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Introduction

It is clear that we are now living in a world where capitalism reigns supreme. Especially since the collapse of the Communist bloc in 1989, the main contender of capitalism, socialism, has been deemed to fail miserably. The fact is that socialism, despite decades of Herculean efforts, has not delivered consumer goods as capitalist societies have somehow managed to do. Indeed the recognition of this fact by the people of Eastern Europe has certainly played a key role in the rebellion against the communist regimes and contributed to their downfall. Even in countries where the communist regimes still survive, e.g. China, Vietnam, the socialist ideology has effectively been replaced by the market ideology. All these have prompted some scholars (e.g. Fukuyama) to declare "the end of history" with the above triumph of democratic capitalism. This may also ring true to the Asians (at least before the onset of the economic crisis). The aspirations for a prosperous economy with its myriad consumer goods are just evident in most Asian countries. The East Asian countries have especially done a great job in this area in the postwar decades- their economic growth is nothing short of a miracle in the eyes of the Westerners. Especially in the big cities of East Asia, the efficiency and affluence of a consumer society are unmistakably displayed. Of course, not all parts of East Asia have reached the same height of achievement. But the capitalist dream is shared- all are looking up to those big cities as their model and are striving to emulate their success. Now the economic crisis has occurred- does it change everything? Not really. People in East Asia may now be more aware of the pitfalls of the capitalist road. They may even be willing to go with less for the moment in order to get over the economic crisis- and that's the point: the ultimate goal for many people hasn't changed a bit! The capitalist society with a booming economy and unlimited provision of consumer goods is still the utopia in their hearts. Is it any different with Christians?

I am not so sure. As to the Christian ideal of being in the world but not of the world, I can only be sure of the former half. I think ^{most} East Asian Christians are some sort of believers in capitalism. The situation is quite different in South Asia where different sorts of liberation theology (e.g. Dalit theology) have a much stronger appeal to Christians. Though East Asian Christians may be more sympathetic towards socialist ideas (e.g. equality) than the common people, they seldom are card-carrying socialists. [I guess one reason is that most of us have "vested interests" in a prosperous economy.] However, I think Christians have reasons not to believe in the end of history thesis. First of all, we should be skeptical of all claims by mortals to have discerned the inner meaning or ultimate destination of history. The hidden things belong to Yahweh alone. Secondly, we should be aware that all attempts to place a secular system on the altar are idolatrous. Christians may agree that socialism has failed and comparatively speaking, capitalism does a better job in creating wealth for all. Nevertheless, while the above fact alone may satisfy the secularists, Christians have reason to suspect that no human socio-economic system is ever perfect from the divine perspective. We should also beware of the effects of a socio-economic system on spiritual dimensions of human existence which the secularists tend to ignore. Although I have argued that the economic crisis will not automatically alter the dreams of the common people, it does reveal some cracks in the shining armour of capitalism, and consequently create for us some mental space to critically evaluate the ideology of consumerism. I invite you to do this with me in this paper.

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Consumer Culture and Postmodern Society

Many people think that the world is currently moving away from the modern era into the postmodern era. The word "postmodern" means different things to different people. I will use "postmodernity" to denote those features of life and thought which oppose the dominant ideology of modernity, Enlightenment rationalism. These features certainly have roots in the past but they mainly flourish in the second half of the twentieth century. For example, whereas the Enlightenment worships science and technology, many postmodern ideas like New Age and environmentalism fiercely attack the hegemony of mechanistic science and technology, and hold them responsible for the destruction of the environment. The gurus of postmodernism mainly come from the European continent. Names like Derrida, Foucault, Baudrillard, and Lyotard will not be unfamiliar to students of philosophy, literature, sociology and so on. They tend to think that the deeper problem of modernity is the belief in objective truth (cf. Derrida on logocentrism), and their cure is deconstruction of many kinds. The trend towards relativism is clear.

However, this current rebellion against Enlightenment rationalism is not merely the game of academicians. Relativist slogans like "it all depends on your point of view" and "there is no absolute truth" can be found on the lips of ordinary people. They may not bother to articulate a sophisticated philosophy of relativism. They just refuse to engage in mind-boggling rational arguments. How do they make choices then? By feeling. Postmodern people will be moved by images and subtle associations, rather than by rational considerations. The emergence of this kind of ethos is most likely related to the advent of the consumer society.

In the modern period, the dominant sector of the economy is production and manufacturing. The representative image is a factory with workers producing tangible consumer goods. In the postmodern period, the dominant sector of the economy makes money by providing services for consumers. What consumers buy are mainly intangible information or experiences. The representative image is a mega-centre with shops, banks, tourist companies, cinemas, food plaza, and so on. You may notice that shops and food plaza still need to sell tangible goods but the new thing is that for the postmodern consumers, the value of those goods does not depend on its capacity to gratify physical needs alone. Instead it has everything to do with the feelings it can evoke in the consumers and the identity it helps to construct for them. That is why we need to look at consumerism as a culture.

The formation of the consumer culture can be traced back to various sources. Firstly, due to the revolution in production, there is a surplus of goods. Instead of cutting down supply, the merchants try to create demand and needs of the goods. This marks the rise of the advertising business whose main strategy is to create an image for the goods which resonates with our subconscious desires. Secondly, modernity, in turning away from traditions and religions, naturally turns to the human subject and self. According to Campbell, the influence of Romanticism is especially important because it makes central the commitment to self-liberation by means of the consumption of experience:

"The "self" becomes, in effect, a very personal god or spirit to whom one owes obedience. Hence "experiencing," with all its connotations of gratificatory and stimulative feelings becomes an ethical activity; an aspect of duty... person... no longer conceived of as a "character" constructed out of the unpromising raw material of original sin, but as a "self" liberated through experiences and strong feelings from the inhibiting constraints of social convention" (quoted by Gay in Clapp 1988, p.28).

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The two factors converge in moulding a new kind of consumer. Traditional consumers use goods that are rather closely tied to our basic needs, e.g. food, clothing, shelter. Nowadays, the distinction between basic needs and luxury is no longer easy to draw. For example, we are offered a myriad of choices of food and clothing which can equally keep us full and warm. Within the constraint of price, the major considerations become their symbolic values: Do I feel good in consuming this food? Will I look cool in these clothes? Will this way of consumption help me to identify with my significant others? There is a paradox here. The consuming process is both individualist and conformist. When you go shopping in a mall or supermarket, you seem to be entirely free to make your own choices in light of your own needs. There everybody feels like shouting out "I am the king of the world" (The Titanic)! However, this freedom may be quite superficial:

- 1) We are under great pressure to play this game of consumption. Otherwise, you risk being ostracized by the larger society. At least parents need to play the game for their children in order not to make them feel deprived and isolated.
- 2) Our "needs" may be artificial, created by the seduction of commercial advertisements and shop windows. Just think of the things you buy which are used only rarely.
- 3) One of our needs is exactly to gain recognition by others. But this recognition is based on volatile fashions rather than something permanent.

So remember: a postmodern consumer is made, not born! The whole process grows out of the "necessity" of the capitalist logic: in order to sell new and exotic goods, there have to be a sizable group of consumers for whom consumption is their life-style and something central to their self-identity. They believe that their ultimate happiness is inseparable from this process of consumption, and that they have an inalienable right to have more and more. Some are even possessed by the desire to possess. They don't just like buying things. They like the process of buying things [looking around, checking and comparing prices, desiring and musing over products, making the "best" choice...] even more! In short, postmodern consumers don't just want, they also want to want for all times. It is this process which keeps their lives going and render them "meaningful."

Consumerism as yet Another God that Fails

Consumerism is by no means neutral, ethically and spiritually speaking. We can in fact trace its roots to the Enlightenment ideology which throws God out of the window and puts human being on the throne instead. There is no salvation in another life. All the happiness we can find has to be found in this world, here and now. What better candidate for this happiness than the joy of consumption? If the secularists sometimes concede that consumer goods cannot provide lasting spiritual satisfaction, they will argue that consumer goods can at least provide constant distraction from the inclination to consider the intractable problem of meaning of life or the source of lasting satisfaction! They may further argue that consumerism enables us to have the autonomy of self-creation and self-definition. What more do we ask for? We also need to note / consumerist values have a totalizing tendency. When goods are primarily consumer goods and values are universally measured by monetary values, spiritual, intangible goods and values are easily dismissed.

If we look at the typical consumerist behavior, there are interesting parallels with the religious behavior. In the cities, the shopping malls and megacentres have become the cathedrals or temples of consumerism. In

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fact, they are now the landmarks of the centers of many Western cities which used to be marked by churches. Sunday or late night shopping has become our weekly service. The speedbank machines are the wayside shrines where we perform our ritual devotions to the god of consumerism. Commercial goods now possess the mysterious qualities that fascinate people which are traditionally attributed to God. Our life events, e.g. wedding, birth of children, are mainly constituted by rituals of consumption, e.g. buying toys, taking wedding photos. Our holidays are also major occasions for consumption, either locally or overseas. Religion emphasizes the centrality of faith in every part of our lives. This role seem to be rather successfully taken up by the consumer goods, even for Christians. In this aspect, the god of consumerism has indeed prevailed.

However, even in the eyes of the more reflective secularists, consumerism is by no means unmixed blessings. High hopes have been put on it but at the end of the experiment, it also fails to deliver its promises:

1) Consumerism and Human Happiness

It is doubtful whether the provision of consumer goods has really made people happier. A recent research in Japan shows that while almost all agree that the standard of living has been raised in the past 40 years, only a few think that people are in general happier now than in the old days. Indeed J.S. Mill has noted the paradox of hedonism a long time ago. The more we strive for happiness consciously, the less likely we shall be happy. Happiness does not only depend on what happens outside us; it is also relative to the expectations inside us. While a prosperous economy provides more diversity of goods and heightened sensory stimulations, the consumer culture also raises our expectation about and demand of happiness inordinately. In fact it can only thrive if we keep on wanting more and more! So the merchants will see to it that we will remain dissatisfied. As we are more and more conditioned to instant gratification and autonomy, we are less and less patient with delayed gratification and limitations, not to mention adversity! [That is why we now talk about AQ-adversity quotient- in addition to IQ and EQ.] Habitual impatience and internal restlessness, which are characteristics of the consumerist personality, are certainly no recipe for happiness. Furthermore, the current economic crisis should make it clear that there is no magic wand which can keep the economy growing forever. As long as we put all our eggs in one basket in our quest for happiness, our happiness is held hostage by socio-economic developments which are not under our control, not to mention accidents, disasters, and so on. Consumerism's promise for unmitigated happiness is a lie.

The above analysis shows that even within the terms of the secularist, consumerism as an answer to our quest for happiness is far from satisfactory. We also need to note that consumer culture tends to produce a kind of one-dimensional man/woman with a fixation on sensory pleasures and stimulations. The utter neglect of spiritual satisfactions will eventually backfire. I have a friend who works as a counselor in USA. She recently told me that many youngsters in the Western affluent society had a sort of anger buried deep down in their hearts. Nobody has done anything wrong on them. Instead their parents may provide for all their needs. Why are they angry then? What accounts for much senseless youth violence like riots or campus shootings? I guess that the young generation just feels betrayed by their society and culture. The TV, the advertisements, etc. all "promise" them happiness and self-respect if only they buy the goods and enjoy their lives. However, when they have tried everything from ordinary consumer goods to sex or drugs, they may only feel bored to death. They are very much into the idea that they have the right to be completely happy. So who is to be blamed for their dissatisfaction? Apparently nobody- or perhaps everybody? Perhaps it explains their internal anger? Anyway, my main point is that the consumerist social experiment

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seems to confirm Jesus' saying that man does not live by bread alone.

2) Consumerism and Self-identity

I have touched upon the point that the consumerist life-style is the postmodern way of constructing one's identity. Descartes' aphorism "I think, therefore I am" in a way epitomizes how the modern way of constructing identity is grounded on one's rational thinking and autonomy. For the postmodern people, "I shop, therefore I am" is perhaps more appropriate. They don't need any deep identity; they identify themselves with their way of consumption, their ephemeral feelings and cultural fashions. However, all these notoriously change rather rapidly. So the identity of a postmodern consumer is shallow, non-permanent, and contradictory as well. It is rather like the TV screen on which many programs, unrelated to one another, rapidly succeed one another. For the postmodern consumer, as long as consumption and entertainment activities continue to go on one after the other, life is "full and happy." Once such activities cease, he will feel empty and restless as if he is the TV screen with no programs showing- what is left is just meaningless noise.

While some postmodernists celebrate this kind of fluid self-identity, the apparent freedom is illusory. The human self is addicted to the consumerist life-style and loses the capacity for self-transcendence. The more serious problem is the erosion of the strong sense of self which is the foundation of promises and long-term commitment. The postmodern personality will not feel guilty about not being punctual or breaking promises. Anyway, who is to say the "I" who does not feel like keeping the promise is identical to the "I" who made the promise? For more traditional people, it makes sense to say although I now feel strongly different from before, I am still the same person and am obliged by that promise. This does not work, however, for a postmodern personality for whom feelings constitute the personal identity. Same reasons account for the postmodern attitude towards the marital vow: one minute he or she feels completely serious about it and the next he or she is having an affair. This is quite intelligible within a consumerist culture. All the above is just contemporary commentary on the biblical teaching about "gaining the whole world but losing oneself."

3) Consumerism, the Society and the Environment

Diligence, frugality, and creativity are often the cultural foundation of a successful economy. Ironically, the latter often produces an entrenched consumerist culture which erodes away these bases. In this way, consumerism is self-defeating. Consumer culture is also corrosive of social morality. People get squeezed out when economics is king. So consumer culture has a tendency to develop into a dehumanized culture. People know the price of everything but the value of nothing:

"Money quickly and conveniently reduces all concrete and qualitative relationships to comparability, making rational choice possible. As money rationalizes our experience of the world by making everything arithmetically comparable, however, so we actually begin to experience the world as a place devoid of qualities" (Gay in Clapp 1988, p.25)

The destructive effects of consumerism on our environment is also well-known and I won't belabour this point. All in all, the point is that while a consumer culture may succeed to glue together a stable society for a while, in the long run it is detrimental to the human community as a whole.

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Christian Discipleship in a Consumer Society

It should by now be clear that it is not easy to be a faithful disciple of Christ in a consumer society. I have no panacea to offer. The following are just some points that I find helpful as I struggle through this problem:

1) Critical Awareness of our Society and Christian Values

For the East Asian Christians, the consumerist game is not too hard to play. There is the danger that we identify with it too much that we are not even aware of the implicit values of the consumer culture. We may even try to Christianize those values by proof-texts. We need to distance ourselves from the consumer culture and critically evaluate it in light of truly Christian values. We also need to reflect honestly upon our own selves- To what extent have we been shaped by the consumerist ethos? What is the ground of our self-identity? It is painful to do so but Christian discipleship asks nothing less than this. If Christ is not the Lord of all (including our life-style), he is not the Lord at all.

2) Freedom to be Different- the Model of Jesus Christ

We need to constantly bear in mind the model of Christ: "Though he was rich, yet for our sake he became poor, so that we through his poverty might become rich." This reminds us of where the true riches lie, and of the freedom of Christ. As we commit our lives to Him, we also gain the freedom to be different from the world: "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is- his good, pleasing and perfect will" (Rm 12:2)

3) God as our Ultimate Satisfaction and Ground of Self-identity

The verse above talks of the will of God as pleasing. Apart from recognizing the illusory happiness of consumerism, we need to understand that God is not against happiness. He offers His love and beauty as the lasting source of our happiness. Furthermore, His love in Christ is a much firmer ground of our self-identity. For Christians, "I am loved, therefore I am" (Gal 2:20). This is a love which calls us to transcend ourselves in service of God and others.

4) Celebration of the Goodness of Creation: Gratitude and Stewardship

Christians are not against consumer goods as such. We have the freedom to use them; the key is a grateful heart (1 Tim 4:4). The difference is that: postmodern consumption causes us to close in upon our self-gratification; Christian consumption of created goods with a grateful heart opens up a relationship with the Creator. The former breeds greed and inordinate desires. The latter brings joy and self-control.

5) Striving for a Just Society and Economic Order

Christians cannot adopt a callous stance towards those who are deprived of the basic needs because we are called to "act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). The former attitude betrays a merciless attitude and a neglect of the just distribution of goods in a society, both rooted in spiritual arrogance [as though we are really kings of the world!] What is a just economic order is a complicated question I can't deal with here. I just point out that Christians should not ignore the question of social justice. At the very least, for those who have surplus, they should develop a habit of giving to and sharing with the needy.

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6) A Consuming Church or the Community of Resident Aliens?

Christian discipleship is a corporate matter. We are not likely to practice Christian values in the modern society without the support of like-minded brothers and sisters. Unfortunately, very often the churches themselves buy into the consumerist life-style and become consumerist churches. As the theologian Stanley Hauerwas reminds us, if the church really hopes to be the light of the world, she must let go the wish to merge happily with the world. Rather the church should be the community of resident aliens, witnessing to the kingdom life-style.

Conclusion

Ultimately, consumerism is about love, the order of love. For Christians, the consuming passion for the consumer goods needs to be overridden by a consuming love for God. Otherwise, our lives will be consumed by this consuming passion itself. God help us all!

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