



ASSOCIATION FOR CONSUMER RESEARCH

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[to cite]:

Guliz Ger (2005) , "Special Session Summary Religion and Consumption: the Profane Sacred", in NA - Advances in Consumer Research Volume 32, eds. Geeta Menon and Akshay R. Rao, Duluth, MN : Association for Consumer Research, Pages: 79-81.

[url]:

<http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/9034/volumes/v32/NA-32>

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SPECIAL SESSION SUMMARY
Religion and Consumption: The Profane Sacred
Güliz Ger, Bilkent University

SESSION OVERVIEW

While religion is against consumption, there is a new religious commercialism which can only serve to escalate the criticized profane consumption. This apparent paradox is the focus of this session. All major world religions hold a critical position against consumption—against the greed, waste, and self-indulgent hedonism seen to be inherent in consumption (Belk 1983, Ross 1991). In modernity, “spiritless” consumerism is seen to replace spirituality and sacrifice human moral aspirations at the altar of comfort, convenience, and safety (Clapp 1998). Furthermore, religion in modernity is commodified as apparent, for example, in the commercialized celebrations of Christmas. Accordingly, various religious groups such as “Alternatives” voice resistance to consumption (www.simpleliving.org). While religious voices have been increasing their calls against consumption, industries, stores, and websites (e.g. www.catholicshopper.com) that provide religious souvenirs, home decorations, clothing, devotional objects, and music have been multiplying. Such items objectify the sacred and take various forms in different geographies: Jesus Christ action figures in the USA, crosses and nativity figurines featured on the stalls in front of the Vatican in Italy, incense, lotus-shaped candles, and Buddha figures in the rows of “temple” shops in China, heaps of amulets in open bazaars in Thailand, and religious calligraphy, bright colored clocks with lights and a picture of Kaba (in Mecca), and jewelry with Islamic scripts in the marketplaces set up on mosque grounds in Turkey. Furthermore, fashion, the most prominent feature of consumerism, pervades even in Islamic dress and head covering (Sandıkcı and Ger 2001). In addition, commercialized and entertaining trendy church services are thriving. Davis and Yip (2004) discuss the growth of New Christian Movement Churches in Australia. These churches engage in multiple business ventures from tele-evangelical services to lucrative music businesses and have slick websites offering ‘online shopping’. Such objects and experiences mix devotion with material indulgence and luxurious leisure pursuits.

The session focused on the growing consumption of religious objects and experiences and discussed the sacred-profane dynamic that underlies religious commercialism and material culture. We explored the interplay of morality and consumption and interrogated the supposed opposition between the profane and the sacred. We discussed issues such as: How is it that while religion is against consumption so many religious objects and experiences are produced and consumed? What makes an object or experience sacred despite commercialization? Is there an opposition between the sacred and the profane? If not, how does the sacred religion appropriate the profane consumption or vice versa; how does the spiritual interplay with the material? What does the lack of an opposition between the sacred and the profane imply for conceptualizations and understanding of consumption?

LONG ABSTRACTS FOR PAPERS

“Negotiating Competing Dogma: Religion and Mundane Consumption”

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A fundamental Christian dogma concerns the freedom from possessions. Concentration on material wealth is condemned not

only in the Christian tradition, but in all the organized religions (Belk 1983, Ross 1991). Religion, as a force in the lives of many individuals is influential in that it defines ways of doing things in terms of certain axiological precepts (Delener 1994), and links consumers to a style of life that determines what, how much, and why something is consumed (Hirschman 1983). Therefore, proscriptive religious logic is likely to affect how possessions and possessing are understood and internalized by consumers for whom religion impacts life choices.

The widely shared “You cannot serve God and Mammon” principle has evolved into divergent interpretations. In the spirit of the “protestant ethic,” the partial resolution of acquisitiveness typical of consumer culture is in allowing for the accumulation of wealth as a sign of virtue (Campbell 1987). Moreover in some currents of evangelical Protestantism, self-indulgence through consumption seems to have replaced moral asceticism (O’Guinn and Belk 1989). However, there are a number of Christian fundamentalist movements that advocate more radical norms of simple living and freedom from possessions. But even with such multiple interpretations, the attitude toward possessions as a sign of the corrupt influence of consumerist ideology in religious discourse remains prominent.

The moralized character of this discourse poses a certain dilemma for religious consumers in that, on the one hand, these consumers attempt to see the world in terms of proscriptive implications linked to ideals (Aquino and Reed 2002) of Christian simplicity and limited possessions, while on the other hand, the ideology of consumption with its abundance of goods is at odds with the pursuit of religious fulfillment. In fact, modernity witnessed a revolutionizing of the relationship between the self and morality. If, throughout western history, pursuit of self-interest (accomplishing the good life through possessions being one of the examples) was considered the root of much evil and the function of institutionalized morality was “to place checks and limits on the self...moral virtue meant overcoming the self” (Baumeister 1989), today self-interest has become the basis for moral value.

Two aspects of contemporary consumption are relevant. First, an inescapable fact of modern life is the definition and extension of self through consumption (Belk 1988) materialized in the attachment to favorite things (Wallendorf and Arnould 1988). Second, in the culture of consumption where pursuit of material goods has replaced the pursuit of religious goals, the ease of acquiring things that symbolize abundance, convenience, and comforts of the good life is seductive. These two aspects raise the issue of what levels of attachment, what kinds, and what quantities of possessions would be sanctioned by religious consumers without perceived violation of the commitment to moderation and simplicity.

Thus, religious interpretations of worldly possessions contain an inherent contradiction in the context of contemporary consumer culture: two models of the good life. How do religious consumers negotiate this inherent contradiction between the dogma of Christian freedom from possessions and the “dogma” of a material culture fixed on possessions? How is the “freedom from possessions” understood and practiced by these consumers in pursuit of Christian righteousness and virtues in the world of proliferated consumer goods? How do these consumers draw a boundary between possessions that will not degrade their allegiance to the Christian ideal, and possessions that are inappropriate or even

dangerous for this purpose? These are the questions that this research will address in order to uncover the relationship that religious consumers have with worldly possessions. Caught up in the whirl of competing discourses about what constitutes “good living,” consumers are engaged in negotiation of boundaries between demands on their commitments and consumption routines.

We conduct semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of religious consumers from Protestant, Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox communities which represent distinctive Christian traditions. Interviews reveal that these consumers attempt reconciling the dictates of the two ideological worlds in their consumption practices. The interviews focus on eliciting the ways in which consumers attempt to juggle between the proscriptions of religious dogma and the inducements in contemporary consumer culture. Uncovering how these consumers define, interpret, and negotiate “freedom from possessions” principle on a daily basis furnishes new insights on the structuring forces at work in the process of cultural production of virtue and virtuous consumption.

“Creolized and Modernized: Religious Consumption in the South Indian Church”

Teresa Davis, University of Sydney – Australia

The Syrian Christian Roman Catholic church in the South Eastern state of Kerala (Malabar) is one of the oldest forms of Christianity in the country. It draws on a rich tradition of orthodoxy and Roman ritual and form. This church, while maintaining strong links to traditional Roman Catholic form, has not been immune to the creolization brought by the centuries of colonization and the demands of modernity. The practice and structure of Christianity has changed over centuries with waves of foreign influences through early trade with the Middle East and colonization. Orthodoxy which was the distinctive feature of the pre-Portuguese church was changed by the Portuguese influence in the 1500s, most clearly seen in the church architecture and the focus on the Weberian idea of the ‘theodicy of suffering’ (Baudrillard 1998). Post independence and modernity have transformed the church in terms of its rites and customs. In the post colonial period, modernity appears in the shift away from simplicity to ostentation and ritually manifest materialism. Syncretism (Woodward 2001) became more apparent than under the colonial yoke. Elements of Brahminism and Indianization became stronger and many of the traditional ceremonies of birth, marriage, and death grew closer in form to ceremonial Hindu and Buddhist tradition than Roman Catholic. With globalization, economic deregulation and high levels of migration and remigration from and to the Southern states (especially Kerala), the forces of modernity have created dominant themes of secularization and manifest materialism.

This paper focuses on this transformation using the modern day marriage ceremony in the Syrian Christian Roman Catholic tradition as a focal point to identify the multi-layered creolization that has transformed the ritual. Elements of the Hinduism, Syrian Christian tradition, Anglicized customs, popular Western culture as well as present-day ‘Indianization’ are all identified in the ritual. This paper analyses the ritual to reveal the consumption orientation inherent in the celebration and the multiple sources of the symbols and tradition drawn upon.

The themes of syncretism, secularization, and creolized form of ritual worship are highlighted in the modern day Syrian Christian Roman Catholic wedding ceremony. The ceremony itself is conducted mostly in the ‘Syro-Malabar’ form. However, elements of the ‘Romanized’ rite are also seen. The exchange of rings and vows are of the ‘Roman’ form, but are ‘Indianized’ by the ‘tying of the 3 knots’ of the traditional Thali central to the Hindu marriage ceremony. The dress of the bride and the groom are a study in syncretic

form. The bride could be dressed in white and gold keeps Indian tradition with golden hair ornaments, but wears a white veil and white silk in the Roman tradition (the colour worn only by the widow in Hindu tradition). Handmade Belgian lace and Benares silk come together in unlikely harmony in the bridal ensemble. The ceremony and the following celebratory meal are symbols of not only religious commitment and tradition, but of social status display where the effects of modernity are seen clearly from the many manifestations of materialistic display. Modernity in the form of materialism, syncretism, and secularization (Giddens 1991) appear along side a creolized ritual. Part of the creolization is in itself the result of desire for material display and not the result of the interweaving of different historical and religious tradition. Comparison of the wedding ceremonies of two decades ago and today show the move away from the focus on simplicity in the Syrian Christian Roman Catholic wedding ceremony to a far more elaborate consumption oriented celebration.

The choice of this form of religious practice goes against the ‘Dominus Iesus’ issued in 2000 by the Vatican encouraging the maintaining of religious orthodoxy in the Roman Catholic church (Woodward 2001). The rigorous ‘purity code’ from the book of Leviticus has been replaced by a ‘glocalised’ creed by today’s new Kerala Christians. Consumers take what fits with their needs from the Bible and mix and match it with local religious traditions, using a ‘consumer decides’ approach to religious choice and practice. The elaborate wedding ceremony builds up a visually and experientially spectacular consumption experience which is focused on the material aspects of status display, wealth, and aesthetics rather than religious tradition or the spiritual aspiration.

“Religious Material Culture: Morality, Modernity, and Aesthetics”

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While the concentration on material wealth is condemned in all the religions of the world, the belief systems regarding the sacred and the profane vary. Some religions and cultures do not consider materialism and spiritualism to be opposites. For example, in India and China the material and spiritual worlds are less divided and objects have spiritual meanings in addition to their aesthetic and functional meanings. We explore the religious material culture in China and compare it to the illustrations from and the literature on Christian material culture. Through this comparison we address the conceptual issues of the interplay between the sacred and the profane, the spiritual and the material, and the implications for conceptualizations of the consumption-morality interaction. As moral ideologies have secular as well as religious bases, our discussion also involves the negotiation of modernity and aesthetics in the consumption of religious objects.

First, we explore the conceptual underpinnings of the religion-consumption interaction. The continual scrambling of the sacred and the profane is evident even in Christianity (McDannell 1995) and the economic and political context plays a significant role in such a blend (Starretts 1995, Tambiah 1984). Second, we examine the materiality of religion, the material culture itself and what people do (rather than solely what people think) in order to understand the relationship between religion and consumption. The sensual and aesthetic aspects of an object are the source of its capacity to objectify myth and values. We investigate the material culture of religion within its historical and present political and social context, that is, both the material representation and the ideology that surrounds a belief system. By studying the specific materiality of the religious objects as well as the social symbolism of these objects and their political and social context, we aim to

enhance the understanding of the sacred-profane dynamic that underlies religious commercialism and material culture. Thus, we hope to contribute to the understanding of how economic, political, and ideological domains interact through the field of cultural production.

Data sources are interviews and observations in homes and temple shops in Shanghai and Beijing. In-depth interviews with lower and upper middle class consumers are conducted with the help of an interpreter. We explore what objects are considered to be belief objects, their meanings, and how are they used, kept, and displayed. We study how consumers experience the spirituality or the sacredness in things despite commercialization. We also focus on the multiple ideologies manifest in the competing discourses about taste, aesthetics, modernity, and official state policies.

The streets around the Buddhist and Taoist temples in China are lined with scores of stores that sell 'religious' (not an emic term) objects such as offerings for ancestor ceremonies, incense to burn at the temple, figures of Buddha in various forms, jade pendants, lotus lamps, good-luck turtles and many other objects that are believed to provide protection, health, and wealth. Monks sacralize amulets, tablets, and pendants by enclosing holy words inside them or chanting holy words to increase the potency of these objects. The abundance of such objects is striking given the historical Communist hostility towards religion, the current official view that many such things objectify outdated superstitions that modern Chinese should not heed to, and the broader ideology of rational modernity.

We investigate the meanings and uses of objects that are considered to be spiritual or sacred in China where traces of Confucian morality, Buddhism and Taoism coexist with communist-capitalist modernity. We examine how consumers negotiate modernity with morality where the movement to modernity is a movement away from communist and Confucian prudence and frugality to a higher regard for aesthetic and sensual experience and material pleasures as well as to a higher regard for rationality. Analyzing the relation between religion, consumption, and modernity and exposing the types and usage of objects that have a spiritual connotation for the owner, the relationship between people and their sacred things, and how these consumers interpret and negotiate the spirituality of objects furnishes new insights on the forces that shape the cultural production of morality, aesthetics, and modernity.

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Profane Consumption. consumer objects and events that are ordinary, everyday objects and events that do not share the specialness of sacred ones. Sacralization. when ordinary objects, events, and even people take on sacred meaning. Objectification. when we attribute sacred qualities to mundane items. Contamination. when objects we associate with sacred events or people become sacred in their own right. Collecting. the systematic acquisition of a particular object or set of objects. Hoarding. unsystematic collecting.Â when a sacred item or symbol is removed from its special place or is duplicated in mass quantities, becoming profane as a result. This set is often saved in the same folder as Chapter 4, Section 3: Major Policy Issues Relevantâ€¦ 10 terms. Brief Information and Notes about Sacred and Profane in India. A Students Guide to Sociology.Â The concepts of sacred and profane are central to Durkheim's theory of religion. Durkheim says that the sacred is ideal and transcends everyday existence, it is extra-ordinary, potentially dangerous,awe-inspiring,fear inducing. The sacred refers to things set part by man including religious beliefs,rites,duties or anything socially defined as requiring special religious treatment. Almost anything can be sacred â€“ a god, a rock,across,the moon,the earth ,a tree, an animal or bird etc. These are sacred only because some community has marked them as sacred. Once established as sacred they bec Durkheim noted two distinct areas within religions: Sacred and Profane objects. Sacred objects, rituals and people are regarded as having special significanceâ€¦Â Sacred objects, rituals and people are regarded as having special significance and will be treated with awe and respect. For example; the â€“Shroud of Torinâ€™ would be a sacred object, which is treated with respect and pilgrimages to this object are ways of strengthening religious beliefs. However, it must be noted that these objects may not be intrinsically special but rather special meaning is attached to the object by the social group. Profane objects, activities and people are ordinary and every day with no special meaning attached to these objects. Sacred and Profane is one that really had a profound impact on my thinking. Read more. 8 people found this helpful.Â An article from: Special Delivery , and others) have shown that the same isomorphisms are found in modernist thought that Eliade points out in traditionalist thought.If the modernist sees the house as a machine we live in, perhaps this is because that is how the modernist sees the universe as a whole.