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Christianity and Consumer Culture

(doi: 10.2383/79479)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 3, settembre-dicembre 2014

Ente di afferenza:

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Christianity and Consumer Culture

by Adam Arvidsson

doi: 10.2383/79479

Introduction

In 2005, the advertising posters for Western brands like Gap, Nike, and Levis that adorned the streets of Jeddah, Saudi-Arabia were mutilated. The smiling, happy young people who illustrated these products in use would have had a foot cut off or an eye gorged out. This mutilation of advertising images was not the work of young vandals or ad-busting activists, but part of a coordinated effort of local religious authorities to fight idolatry images, an effort that also targeted a substantial part of the city's non-Muslim historical heritage [Howden 2005]. To local Wahhabi religious leaders, advertising posters appeared as propaganda for *another religion*. They saw these posters not simply as enticements to buy shoes or sweaters, but as Christian idolatry effigies that risked diverting the mind of the believer away from the righteous path of Islam.

At first sight, this might seem absurd, a symptom of the fundamentalism of Saudi religiosity and its excessive preoccupation with images.¹ But, on closer reflection the association between Christianity and consumer culture might not be that far-fetched. This association is certainly embraced among some Christian fundamen-

¹ We should remember though that Christianity has also had its iconoclastic phases, and has gone through periods of fairly severe opposition to advertising and consumer culture in general. The Italian Catholic Church, for example, tried to ban lipstick in the 1930s [Falasca-Zamponi 1997].

talists, like the hugely successful Neo-Pentecostal prosperity gospel movements that presently give hope to the world's poor [Comaroff and Comaroff 2000].

These Neo-Pentecostal groups quite simply take consumer goods as the direct, material expression of the Grace of God and, in a curious inversion of the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, they argue that God wants his subjects to prosper and be wealthy. In this sense, faith is rewarded with worldly success as manifested through rich endowments of the goods of this world. If your faith is strong enough, you'll earn God's love, and he'll make you rich. To quote from the superstar preacher Joel Osteen, leader of the hugely successful Huston-based Lakewood Church: "[...] through faith I am able to get the best parking spot in a crowded parking lot, a first class seat on a crowded airplane with no boarding pass and a priority seating in a restaurant" [Alnor 2003].

That this identification of consumer culture and Christianity is common to both Muslim and Christian extremists might suggest that it might be worth taking it seriously. Can we conceive of consumer culture as an expression, a secular expression perhaps, of Christianity, directly visible to those, like the Saudi Wahhabis, that live outside of the now overall secularized edifice of Christianity? This suggestion is by no means alien to sociologists and cultural theorists who – beginning with Walter Benjamin – have suggested that the mechanically reproduced seductions of modern consumer culture constitute a secularization of an earlier religious aura, or that the kind of consumerist mentality that developed in Western Europe in the late Eighteenth century has its roots in a particular kind of Romantic ethic, deeply infused by the values of European post-reformation Christianity [Campbell 1987].

Indeed, in recent years it has become commonplace to speak of consumer culture as a kind of secularized religion. Shopping malls, department stores, and other "cathedrals of consumption" [Ritzer 1999] propagate a consumerist re-enchantment of the world whereby the values, rites and ecstasies of mass consumption can fill the void opened up by what Italian Catholic sociologists used to call the "eclipse of the sacred in industrial society" [Acquaviva (1961) 1979]. At the same time, consumer research discusses consumption as part of an experience with the sacred [Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989], and speaks of brands like Apple or Star Trek as endowed with religious or even cult-like qualities [Belk and Thurnat 2005; Muniz and Schau 2005; Kozinets 2001].

Departing from a Durkheimian definition of religion it is not difficult to think about consumer culture in this way: consumer goods provide the rituals that supply social cohesion; brands are like totems or fetishes that derive their affective value from the faith invested in them on the part of a community of "believers." More importantly, consumer goods and consumer culture supply its followers with a par-

ticular cosmology, which explains the workings of the world and their place in it, as well as with the rudiments of an ethical orientation.

While the idea of modern consumer culture as secularized religion is nothing new, we need to turn to its cosmology to make a somewhat more controversial argument about its distinctively Christian roots.

The Christian Origins

Consumer culture offers a powerful cosmology, maybe the only cosmology that is able to act as a common referent all across the globe. Global media culture contains a fairly standardized pack of images and narratives with a roughly coherent set of taken-for-granted assumptions: it proposes a modestly elaborated (or, which is the same thing, sketchy) world-view, which manages to explain how the social world works and why people's lives are in a certain way. What then is its message? The central proposal of the religion of consumption is the belief in the transformative potential of consumer goods. This proposition is mainly channeled through the institution of the brand.

A brand today is no longer a simple "maker's mark" or a sign of recognition that permits consumers to differentiate between functionally equivalent, mass-produced commodities. Rather, a brand stands for a set of intangible extras that are added on to the material commodity (indeed, marketers often distinguish between branded goods and unbranded "commodities" that do not offer these extras). The brand stands for a series of possibilities to experience one-self and one's actions differently. With a branded object, a Rolex watch, a Macintosh computer or a piece of Fair Trade chocolate, one's actions can *feel* different, more elegant, smarter, more ethical. The brand gives a sort of grace to ordinary actions: it puts them in a different light.

It is worth noting that the grace of the brand is different from that of *Mana*, the spiritual principle guiding the gift economies analyzed by Marcel Mauss. *Mana* was historically oriented: an object embodied the *Mana* of its previous owner or user. *Mana* provided a religious understanding of a relatively stable society [Appadurai 1986]. The brand, instead, is directed towards the future: it is about what you can become, what you could feel and experience. In this sense, brands are a spiritual mechanism adapted to a dynamic and unstable society. In brands we worship the productive potential of social life as it has been set free from the constraints of traditional culture and is now channeled through consumer capitalism. The first principle of the religion of consumption is then this: immanent transformation. Things can and should become different, here and now.

However, this difference is never revolutionary or upturning. It is a matter of small, mundane transformations. Mostly it unfolds at the level of feeling and affect. Things can feel different, you can experience your actions or relate to people in another way. This is true even when brands deal with issues that are in some way political. Organic groceries can make you feel engaged in the environment, ethical goods enable you to experience an ethical engagement and rebellious pop music makes you experience the intensity of revolt. But it is not about being different, which would entail an actual transformation of the order of things. The religion of consumption is a religion of private life.

Consumer culture, and particularly brands, its central institution, are often analyzed in terms of commodity fetishism. When Marx adopted that term in his analysis of the commodity in *Capital*, he (like Freud after him) was inspired by recent anthropological “discoveries” of West African fetishistic religions [Pietz 1987]. I would argue, however, that fetishism, or even commodity fetishism has distinctly Christian precedents as well.

One of the closest parallels to the contemporary brand can be found in the early Christian trade in relics. Like in the case of brands, relics were fairly ordinary objects (pieces of wood or bone, mostly) that by virtue of the faith invested in them carried an immaterial extra that was beyond measure, but nevertheless tradable [Geary 1986, 189]. Relics were condensed, tradable forms of social effervescence. And, as in the case of the brand, this affective extra made a tangible difference to the object. As Gregory of Tours claimed in his account of the relic-making capacities of St. Peter’s tomb in Rome:

[...] should [the pilgrim] wish to bring back a relic from the tomb, he carefully weighs a piece of cloth which he then hangs inside the tomb. Then he prays confidently and, if his faith is sufficient, the cloth, once removed from the tomb, will be found to be so full of divine grace that it will be much heavier than before. Then he will know that his prayers have been granted. [Green 2000, 31]

Similarly, the ease with which relics could be manufactured meant that the cult of relics contained a dynamism and potential for fragmentation comparable to contemporary consumer culture. It was often necessary for bishops or other authorities to appropriate particular relics that had acquired a popular following or, as in the many waves of iconoclasm in the early Middle Ages, suppress the relics trade entirely, lest a dangerous fragmentation of the faith occurred.

While the potential for fragmentation is present in all religions, that potential has arguably been higher in Christianity than in other monotheistic religions, like Judaism and Islam. The history of Christianity has been particularly marked by the

tension between the Church with its dogma and hierarchy on the one hand, and a more dynamic Christian movement on the other, directed primarily at the mundane and everyday. In part, the dynamic and mundane nature of the Christian movement is inscribed in Christ's very message. First, Christ never lays down the law. On the contrary, he encourages his followers to create a better world through brotherly love. His is an imperative to creativity and innovation, rather than, as in Islam, to acceptance and submission. Second, Christ clearly separates religious practice from the big world of political concerns (at least in the here and now). The world of Cesar and the world of God are distinct and the latter primarily concerns the de-politicized realm of private life, of love, friendship, interpersonal conduct, personal morals etc. Christianity thus introduces the possibility of religion as something private and apolitical. Unlike Jaweh, the Christian God is remarkably apolitical. As Debray stresses:

[i]t was Christianity that invented religion as something apart – a separation that had no meaning for a Greek (who did not even know the word, since he did not separate the human and the divine, matters civic and those pertaining to worship) nor for a Jew, because in Judaism, nation and religion are one. In Jerusalem, Athens and Rome, civic ritual was religious, and religious ritual civic. [Debray (2001) 2004, 139]

But this privatist, mundane nature of Christianity also has to do with the very technological infrastructure of the faith. Christianity is built around a text, not a place (like Jerusalem or Mecca). And Christian practice (at least early Christian practice, which then returns in the Protestant Reformation) is built on the private reading and interpretation of texts. Contrary to the Torah, which is read only by particular people in particular places or circumstances, or the Koran, which is supposed to be memorized and recited, the Christian gospel is read, discussed and interpreted in the homes of the faithful. Christians interact with the text, they try to see what it means for them, they construct interpretations. They do not simply recite it. As if to underline this, early Christianity relied on the cheap and mundane medium of the codex, and not the expensive official scroll. In Rome, codices, small collections of bound wax-tablets were used as everyday notebooks where (mostly women) would take down shopping and laundry lists and such, while scrolls were used for official documents. The Christian God,

[a] God poor in spirit speaks to the poor in money, and makes contact through the most economical means. He has the mind of a child, and makes use of a toy. He is close to the gynaeca, and something of a gynophile. He takes to the notebooks which the women of Rome used to note down in shorthand, with stylus of bone or ivory, in minuscule characters, errands to be run and the week's expenses. Pagan Rome made use of scrolls for public life, and for more intimate occasions there were these little wax tablets, easily erasable (like our "magic slates"), with protruding edges, no

bigger than a hand. No grandiose dialectic? Not to worry – we'll use the servant's staircase. Yahweh was a He addressing an us. His successor (and rival) will be an I addressing a me. [Debray (2001) 2004, 127-128]

We can thus find a privatist and mundane direction, a creative dedication to the intimate matters of the “me,” similar to that of contemporary consumerism, already as a defining element of early Christianity.

Protestantism and Consumerism

This privatist interpretative element of Christian religious practice returns with the Protestant reformation. As books become more readily available and literacy increases, Christianity anew becomes a reading movement. At the same time, Protestantism continues the de-linking of religion from public life. Although there are of course exceptions (religiously motivated political movements, like Christian Socialism, or political appropriations of religious dogma), Protestantism, as Weber clearly saw, is mainly about the private sphere: it is about individual self-betterment, private morals and commercial or professional success. Indeed, one could suggest that it was the Protestant de-linking of religion from public life that opened up for new forms of sacralization of politics, centered first on the King and then on the nation or party. As Weber has showed, Protestantism took the Christian imperative to “build a better world” to new heights by emphasizing the duty to serve God through inner-worldly engagement. It was by building a better private world, here and now, that one could serve Christ.

This orientation towards “creative privatism” was perhaps most advanced in American Protestantism. This was particularly expressed in the hugely successful Pentecostal movement. Originating in the 1830s with the Scottish theologian John Irving, but really picking up speed with the North American Pentecostal revival originating in the Bible School in Topeka, Kansas in 1901, Pentecostalism emphasizes the transformative capacities of faith. Drawing on the moment when the Apostles are possessed by the holy ghost and start speaking in tongues (Acts, 2), the Pentecostalists argue that each believer (and not only, as for the Catholics, saints) can become a vessel for the holy spirit and exercise its transformative magic in this world. In the U.S., this emphasis on the magical potential of faith has received an ever more inner-worldly direction, culminating in the more recent New Thought or Positive Confession movements that directly argue for the divine nature of the believer. The core belief in positive confession (as in most other prosperity cults) is that pronounced desires actually become true, that there is a transformative power inherent to language as such.

This doctrine of the inner-worldly transformative potential of faith stands behind the more extreme expressions of contemporary fundamentalist Christianity. But it has also had an impact on the evolution of consumer culture. Not only were many of the early entrepreneurs who originated contemporary consumer culture – like Asa Candler, the man who commercialized Coca Cola – deeply religious men who saw their products as tools for the construction of a new and better world, but a secular version of this originally Protestant branch of creative privatism (mostly in its more moderate Methodist version) stood behind the general move to propagate mass consumerism in the 1920s and 1930s [Marchand 1985].

A similar secular version of the Protestant impetus to privatist inner-worldly transformation was also embraced by the managerial pioneers driving the post-war emergence of the institution of the brand. Ernst Dichter, influential consumer researcher and marketing guru in the 1960s, liked to refer to himself as “a Messiah,” and saw consumer goods as a medium for the expression of the “inner divine nature” of “Man:” *Gott lebt in uns. Er ist nicht nur die projection eines Vatergestalt* (God lives in us. He is not just the projection of a father figure). A similar emphasis of the possibilities to transform private life through hedonistic “self expansion” were also implicit in the Maslovian philosophy of “post-materialism” that stood behind most of the marketing theory in the 1960s and 1970s.

Of course with the development of modern brands the memory of the religious origins of these dispositions got lost. But the dispositions themselves remained. With the reorientation of brands and marketing that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s, the promise of the commodity changed. It was no longer about social acceptance, about acquiring the “citizenship goods” that would allow others to consider you an accomplished member of society. Instead, it was about self-realization. A brand or a branded product could bring forth the potential of becoming the self that lies within you. While this promise was often clad in New Age terms – as Boltanski and Chiapello [(1999) 2005] have documented, New Age movement were hugely influential on 1970s managerial thought – its basic promise was itself part of a secularized ethos of North American charismatic Christianity. Starting as a religious incorporation of the urge to social mobility and material change that marked the last decades of the 1890s, American charismatic Christianity translated the original Christian promise of intimate, mundane self-transformation through faith into a desire for social achievement and the accumulation of material wealth. This ideal fit the reality of recently arrived immigrants embarking on the American Dream. And as Max Weber has described, Protestantism became a central ideology among the businessmen who shaped the evolution of American capitalism, including the institutions of mass consumerism.

In the 1960s and 1970s the charismatic promise of self-transformation through faith went through a second transformation as it encountered New Age notions of the power of thought and desires, and emerged as a secularized ethic of self-help and positive thinking. In marketing, this took the form of proposing consumer goods as vehicles for the realization through faith of that true self that supposedly lay dormant inside each human subject, however repressed by the conformist rigors of mass society.

In the recent era of global brands, the promise of transformation through faith has been secularized to the point of becoming fetishistic. Just like God was absent to the medieval believer, an abstract entity hidden behind incomprehensible language and complicated rites, an entity with which one communicated through the mediation of the fetish of the relic, so the self is absent or at least abstract to the contemporary consumer. It is something that emerges only as it is acted upon, through practices of bodily or mental transformation, or through the transformation through faith that brands make possible. It is wearing your Prada bag that you feel yourself through the perceptible effects that the brand has on you, through the ways in which it alters the gazes of the people seeing you, through the urge that it creates in you to briefly catch your look in the mirror.

While Christianity is not the historical cause of modern consumer culture, just like Protestantism was not the *cause* of modern capitalism, it is perhaps not an impossible hypothesis that Christianity, and in particular American charismatic Protestantism shaped its message once modern mass consumerism came about.

The characters that Christianity imprinted on modern consumer culture were two. First, the promise of self-transformation through faith: modern consumerism is not about hedonism, not about satisfying undisciplined appetites and desires; it is about achieving a transformation of self-hood, about becoming a better person, a more likeable person, a socially accepted person, or, more recently, one's own self. And this transformation occurs through faith, for example through the irrational faith that mass-produced objects, which are used by millions of others, can aid in expressing one's individuality. Second, the promise of modern consumerism is that of small scale, private transformation. Consumer goods will make you a little bit different, they will impart a small, hardly perceptible change on some very basic and mundane aspect of your private life – you will feel better when looking into the mirror or people will look at you differently. This is not about revolutionary transformation, it is about the kind of transformation of the private intimate self that Christianity has made its main promise from the outset. And it was precisely this privatist dimension of modern consumer culture that most upset the proponents of alternative consumerist “messages” in the 1920s and 1930s. To Italian Fascist intellectuals, and to the mem-

bers of the Italian advertising profession that sympathized with the Fascist project, American style consumerism was considered as privatist, individualizing, atomistic, and concentrated on the ephemera of everyday life. What was needed was a Fascist consumer culture where mundane everyday objects could remind consumers of the *grandeur* of the reborn nation and their place in it [Arvidsson 2003]. The emphasis on private transformation and intimate transformation won out. Maybe because this apolitical dimension was more compatible with a liberal democratic post-War order, maybe because it found support in the Christian imprint. In any case, the Christian origins of consumer culture might be a research project worth pursuing, in the manner of Giorgio Agamben's [(2007) 2011] recent work, which locates the origins of the categories of modern political theory in debates among the early Church Fathers.

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Christianity and Consumer Culture

Abstract: This paper experiments with the hypothesis of Christian origins of contemporary consumer culture. While many observers have pointed at the religious nature of consumer culture, I suggest that contemporary consumer culture might have a distinctly Christian genealogy. This genealogy starts with the promise of intimate and personal self-transformation inherent in the Christian message, and passes through the protestant orientation towards inner-worldly transformation on the part of early pioneers of the Nineteenth century U.S. consumer culture. The whole-hearted embrace of consumerist desires on the part of contemporary expressions of charismatic Christianity, like Prosperity Gospel, are discussed as a case in point. The paper concludes that a deeper investigation of the Christian genealogy of contemporary consumer culture might be an interesting research project.

Keywords: Consumer Culture; Brands; Protestantism; Prosperity Gospel.

Adam Arvidsson teaches sociology at the University of Milan. He is author of *Brands. Meaning and Value in Media Culture* [Routledge 2006] and *The Ethical Economy: Rebuilding Value after the Crisis* [Columbia University Press 2013 – with Nicolai Peitersen].