a tendency to relativize claims to truth. David Wells describes this phenomenon as it relates to the consumer mindset:

The world is now filled with so many competing interests, so many rival values, so many gods, religions, and worldviews, so much activity, so many responsibilities, and so many choices that the older symphony of meaning has given way to the random tumult of the marketplace, to a perpetual assault on all of the senses (Wells 1994, 14).

The plurality of choices in the marketplace is easily transmuted to other areas of life. The consumer mindset turns all life into commodities to be consumed, bought, and discarded. All of life is thus “viewed through the prism of maximizing utilities” (Elshtain 1998, 8). The consumer mindset is not concerned with what is true and good, but with what works for a given individual at a given time. As such, the relativizing effect of market capitalism leads to a place where “we may have everything, but none of it means anything anymore” (Wells 1994, 14).

When everything is viewed as a consumer item, all of life turns into shallow preferences and trends. This is also true in man’s search for spiritual meaning and religious identity. As Sampson puts it, in postmodernity people find meaning through consumption, and solidarity in “communities of product image, style, and design”

(Sampson 1994, 31). That is, consumer groups that share preferences in image, fashion, music, and lifestyle are usurping the role of the family as a socializing agent. Society, therefore, fragments into consumer sections, with little to no transcendent value to inform life except consumer fads and personal preferences (Sampson 1994, 42). The result is that, as with postmodernity, the individual in the consumer society, who has taken on the consumer mentality and approach to life, has no stable identity. Her identity rather oscillates according to the trends of the surrounding society and popular culture. She has no real self and thus seeks to create and recreate herself through consumption of products and the building of a certain self-image. As Elaine Storkey comments, “we both create and market ourselves; our goods and products are personalized, pointing back not just to the owner but to the creator of cultural objects” (1994, 145-46). In other words, the postmodern self finds its identity through consumption, and even understands itself as an item to be consumed.

From the brief discussion above, it can be concluded that consumerism shares many affinities with postmodernity. Still, in what way does consumerism operate within postmodernity? Scholars often present consumerism as a by-product of postmodernism (e.g. Clarke 2003), paying less attention to the fact that consumerism is itself a catalyst to societal change. Seen rightly, however, consumerism constitutes a major cause for the changes associated with postmodernity. The fact that changes in economic practices yield drastic changes in other areas of life has been well documented by sociologists like Max Weber and R.H. Tawney. Arguing along similar lines, George Ritzer (2019) proposes that the business practices of the fast-food industry, exemplified by McDonald’s, have infiltrated nearly all aspects of our society. Ritzer claims that there are four dimensions of this process he calls McDonaldization: effectiveness, measurability, predictability, and control. These are, according to Ritzer, the central values of society around which we form our lives and decisions.

Adding to these, Craig M. Gay (1998) posits that the fundamental assumption lying beneath the structures of society is the irrelevance of God. His thesis is that most people live their lives as if God does not exist. The fact that he may actually exist, although philosophically intriguing, is inconsequential because God has become “largely irrelevant to the real business of life” (Gay 1998, 2). This overwhelmingly pervasive “practical atheism” is made possible by the process of secularization, which has been taking place in Western societies for quite some time, and is increasingly evident in the new democracies of Eastern Europe as well (Măcelaru 2021b, 80-84; Măcelaru 2020b, 375-86; Măcelaru 2016, 35-54). One important facet of secularization is “rationalization,” that is, “the process in which social actions have come...to depend upon purely calculable and controllable criteria” and less upon religion and/or tradition (Gay 1998, 21).

Economic forces play a key role in the rationalization and secularization of life. Gay (1998, 132) asserts that “market economy is one of the most significant carriers of secularity and practical atheism in contemporary society and culture.” Because rationalization rejects all but the calculable and tangible, the only viable forms of action in the capitalistic framework are those that can be proven to “contribute to planned outcomes” (Gay 1998, 136). Efficiency, measurability, and control become the values that determine decisions, whether in economy, politics, private life, or any other area of society. Reality becomes reduced to a controllable and profitable system. And since divinity is not an item to be measured and calculated, and from a human perspective appears immensely ineffective, rationalization eliminates belief in God as an irrational and inefficient decision.

The consumerization of society that has taken place during the later part of the 20th century has essentially sped up the process of rationalization. As such, it has also played a major role in secularization, and hence in the “move” to the postmodern condition. The

result of the frenzied pursuit of economic growth is that society is increasingly emptied of content that is not consumable, or a society that consumes not only the “products of capitalism but just about everything else” (Scotland 2000, 135). Consumer choice is, therefore, at the same time a central aspect and a fundamental value of contemporary “postmodern” society. As stated by Graham Gray (2000, 154),

Postmodernity is characterized by the elevation of consumer choice to the integrating value of society; by an electronically globalized society that takes everything everywhere – radically increasing the apparent range of consumer choice – and by a profound distrust in rationalism and suspicion of large scale frameworks of understanding.

These elements of consumerism – the plurality of choices, secularization, and the resulting relativity which the consumer culture produces – clearly identify consumerism as a driving power in postmodernity. Not only is consumerism at home here, but it has created exemplary conditions for the existence and continuation of the postmodern mentality.

A Christian Response

Even though consumerism should not be simply equated with postmodernity as a cultural phenomenon, recognizing its presence as a major force in postmodernity can be enormously helpful to faith communities that have a responsibility for the preservation of cultural and spiritual values and traditions; the postmodern world seems to gradually squander (Măcelaru 2020a, 87-96; Măcelaru 2014a, 169-74; Măcelaru 2009, 123-47). While one can argue that postmodernity (and postmodernism) are just buzz-words, consumerism is a concrete, visible reality in everyday life. As such, it can be addressed in fruitful ways. Undoubtedly, tangible action may be difficult. Since consumerism saturates society so thoroughly, it may seem impossible to oppose its influence, to provide alternative ways of living. However, together with Gray, I argue that it is not sufficient for faith communities to simply “decry consumerism;” rather they are to work from within for the preservation of values, contextualizing their approach while avoiding syncretism (Gray 2000, 156). In the remainder of this paper, a few concrete ways will be suggested for the faith communities to address the challenges of postmodernity as exhibited in consumerism (Oprean 2009, 99-122).

Although the Church should not completely withdraw from society, it is vital that believers and believing communities are, in some ways, distinct from society at large. The Church, says David Wells, “carries within itself a discernibly different view of life from what passes as normal and normative in society” (Wells 1994, 41). The Church is to be a witness by its very life and action before a watching world (Rotaru 2012, 5). That means “not being conformed” to the patterns of this world, as the Apostle Paul put it, but by being “transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom. 12:2). This calls for decisive non-conformity on basic aspects of the consumer lifestyle.

Primarily, what this means is to renounce the fundamental values of consumerism and find concrete ways in which to purposely pursue alternative, community-building and life-affirming values. Within the Christian worldview, the disciples of Christ are not to find their value in material possessions, but in the grace and mercy of God in Jesus Christ exhibited in the Kingdom of God (Matt. 6:19-20). Personal freedom, as exhibited by Jesus Christ, is not reduced to individual choice and private fulfillment. Rather, it is found in community, in meaningful relationships, as one freely gives her life for the other (Gal. 5.13-14). Furthermore, we are not to live by the urge of our every desire but are to be self-controlled. A person guided by his compulsions is not free, as he supposes, but is

hostage to uncontrollable desires within and without. Such an individual is reduced to “a shadow of a genuine person” (Merton 1961, 86). Believers and faith communities therefore must start by closely examining their own lives to identify the influence of these ideas in their habits, attitudes, and economic practices; only then a better way can be embraced.

Not only is the Church to be a distinct community that refuses to be conformed to the consumer mindset of the larger culture. She is also to be a refuge for those who have been made homeless and fragmented by the prevalent consumerist forces. Secularization has impersonalized society (Rotaru 2006, 251-266), thus isolating the individual from his relation to others. The processes discussed in this paper have taken away the basic aspect of community, making immigrants of most people. The self becomes the only refuge for the individual; identity is found only in the changing images of postmodern culture.

The task of the Church is to oppose the tendency to treat people as objects to be manipulated. Rather, we can give ourselves to others, to love and trust them. That is, to live in relatedness with the other, not seeing our neighbor as something “to be consumed” but as a being created in God’s image, having inherent dignity and value (Măcelaru 2021a, 586-608).

Conclusion

The complex nature of postmodernity reflects the complex nature of life in contemporary culture. Analyzing and interpreting culture is never a simple task, as there is always the risk of generalization or oversimplification. Yet, it seems that now more than ever, faith communities should understand the culture within which they exist and develop appropriate responses to the challenges it presents.

We have argued that the phenomenon of consumerism offers a concrete framework through which to understand life in postmodernity and a definite opening to begin facing the multifaceted problems of our contemporary culture. This is so not only because consumerism is a part of the postmodern culture but also because it helped to create postmodernity itself. To confront the debilitating aspects of postmodernity and consumerism, the Church is summoned to live authentically as a distinct community that pursues life-affirming and community-building modes of existence.

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