

Krzysztof Bochenek<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7849-642X>

University of Rzeszow

kbochenek@ur.edu.pl**Jarosław Kinal**<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2810-7307>

University of Rzeszow

jkinal@ur.edu.pl

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Does a Post-modern Consumer Need the Sacred? Few Impressions about the Issue

ABSTRACT

In the age of post-modernity the religious and ethical awareness of societies are undergoing devaluation. We are witnessing walking away from religiosity and the denial of its values. Religiosity is replaced with “metaphysical” sacralised consumerism and the worship of the body, which are seen as a shorter route to heaven. As the response to the fall of traditional values, a new form of spirituality is emerging. It is based on distance, rejection and going beyond empty and compulsive consumerism. Thanks to that an individual is able to regain self-determination and one’s own humanity.

KEYWORDS: post-modernity, consumerism, cult of the body, religion, sacred, spirituality, transcendence

STRESZCZENIE

W dobie ponowoczesności świadomość religijna i etyczna społeczeństw ulega dewaluacji. Jesteśmy świadkami odchodzenia od religijności i negocjowania jej wartości. Religijność zastępowana jest „metafizycznym”, sakralizowanym konsumpcjonizmem i kultem ciała, które postrzegane są jako krótsza droga do nieba. W odpowiedzi na upadek tradycyjnych wartości pojawia się nowa forma duchowości. Opiera się ona na dystansie, odrzuceniu i wyjściu poza pusty i kompulsywny konsumpcjonizm. Dzięki temu jednostka jest w stanie odzyskać samostanowienie i własne człowieczeństwo.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: ponowoczesność, konsumpcjonizm, kult ciała, religia, sacrum, duchowość, transcendentja

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Introduction

The beginning of the 20th century was the time when the typical features of modernity, such as changeability and liquidity of surroundings, the automation of morality, individualism as well as the crisis of institutionalized religion became more and more visible and, therefore, acquired the status of being obligatory. Zygmunt Bauman ascertained that state of affairs by saying that

liquid life, just like liquid modern society cannot keep its shape and stay on course for long. In the society of liquid modernity trophies do not comprise permanent achievements because, in no time, assets may become liabilities and virtues may become weaknesses (Bauman, 2007, p. 5).

Within liquid societies there is a conviction that nothing that begins now will last forever and that nothing ends irrevocably.

It comes as no surprise that the ethical awareness of many post-modern people clearly cannot keep up with the pace of civilizational, social, technical and cultural transformations. Universal axiological systems as well as categorical rules are no longer valid and values are becoming only an element of social organization, used in fragments to suit the needs and verbalized expectations of the majority. Along the rejection of all “fundamentalist metaphysical traps,” there is a decrease in the importance of those religions which they refer to (Baudrillard, 2005, pp. 7–8). What is more, nothing is regarded as transcendental and the commonly accepted sacred sphere seems to be decreasing or even vanishing. However, post-modern man does not seem to be concerned about it, working hard on their consumerist paradise adequate to their needs and expectations. Similarly to medieval ascetics, who chose a heroic path to sainthood, they “believe” that they will find the desired salvation in that way. Even if they intuitively sense a certain discord or falseness in that, they have no intention to dwell on it for long. Since *homo consumenus* has to be “happy” and only consumption makes them happy, it becomes their sacred, religion and salvation.

Anthropology that questions spirituality

The sources of such understanding of human potential and aspiration in post-modernity must be, in the first place, searched out in today’s preference for its highly reductive vision. By bringing down humanity to corporeality, anthropology, which has been formed by philosophy for 2,500 years, is ousted. According to this philosophy, man was a surprising

outcome of some contradictions, materiality and spirituality in addition to their emplacement in the environment and the creation of culture, finiteness and longing for infinity. In a post-modern reality, human transcendence is often ruled out in a more or less defined or even conscious way. Therefore, man can only be found on the level of a material world (Frankl, 1984, p. 95). This phenomenon is accurately described by M. Foucault: the core of man is called the soul and it shall be deconstructed (Bell, 1998, pp. 87–88). According to the identity models preferred by the popular consumerist culture, the human body remains a sound foundation for the “own self” of a modern human being. Unless the body undergoes countless care treatments, it becomes an object of distaste and even detestation and any deficits in this area cause deep frustration. Along with the cult of beautiful and nearly forever young body, comes the development of commercialization and considerable overestimation of values. The lifestyle of the post-modern man involves, importantly, various “body regimes,” i.e., behaviour associated with cultivating the desired body features. The body becomes an infinite object and, therefore, it requires a lot of work which is done by such specialists as: personal trainers, cosmetologists or dieticians. Seniors, deprived of the desired perfection of the body, are left feeling useless. By exposing human usability and productivity, elderly people begin to wonder whether their life still has any sense. Even if we see them in the media, they are presented as those enjoying their second youth, full of energy thanks to various advertised supplements or a healthy lifestyle.

An illusion of a consumerist paradise

Adequately to ever growing open-mindedness of post-modern societies, the phenomenon of the transversal functioning of various societies is now becoming more and more visible. This phenomenon is difficult to be unambiguously assessed. Within the hybrid cultures and lifestyles implicated by them, the difference often comes down only to the object and the quality of consumption. By trying to adjust to the perceptual possibilities of as many consumers as possible, the dominant post-modern culture becomes, by its nature, highly superficial. There is even no attempt made to camouflage the fact that the only aim of this type of culture is obtaining pleasure. As early as in the 1960s Hannah Arendt noticed that turning culture into a product leads directly to its degradation and what we are observing nowadays is not a desired mass culture but mass entertainment which preys on its “products” (Arendt, 1994, p. 249).

Excessive possession of all types of material goods deprives many people of any broader horizons. They turn into internally empty slaves focused

only on multiplying the goods they possess or replacing them with new ones which seem to be even more perfect. The post-modern man treats the entire world, other people and nature, solely as items that can be consumed. Consumption, which is only one part of our nature, has dominated all other spheres of our nature in post-modernity. The same applies to science, morality, art and religion. The dominant “philosophy” in all areas of modern life is not consumption as such but its such form which, paradoxically, can be defined as something even more dangerous – the “metaphysics” of consumerism (Campbell, 2004, pp. 41–42).

Consumerism is the promise of not so challenging but happy life of consumption and only thanks to consumption. Therefore, any higher values, gained through effort, are only obstacles in the fulfilment of “dreams” and the “peaceful” provision of “essentials.” In the post-modern world an evolution is taking place, from the traditional system of values, dominated by material ones used in the struggle for survival, to post-modern values used to express one’s “own self”. In the reality which creates an illusion of heavenly existence, where everything favours merry consumption, there is no place for suffering, not to mention any reflection on death. Suffering, which is a part of life, is nowadays “censored” and rejected as something useless and senseless. Unfortunately, running away from suffering is nothing else than a negation of the full dimension of life and the existence of different sacred area than consumption.

Disappearing religion?

Secularization needs to be regarded as a rather symptomatic determinant of pluralistic post-modernity. It implicates the decrease of the impact of religion on the formation of the meaning of life within the vast majority of modern societies. Cardinal Walter Kasper accurately assesses this phenomenon by saying that the biggest drama of our times is the huge gap between faith and modern culture (Kasper, 1990, pp. 298–306). Everything which has been untouchable so far, as sacred, becomes ignored or negated in today’s reality (Marcel, 2011, p. 54). Although the anti-religious Marxism went down in history, the vast majority of modern currents of thought, also those which credit themselves with humanistic perspectives, aim at freeing man from an alienating religion. Post-modernity attempts to shift faith to a private otherworldly level, invalidating its prerogatives and aspirations. Religion, together with everything that is regarded as traditional, appears to be archaic and Church institutions, due to their limited “ability” to change, are defied. Values and attitudes, typical for the Christian morality, e.g., celibacy, fasting, shrift and abnegation seem to be useful only for religious

fanatics. It is also said that religious institutions only cause greater fear in believers by focusing solely on the negative aspects of human life. By losing their status of an unimpeachable authority, those institutions, including Christian institutions, are forced to function on a free market of countless religious lifestyles. What religion offers as an explanation of the meaning of the existence of the world and man is accepted optionally as an individual decision of every man. Adequately to the expectations of the post-modern man, who wants to make their life meaningful in their own way, an “invisible” post-modern religion is created. It exists outside the Church and it is scattered and subjective (Luckmann, 1996, pp. 39–40).

In the wake of eliminating the sacred from the “secular” canon, the credibility of the global proclamation of religious norms decreases. God is often regarded as an immanent rather than transcendental reality. Modern and post-modern societies have replaced religion with utopia which is no longer “a transcendental ideal, but one to be realized through history (progress, rationality and science) with the nutrients of technology and the midwifery of revolution” (Bell, 1998, p. 65). Erich Fromm also stated that

since the beginning of the eighteenth century, “history” and “the future” have become a substitute for the Christian heaven – fame, celebrity, even notoriety – anything that seems to guarantee a footnote in the record of history, constitutes a bit of immortality (Fromm, 1989, pp. 140–141).

Human beings “in the state of their greatest real impotence, imagine themselves in connection with science and technique to be omnipotent” (Fromm, 1989, p. 232). “Great” scientific and technical achievements seem to give hope for the realization of the long-lasting human dream, i.e., “being equal” to God. The abundance of technological tools implies countless offers of consumption, leaving no empty spaces where we could feel sanctity. Within liquid post-modernity religion and the sacred, in their free-drifting forms, differ from those rooted in Church institutions. Sanctity is often looked for on various and often surprising paths, where spirituality is understood as the practice of numerous forms of meditation, appreciation of art and music and even the preference for solitary walks.

Being constantly on the move, undergoing either or simultaneously the processes of secularisation and desecularisation, religion takes on new forms, adapting to the requirements of post-modernity. After years of devotion, a post-modern man seems to be petrified with the world which is losing its religious heritage. This fear is justified as the lost myths are not replaced with an enlightening rationality, but with the secular caricature of salvation through the consumption that knows no limits. As Leszek Kołakowski says it comes with a great relief to observe the symptoms

of religious revival. What is more, the comeback of the sacred becomes a fashionable topic. Philosophers, sociologists and anthropologists cannot contribute to this process but they can describe it with either hope or fear. Only through priesthood and prophecy the act of living faith can sustain and strengthen the presence of man in the sacred. Intellectuals are helpless and unable to revive the myths (Kołakowski, 2014, pp. 100–101).

The sacralisation of consumption

When trying to look for the myths which may displace or even replace the sanctity offered by religion, we are forced to point to consumerism. Particularly large shopping centres are becoming not only places of consumption but also post-modern temples and cathedrals. Just like the churches of the past, they attract clients or even “spectators” with their magic and grandness. They retain a cosmopolitan character so as not to limit potential clients, including those who have no connection with any religion. The atmosphere created in those places is similar to the one in churches during services but obviously the sacrament of sacrifice is replaced with the ritual of consumption. Post-modern “religion” is based on the divine attributes of commercial temples of consumption: fountains, exotic plants or a specific “liturgical calendar” which marks holy days and dates before which we need to do the shopping. Even if the reference to holiday, especially Christmas, is made, the spiritual aspect is totally lost due to the hedonistic consumerism.

Even if the mechanisms and rituals within the para-religions of consumerism remain the same as in the case of traditional religions, their goals and measures are totally different. Unlike religions which direct man towards numerous existential obligations and prohibitions, consumption is based on never ending fun. Post-modern secular “dogmas of faith” of consumerism lead to economic growth and the possibility to fulfil all individual dreams and goals. The aim of the modern economy is no longer satisfying physical needs, but a human soul.

Just as medieval society was balanced on God and the Devil, so ours is balanced on consumption and its denunciation. Though at least around the Devil heresies and black magic sects could organize. Our magic is white. No heresy is possible any longer in a state of affluence (Baudillard, 2006, p. 275).

Nowadays spirituality conforms to universal rules of buying and selling transactions. It becomes similar to any other product. The only thing left

after religion is glitter which is more and more often limited by the economic reality and the call for generosity. Churches, present on the consumer market, are forced to offer as much “sensual experience” as possible to their followers, taking care not only of the message but mainly of the adequate frame.

In search of transcendence and hope

Despite the above-mentioned worrying phenomena, spirituality, including spirituality which transgresses the traditional religious rituals, may still be an important remedy for the negative consequences of the religion of consumerism. The use of the conditional is obvious here, as the proclamation of some kind of faith does not have to entail spirituality. Also, the lack of it does not result in the lack of spiritual life. Therefore, in the societies of economic prosperity a man needs the revival in the area of spirituality, they need to regain the authentic transcendence.

By existing in a consumerist society, it is easy to give in to the temptation of a not so challenging lifestyle. However, the vast majority of modern people look for something that would fill up their lurking internal emptiness to a greater extent than the consumption of various goods. Without spiritual distance and abstinence “towards” and not “from” something, experienced consciously and freely, man is not able to find true hope and free themselves from the destruction of primitive consumerism.

In this context it is still worth referring to Gabriel Marcel who promotes a vision of hope different from the one we commonly have. Hope of this kind is based on something which can be compared to an adequate number of “tokens” possessed. Hope in a metaphysical sense, founded transcendently, can only be found in saints, spiritual geniuses who, having no tokens to cover their expectations, have unflinching hope (Marcel, 1984, pp. 37–38). As Marcel adequately points out the requirement of human transcendence achieves its most fundamental expression in the lack of satisfaction experienced as discontent. Man treated as an individual has an ambition to go beyond what already exists and what can fulfil their consumer needs. Not every realization of aspiration is transcending even if a lot of post-modern slaves of consumption do not see their immanentization in the world of corporality. The requirement of transcendence demands creativity manifested in the relation between a man and Transcendence.

In this context it is worth referring to Victor Frankl, the founder of logotherapy, a concentration camp prisoner, who believed that it is not possible to find hope without giving sense to one’s life. Even if the internal struggle to look for the sense of life mainly through the contact with God

causes tension rather than balance in man, it is deeply rooted in human nature (Frankl, 1984, pp. 104–105). Coming in contact with the sphere of the sacred should, by definition, translate into a certain lifestyle which is a consequence of this encounter. The same applies to the post-modern consumer reality.

Conclusions

The progressing computerisation and mediatisation make our lives and surroundings so liquid that they are becoming totally unpredictable. Man is forced to confront themselves with a conglomerate of information which they are not able to receive, process and use as the foundation to build a meaningful vision of life. Meanwhile, our status of contingent beings demands eliminating dramatic and existential deficits by means of something or somebody from the outside. As *homo viator* that every one of us is, from the very beginning to the very end, on the way to one's own fulfilment. Our human nature gives us the possibility to go beyond everything that we are and we are not. Its motto cannot only be *sum* but "*sursum*," not only "I am" but what level I can rise beyond (Marcel 1984, p. 25). No matter whether this individual rise means the encounter with some kind of religion or any other form of spiritual life, we need to look for the room for existential freedom which is beyond consumerism. "Homo consumenus" is not able to find their own sacred sphere, and therefore they cannot be fully a human being.

The house, in which a human spirit dwells, is supported by four corners. These are: Reason, God, Love and Death. All of them are tools thanks to which we free ourselves from the terrifying reality of time. Their aim is to truly tame time (Kołakowski, 2009, p. 297).

When analysing those powerful words of Leszek Kołakowski, which the author himself regarded as the final metaphysics, it is not possible to anticipate the future of a post-modern man without any worry. However, it is possible to find some hope thanks to which "homo consumenus" will be able to fill up their life with something more than consumption.

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Krzysztof Bochenek – Assistant Professor and professor at the University of Rzeszów. Director of the Institute of Philosophy of the College of Humanities, the University of Rzeszów. Philosopher. His research focuses on medieval studies, the history of Polish philosophy, personalism, professional ethics of various groups of workers and the challenges of modern times.

Jarosław Kinal – PhD, employee of the Institute of History at the University of Rzeszów. Sociologist of communication and media scholar. His research interests include issues of media convergence, information society and technological determinism.

