Social Ethics in a World of Consumption

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this paper is to explore the implications of the postmodern consumerist society from the perspective of Christian ethical teaching. The argument shows that the consumerist culture is built on a worldview that originated in the Enlightenment and has acquired a foothold within Eastern Europe and the church. The paper highlights the challenges consumerism poses for living a truly ethical life within the community and proposes that the church, in an act of self-examination, can become a catalyst for change. It can be a voice and an example of alternative living for society at large.

KEYWORDS: Consumerism, social ethics, cultural identity, Christian ethics, Christian service

Introduction

We live in a world today that does not resemble anything that has gone before. It is a world of deep contrasts and fast changes. It is a world where "we may have everything, but none of it means anything anymore (Wells 1994, 14). It is a world that, in the past thirty years, has registered significant transformations in regard to societal perspectives on human existence. Within Eastern Europe, this is a world that has registered political upheavals, violence, moral decadence, and economic hardships, while at the same time, the opportunities for advancement and a better life have never been as high in this region as they are today (Măcelaru 2021, 80-84; Măcelaru 2020, 375-86).

The changes on the social, political, and economic planes are accompanied by a deeper change in philosophical and ethical perspectives. Some have given up the search for anything that could be meaningful outside of themselves and now live life simply according to the principle of: "to know as little as we need and care as little as we can" (Guiness 1999, 302). Others have traded in the concern for aesthetic pleasure in order to gain knowledge. Yet, in their quest for knowledge, they seem to have misplaced its value. Thus, a vacuum was created whereby human understanding and identity used to fill the conscience. The result – a culture in which one can boast with excitement that "since there is no absolute value, I consider all values to be equally unimportant" (Bosch 1995, 22).

Did such a vapid worldview emerge on its own accord? Or is there something behind such manner of thinking that has slowly captured our imagination and implanted the noted emptiness in the minds and hearts of the average person? The answer to these questions would seem to revolve around the issues of meaning and personal identity – the place from whence people derive a sense of purpose, even if living in a culture where the "older symphony of meaning has given way to the random tumult of the marketplace" (Wells 1994, 14). The answer is not so simple. By simply turning on the television or visiting the nearest mall or shopping center one can gather a lifetime of information. The more affluent our societies turn, the more time, energy and resources are spent on the acquisition of things that presumably will make life easier, more productive, or even happier. We cannot but recognize that, like our Western brethren, within the last decades we have been caught up in a whirlwind of "stuff." Consequently, society has come to associate its value with "the things and funds we control" (Moritz 2000, 79). That is, "the core values of the culture derive from consumption rather than the other way around" (Bartholomew 2000, 6). This way of life has been known by the name "consumerism" because it is characterized by an unceasing cycle of consumption.

This article examines this phenomenon from an ethical perspective, asking what the response communities of faith, traditionally tasked with upholding the moral standards of a society, ought to give to the "new world" within which we live. What is the role such communities have, ethically speaking, in a society in which covetousness has become rampant?

The Roots of the Problem – Enlightenment

Before going any further, it is important to pause and ask where and when the problem stated started. We can trace the beginnings of the contemporary worldview, identified by most as "postmodernism" (Bertens 1995, 51-78, 107-32; cf. Hariharasudan et al. 2022, 148-58), back to the Enlightenment (Hutcheon 1988, 3-104). Bosch (1995, 5) has suggested that this "malaise" has "evolved in the course of time" out of the mindset of the Enlightenment, which upheld as the highest value the human capacity to reason. So high was this value elevated over all other values that it became *the ideology* behind all academic pursuits, closing the door upon all considerations that were not purely "scientific." The damage however did not originate in the human desire for knowledge, but rather in the way humans begun pursuing knowledge. Within scientific pursuit, the question of purpose was drowned amid soaring waves in the sea of cause and effect. In other words, values were gradually replaced by "the assumption that all true knowledge was factual, value-free, and neutral" (Bosch 1995, 5). Values "were excused" from the "true" academic sciences and consequently so was religion. As Wells (1994, 14) put it, "God began to disappear from public view, and the whole noisy human enterprise took his place." Thus, not only had the Enlightenment (Rotaru 2005, 441-447) done away with old structures that "hindered progress" – such as church authority and the mystical view of nature – but it also did away with old value systems, that is, with the very thing that held society together.

Within the process of modernization, humanity also became the center, starting and ending point, of all human thought and endeavor. The idea that all problems were, in principle, solvable in some form or another by scientific analysis became the motto of the society. Thus emerged the individual – the free man, able to make his own choices and decisions, "liberated" from the bondages of religion and tradition, capable of anything he puts his mind to. The man began his long journey, so to speak, of "continuous self-creation through the accessibility of things" (Wenham 2000, 10).

One also should ask where the Christian Church was throughout this transformation of man from creation to creator. As early as 1926, this point is raised by Tawney in his book, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism.* He argues that the individualism of the Enlightenment crept into the church, the result

being "an individualist morality" (Tawney 1926, 11). The church allowed "the spirit of the age" to gradually redefine its spirituality and was thus gradually removed from the public arena. Due to the primary focus on the individual, a secular society evolved, a society in which religion was relegated to the margins, becoming but a small part of the social makeup. The result was a void in the human psyche, a void religious sentiment used to fill. Within the Eastern European environment, these changes were welcomed by the Marxist-Leninist ideologues that aimed to "cleanse" the human mind from the superstitions that were holding it down (Măcelaru 2016, 35-54). Within this new societal makeup, "religion lost the function it had in an earlier era – that of explaining the world" (Bosch 1995, 18), and so humanity's major identity crisis began.

The Name of the Problem – Consumerism

The philosophical and societal developments noted above are accompanied by another displacement in history. Not only that the authority of religion was removed from the center of life, but also the authority and freedom of humans were eclipsed by human desires (Rotaru 2019, 269-271). Wells (1994, 14) notes, "the whole human enterprise was itself displaced and the organizing center of life was assumed by the extraordinary pervasive and impersonal forces that modernization has unleashed." The subsequent struggle to recover a sense of purpose and meaning, Wells further proposes, is the very reason why a sense of alienation has become pervasive, and that despite the enhanced connectivity provided by globalization (Măcelaru 2014b, 71-73). The result is that the void left by the "removal" of God, religion, and values from the center of human existence is being filled with a pursuit of "things." Thus, life has primarily become materialistic.

 We cannot but recognize that humans have turned to materialism with the greatest of ease and the most avid of force. In fact, at the turn of the millennium, looking back at what has occurred, Miles (1998, 1) claimed that consumerism had become "the religion of the late twentieth century." From the Christian camp, Sider has described the situation as follows: "The ever affluent standard of living is the god of the twentieth century, and the adman is its prophet" (Sider 1997, 22). Also, Brueggemann (2001, 55) added

to this dire description, in his penetrating style, an assessment of his own North-American context:

> I propose to understand current U.S. culture as a "totalism of productivity." By totalism I mean an all-comprehensive ideological system that excludes discounts and nullifies all who do not submit to that dominant ideology. By productivity I mean that the dominant ideological system in the United States values only those who participate in the production and consumption achievements of commodity consumerism, which is governed by the triad of money, power, and sex. The liturgies that sustain that ideology are those of sports and the entire entertainment industry, which specializes in power, success, wealth, and comfort in limitless proportion. The medium for that liturgy is, of course, television and increasingly the Internet, which mediates a world of speed, power, and growth that is completely disconnected from the lived reality of bodily persons in bodily communities.

All these correctly see that within the world of consumerism, the individual has been maximized, and his/her personal gratification, involving acquiring and manipulating things purely for the sake of pleasure, has become life's highest goal. And since within this world people "live utterly in the present and seek instant gratification" (Bosch 1995, 13), ideas such as the pursuit of what is "good" or "true" have dwindled. The new ethical goals are defined by the immediacy offered by the market-economy, for all that matters within a consumerist culture "is not what is true or meaningful, but what catches the eye" (Gray 2000, 156). It is notable how concepts and values have received new meanings. For instance, the notion of freedom has been, in a sense, westernized and subsequently carried all around the world, as the means of communication have bettered in the new globalized era (Măcelaru 2014b, 71-73; Rotaru 2014, 532-541). Freedom has become synonymous with the Western model of democracy, but also with the Western way of life. It is no longer about responsibility toward the other, but about individual choice and private life (Bartholomew 2000, 8). The implication of all these is that the American proclaimed right to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" now means the right to choose whatever product or service one desires with little or no attention given to social and environmental consequences.

This does not mean that consumerism is limited to the private sphere of personal choice and pleasure. Consumerism is an intentional system of thought and behavior, and since the 1989-1990 fall of communism, it has become the strongest ideological influence within our societies in Eastern Europe. It is a rearrangement of the world, one in which "relationships between lived culture and social resources … are mediated through markets" (Slater 1997, 8). Thus, this change has not come about simply because of the way people understand themselves as free individuals within the world, which in turn led to economic choices, but it has been advanced purposely by economic thinkers and advertising agents (cf. Storkey 2000, 113). Though people may think that they are making decisions based on their own preferences, the advertising industry plays a significant role within the current economic system by creating desire within the deepest subconscious of the consumer (Sider 1997, 21). By repeatedly assaulting the average person with a stream of images, noises, names, labels, ideas, and selective values, the marketers create an entirely false sense of need. Storkey notes that advertising is such an immense part of life that it surpasses any ideological influence humanity has known in its past (Storkey 2000, 113).

The ethical problem within this context is the fact that notions such as love, health, sexuality, happiness, family life, etc., are being redescribed along the lines of market trends, leaving the unsuspecting bystander with a distorted set of values in the process. As such, no longer are religion and tradition the foundations on which society builds its ethical life. The redescribed reality offered by the advertising industry leaves people without a history to learn from, without tradition and religion to inform their choices, and ultimately without a self to call their own. When society is reconfigured along the lines of what is available and what one can acquire, no transcendent framework of reference remains available. That is, a society that so closely follows the cues of the adman and so willingly embraces consumerism as a way of life will lead itself according to the self-oriented principles of consumerism in its ethical aspects as well. Such a society becomes dysfunctional, for the ideology on which it is based (consumerism) "is at least indifferent if not hostile to every social structure and institution that is indispensable for a functioning human community" (Brueggemann 2001, 55).

Ethical Responsibility in a World of Consumption

It is evident that consumerism presents a significant ethical dilemma. Therefore, faith communities still carry the responsibility to counterbalance the new ideologies that destroy community life and social cohesion. As a Christian, I argue that the church should provide adequate responses based on the ethical principles of the Bible that have been applied throughout the history of Christianity and are relevant and applicable within the contemporary context as specific societal problems are addressed (Măcelaru 2009, 123-47).

Historically the church has made her share of mistakes in attempting to apply the gospel of Christ to the culture around. As David Bosch (1995, 33-34) has pointed out, the same two mistakes have been repeated and again in different forms and contexts. The first is the attempt to make create a "Christian society" by merging cultural and political life with the spiritual and the religious. The result is the unhealthy symbiosis of Church and State well known within Europe (Măcelaru 2014a, 169-74). The second mistake is the complete withdrawal of the church from society in the hope that true spirituality can be attained if out of the world. Such form of isolated faith however is not only foreign to the Biblical witness, but it is also making the church, as a holder of moral standards, irrelevant. Neither of these options is feasible, for as salt to the world (Matt. 5:13) the church must retain its distinctiveness and as light in the world (Matt. 5:14), she has to be *in* the world.

But herein also lies the difficulty. It is very likely that the consumerist worldview is well represented within our faith communities, making the work of distinguishing between the way the world functions and the way the church functions more difficult. There are, in fact, obvious examples of consumerist ethics creeping into Christian communities nowadays. For instance, the "mega-church" phenomenon that has transformed congregations into an entertainment business that offers parishioners all kinds of amenities, the idea being to cater to as many of the needs (note the word!) of the community as possible and win financial and stability in the process. This has become quite a successful model in some quarters, but its principles look suspiciously like another cultural icon – the shopping mall (Wells 1994, 61). Along the same lines, is quite common to think of the church as a business with a product to market – the Gospel (Barna 1988, 13).

It is at this point that we must have a rather heavy-handed approach in examining contemporary culture in the light of Christian ethics. First, I argue that Christian communities must seek to grasp the ways in which they are distinct from the world. Practically, the issues in which human life in the consumer society does not coincide with the truth of the Gospel must be identified and named. This also means that each believer and Christian communities must take an honest look at themselves to review and cleanse their value system according to the principles of the Kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus (Rotaru 2010,7) and that, even at the risk of deconstructing some of the foundations that that particular community has been built upon.

As one seeks to regain an ethical vision of human existence, not only that areas in society which are contrary to the truth of the Gospel are identified, but the enormous possibilities of service that the consumerist crisis offers will become evident. As stated above, one of the central problems identified is the scrambled identity of the modern society. Christians and their communities are challenged by this central problem to examine themselves to assess if life inside the church is in fact as fractured and dislocated as life on the outside. In this regard, I will close the argument with a brief look at three areas in which the Christian can faithfully promote her ethical vision into society.

First and foremost, the church, in its true form, is a *community* (Acts 2:42-46). According to Apostle Paul, the church is not truly the church unless it contains different people working and living together in harmony, all witnessing to the reality of Christ (Ephesians 4). Christ has destroyed the "dividing wall of hostility" between God and mankind and between humans (Eph. 2:14-15). Through Christ, therefore, people can be at peace, forming communities that value and nurture fellowship and care for each other. (Gal. 3:28). Since the modern human desperately needs to know the wholeness and peace that come from living a life at peace with God and with one another, the redeemed community can give voice to and be an attractive example of alternative living. Ultimately, it is an invitation for all that are far away to be brought near (Eph. 2:13).

As members of a "discerning" community, believers are also responsible to examine their lifestyles and habits in the light of the ethical demands of the Scripture. In doing so, Christian communities will be acting as a witness, showing to society that true life is more than just the sum of possessions.

Instead of following the path of self-serving pleasures the Christian ought to herself generously in *service* to the other. This, I argue, is the goal of Christian social ethics for not only is service the greatest Christian protest against a society that lives daily under the assumption that goodness is found in self-actualization, but it is also the main ethical imperative the Gospel proclaims. Moreover, such a protest is also the greatest Christian apologetic to an unbelieving populous. Concerning these, Bosch comments that "the issue is not to talk more about God in a culture that has become irreligious, but how to express, ethically, the coming of God's reign" (Bosch 1995, 35).

Conclusion

It is no simple matter to attempt to authentically represent the ethos exemplified by the crucified and risen Savior of creation. In the current societal landscape, the church faces two choices. The church may either hide from the world – betraying its fear of change and newness – in hopes to retain a semblance of piousness and tradition; or it may seek to move, with a strange sense of hope, toward the grayness of late modernity – not fearing the change for the Master of all is changeless (Rotaru 2017, 57-76). The latter option is by far the most dangerous, most risky, and the path of most resistance. But it is the narrow path that leads to life – not only for ourselves but for others as well (Rotaru 2012,5). It requires deep conviction, more creativity and, above all, the humility to follow Christ's example and acknowledge our own need for ethical reform.

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