Ethical Reflections on Consumerism and Evangelical Christianity in Romania

Dănuț-Daniel Martin

Rvd. Holy River, London, United Kingdom,
PhD (c) "Aurel Vlaicu" University of Arad, Romania
danmirmartin@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: The paper highlights the negative, as well as the positive, consequences of consumerism for Evangelical communities in post-communist Romania. Consumerism is identified as a feature of postmodernity, as a way of life that focuses on pleasure, possessions, desire, and consumption. It may offer opportunities for Christian ministry, but it also presents a challenge due to its penchant for individualism, seeking one's own satisfaction to the detriment of others, and the priority given to material aspects of life rather than spiritual matters.

KEY WORDS: consumerism, postmodernity, evangelical Christianity, Romanian society, Christians in Romania

Introduction

The collapse of Eastern European Communism some 30 years ago has opened the door to many social, political and economic changes in the life of Romanian citizens, some of them positive and some negative (Măcelaru 2021, 80-84). Economic progress and freedom of movement were accompanied by the progressive capitulation of the Romanian society to a consumerist ethos, a move fueled by access to goods and services, previously unheard of

in the country, typical of a free market economy, which gradually replaced the traditional commercial institutions and comportment. Undoubtedly, access to goods is something to appreciate. However, less so is the gradual change to a consumerist mind-set that has taken roots within communities of faith that traditionally would have resisted such change. Thus, "consumerism" is what concerns us in this paper, and that in the global sense of the word. For "consumerism is global, not in the sense that all may consume, but in the sense that all are affected by it" (Lyon 1999, 88).

Consumerism as a feature of postmodernity

Christian thinkers have long endeavored to speak about consumerism, and that mostly in negative terms. For Dave Collis (1999, 2), consumerism is "the voice which narrates a fragmented story full of myths centred around money" which "blurs the reality/illusion boundaries through imposing a type of hyper-reality." Mark Buchanan (1999, 63) speaks of "consumerism" as if it were an alternative idolatrous religion. He writes:

> The Cult of the Next Thing is consumerism cast in religious terms. It has its own litany of sacred words: more, you deserve it, new, faster, cleaner, brighter. It has its own deep-rooted liturgy: charge it, instant credit, no down payment, deferred payment, no interest for three months. It has its own preachers, evangelists, prophets, and apostles: ad men, pitchmen, and celebrity sponsors. It has, of course, its own shrines, chapels, temples, meccas: malls, superstores, club warehouses. It has its own sacraments: credit and debit cards. It has its own ecstatic experiences: the spending spree.

Consumerism is "The Spirit of the Age" (e.g. Bartholomew and Mortiz 2000), the pursuit of unlimited pleasure (Gabriel and Lang 1991, 100), the promise of freedom (Wenham 2000, 129), the carving for material possessions (Buchanan 1999, 63-64), and the never-ending desire for purchasing and consumption (Collis 1999, 20).

Consumerism has also been associated with "postmodernity." According to David Lyon (1999, 88), "if postmodernity means anything, it means the consumerist society." Elsewhere Lyon (2000, 77) writes: Consumerism, that is lifestyle and cultures structured around consumption, is a defining feature of the postmodern. Consumerism works in tandem with new media

as one of two crucial characteristics and carriers of postmodernity. Direct mail, computer-generated niche marketing, expresses this marriage perfectly. Strolling and shopping have become an important part of life for many people in the affluent societies. Leisure consumption is displacing work as the source of identity. Disneyland draws all this together in one symbolic place, epitomizing the postmodern focus on consumption and the self, on desire and choice.

Similarly, J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walls (1995, 60) describe consumerism as the "carnival" or "the mall culture" of postmodernity. In the least, the consumerist culture is regarded to be an important feature of postmodernity as it influences society in all of its aspects: moral (Scotland 2000, 135), social and cultural (Lyon 1999, 71). Given its wide impact, we can also say that it is a means by which people's identities are shaped (Lyon 1999, 71, 74). As Alan Storkey (2000, 115) observes,

> There are many theories of postmodernism, and as a practicing sociologist I have read most of them. I have several more of my own, including one that took something like ten years to develop. But much of the erudite and even arcane discussion of postmodernism misses the most powerful theory of all. Postmodernism is consumption. The deconstruction and fragmentation which is often identified with changes in approach to text and philosophy is actually buying, advertisements, TV culture, in-your-face entertainment, shopping, pressure, thing-filled living-in a word consumption.

To conclude, we could regard consumerism as postmodernism's basic outlook on life. It is a pervasive feature of the contemporary society and its effects on individual and community life are wide-ranging, deep-reaching and long-enduring. It should therefore come as no surprise that consumerism is also affecting faith communities. This is the aspect that will concern us in the reminder of the paper.

Consumerism and Evangelical Christianity – Negative Consequences

One of the phrases frequently used by leaders within the Evangelical Romanian context is: "The problem is not the presence of the church in the world but the presence of the world in the church." Why is that so? Because

the voice of the world speaks through consumerism in many languages and from many sources, including television, radio, media, advertising, the mouths of politicians, the music, the internet, etc (Collis 1999, 12). Umberto Eco characterizes our world as an "uncontrollable plurality of messages" (Eco 1986, 148). Myers (1994, 61) describes the voice of consumerism as "a relentless aural and visual onslaught upon our consciousness, with objectified texts and seductive subtexts, which we cannot help but absorb." All these suggest that there is a certain abusive influence consumerism has upon individuals and communities. The question, here, however, is whether consumerism impinges on our spiritual life; and if so, how? Lyon (1999, 72) has argued that consumerist culture influences "not just artistic and consumer goods but intellectual and *religious* ones become subject to the market which resists both monopoly and hierarchy". Similarly, Miles (1998, 1) notes that the parallel drawn between consumerism and religion is not accidental, since consumerism "is arguably the religion of the late twentieth century." Does this mean that consumerism is "bad news" for the churches in a context as Romania, a society that is still moving away from the communist mindset and structures toward the new free-market, democratic, western models (cf. Măcelaru 2016, 35-54; 2020, 375-386; 2021, 80-84)?

I propose that the danger consumerism poses for the Evangelical community in a place like Romania is the excessive re-branding of the Christian message so as to fit the new market models, thus stifling the prophetic voice of the church and therefore missing on the role it has to evaluate, challenge and eventually critique the consumerist culture (cf. Bartholomew 2000, 85). Bartholomew observes that there is "a fine line between being relevant and losing integrity, and in order to have successful 'ministries' many churches too easily start packaging the gospel as a product for consumers" (2000, 86). Thus, a market-oriented approach is potentially disastrous to education and faith. For instance, it is my personal assessment that courses in the Seminary where I pursued my theological education in Bucharest, Romania, methodologically speaking, are more secular than religious. Thus, the future leaders of the church are becoming managerially intelligent without however being spiritually deep. And since the face of the church is directly dependent on how spiritual or secular her leaders are, the very future identity of the Evangelical community in the country is at stake.

Another dimension of consumerism is the pursuit of "the latest" in all aspects of life: culture, fashion, possessions, etc. This has affected the younger generation within the churches in the region. Such lack of discernment is a danger to genuine spiritual growth within the community of faith. In this regard, Lasch's note on the narcissistic nature of consumerism, which focuses our attention on the present rather than the past or the future is relevant. He explains that "to live for the moment is the prevailing passion to live for your self, not for your predecessors or posterity" (Lasch 1979, 5). Such worldview, which claims that the most recent is the best, is a serious challenge to the Christian tradition, which is many at times perceived as old-fashioned and irrelevant (Drane 1994, 14).

The promotion of pluralism may also pose a threat to faith communities since "pluralism easily becomes relativism" (Cobb 1975, 58). The popular form of such thinking is expressed as: "You can believe (do, be) whatever you like as long as it doesn't hurt me" (Riddell 1988, 60). No wonder that Christian leaders in Romania have become increasingly nervous when faced with pluralism and have chosen an isolationist attitude, which is the reversal of the coin, as negative as its counterpart (Măcelaru 2021, 80-84). As Riddell (1988, 65) observes,

> a new generation in a new culture wants to throw the doors open and listen to all the stories. If there is such a thing as truth, they argue, it will emerge from listening to these stories. The concept of truth they are reacting to is objective, rationalistic, individualistic, and linear. Stories, on the other hand, are subjective synthetic, relational and playful."

Related to the above, is the acute tendency to individualize and privatize the Christian faith evident within Evangelical communities. The pursuit of personal spiritual experiences, fueled by a desire for personal spiritual satisfaction is a manifestation of the same outlook on life that forms the base of consumerism. Since a "consumer society is individualistic by definition" (Sulkenen et al., 1997, 6), the "actualization" of Christian ministry models to fit the new society is bound to lead to "strong individualism and in particular a hedonistic understanding of the self with devastating moral implications for society and the church" (Walker 1999, 3). Evidently, this would have deep implications in regard with community life and a community-based self-understanding. Scotland notes that one aspect of consumerism, frequently

termed "niche marketing," advances the idea of the customized, individualized approach, designed to reach targeted individuals, or groups of people, with the Christian message, fashioned to fit their distinctive tastes and values (Scotland 2000, 149). This is "Christian consumerism" at its best, because "evangelism without a worldview is simply marketing with no purpose other than a desire for success and no criteria by which to judge the results other than mounting numbers of warm bodies" (Wells 1994, 221).

To conclude, since we live in a culture concerned with the satisfaction of oneself, with personal fulfillment and the meeting of individual needs, the shape of Christian life and witness has undergone change as well (Cray 2000, 157). As Christopher Lasch has warned, "the contemporary climate is therapeutic not religious. People hunger not for personal salvation (…) but for the feeling, the momentary illusion, of personal well-being" (1979, 7). In such a society Christians may feel tempted to live for the spiritual experience, a sort of "feel-good" factor, to the detriment of genuine biblically based spirituality, which is evaluated in terms of "the fruit" it bears and the service to the lost and the needy it provides. Again, from personal observation, it seems that many at times Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity in Romania falls prey to the pursuit of personal "encounters" with the Holy Spirit to the detriment of genuine conversion, sanctification and participation in the *Missio Dei*. Could this tendency have something to do with "the spirit of the age" – consumerism?

Consumerism and Evangelical Christianity – Opportunities

The fall of Eastern-European communism came at the down of a new era, a period in which the modern worldview begun to collapse the postmodern fingerprints became more pronounced. As one of my colleagues has recently observed, this would mean that we live in "post" society: post-modern, post-industrial, post-critical, post-liberal, post-Enlightenment, post-Christian, post-Communist, post-etc. Undoubtedly, this may represent a serious threat, especially to communities of faith that "have hitched their wagon to some aspect of modernity" (Gohen 1999, 167). However, it may also be an opportunity. According to Gohen (1999, 167), in postmodernism "the church has lost its dominant position and is now at the margins. As it struggles with its identity, the opportunity is there to recover a missionary

self-consciousness". In fact, there seems to be a connection between spiritual revivals around the world and the consumerist culture. As Drane indicates,

> … the spiritual revival has tended to be influenced by the consumer culture, so that religious options are selected and combined to suit the tastes and lifestyles of their users. Dazzling and bewildering arrays of different spiritualities compete for attention, each of them claiming to be able to offer something that will help us find our souls again, and chart a safe course for the future. The goods on offer in this religious market-place range from messages from spirit guided and extra-terrestrials, to neo-paganism, Celtic mythology and aboriginal spirituality - not to mention renewed interest in astrology and a vast range of psychological therapies offering the prospect of a renewed, holistic humanity (Drane 1994, 16).

Similarly, Scotland emphasizes that the accomplishment of "confined marketing enterprises" has positive implications for churches. He gives examples of church planters, who begun new congregations with the specific objective of reaching particular people groups, or ethnic minorities, or specific age subpopulations. He agrees that "this kind of precise targeting has proven to be an effective means of evangelism and has seen the emergence of unique enterprises" (Scotland 2000, 149). Of course, the question remains as to the authenticity of the spiritual experience sought by the new converts, but according to Lyon (2000, 82), more consumption may mean less conservative-style but not necessarily less sacred. He explains:

> The new symbols that excite, inspire, or give a sense of connection with others may actually be cultural commodities, available in the mall, on TV, or on CD. In this light, the sacred may in one sense be reduced, in another relocated, in a third redefined. These processes have huge implications for understanding both the postmodern and its relation to contemporary religious life (Lyon 2000, 84).

To conclude, it seems that there is a certain freedom that comes with a consumer culture, the freedom to perceive God as the "author of our satisfaction" who fills "a niche in the market through satisfying the desires of customers" (Walker 1999, 3). However, I argue that while learning what is good and worthy from consumerist methodology in order to build bridges for mission, Christians also need to remain faithful to the ethos of the Gospel.

Conclusion: The Responsibility of Christians in a Consumerist Culture

I have argued above that the consumerist society comes with both positive and negative features. As such Christians and church leaders must be constantly engaged in the task of analysing their surrounding culture and the needs of the people who live within it. Firstly, this may mean a recovery of a biblically based worldview. As Bartholomew (2000, 94) emphasizes,

> What we thus need is for Christians to consciously allow their worldview to become more and more biblical, to think through all aspects of our culture from a Christian perspective. Only thus will we exercise and embody a prophetic perspective in our own context and resist the idols of our day, such as consumerism.

Indeed, not all pastors or Christian leaders will be experts on cultural analysis and social phenomena. However, we can expect that they keep their audiences attentive to God's word and thus direct them to fulfil their role within the society. The church needs gifted thinkers who have the courage to engage their culture. As Wells (1998, 4) points out, "part of the theological task must always be to ask what it means to have this word in this world at this time". And the only way this can be accomplished is by engaging in "careful, rigorous, and sustained analysis" (Wells 1998, 4) of one's culture. Of course, on the other hand, Christians must stay alert so that the analysis of culture does not become the objective, thus losing sight of the message itself. To "market the gospel using consumerist models without necessarily changing the product" (Scotland 2000, 150) ought to remain the objective.

To accomplish the above, I argue that maintaining one's integrity as Christian and as minister is a vital ingredient. That would allow for an objective assessment of positives and negatives of culture. If not so, the church loses its reason for being. That is, "when the church abandons the biblical worldview, when it fails to confront its culture with this worldview in a cogent fashion, it has lost its nerve, its soul" (Wells 1994, 223). This applies both at individual and community levels. Integrity for the church is to embody that which it is meant to be – the people of God, the sign of hope, the agent of transformation in a world grown old with sin and cynicism. Regarding these, Kenneson and Street (1997, 23), rightly state:

We believe that the church is called to be a sign, a foretaste, and a herald of God's present but still emerging kingdom. Because the hallmark of the kingdom is God's reconciling in the world, the church lives to point to embody, and to proclaim that reconciling work. But because this present-but-still-coming kingdom is a certain kind of kingdom, the church is called to be a certain kind of people. Not just any kind of community will do. If the convictions that animate the life of the church are at cross-purposes with the convictions at the hert of this coming kingdom, than the church will fail to be what God has called it to be. If the church's embodied life and witness are to be a sign, a foretaste, and a herald of this kingdom, then the church must strive diligently to embody faithfully those convictions that make visible this kingdom.

Thus the responsibility for the Christian nowadays is to "consume" the word of God so that she or he is equipped to resist consumerism as an ideology while employing its methods where appropriate. This is Bartholomew's plea as he looks for "a way of consuming the Bible" which "will inoculate us against idols such as consumerism rather than allowing us to succumb to them" (2000, 97). Within this context integrity means to develop a Christian worldview that is integrally shaped by the Bible. In this way we may learn that we are made in God's image as fundamentally moral beings rather than not consumers. Thus, the satisfaction of our desires pales in significance when compared with the lasting value of doing what is right. Such an attitude calls us away from consumerism to a lifestyle of simplicity, generosity and contentment, in which we take responsibility for the other in our communities and use the gifts God has given us (talents, work, even money) to serve the other. As Green (1996, 130) has claimed, our primary responsibility is "stewardship". The responsibility of Christian communities is to serve the needs of the society, without compromises, but with courage and wisdom.

References

Bartholomew, Craig. 2000. "Consuming God's Word: Biblical Interpretation and Consumerism." In *Christ and Consumerism: A Critical Analysis of the Spirit of the Age*. Edited by Craig Bartholomew and Thortsten Mortiz. Carlisle: Paternoster Press.

Bartholomew, Craig and Thortsten Mortiz, eds. 2000. *Christ and Consumerism: A Critical Analysis of the Spirit of the Age*. Carlisle: Paternoster Press.

Buchanan, Mark. 1999. "The Cult of the Next Things." *Christianity Today* 43/10: 62–72.

Collis, Dave. 1999. "The Abuse of Consumerism." *Zadok Paper* S101. http://www.zadok.org.au/papers/collis/colliss10103.shtml

Cobb, John. 1975. *Christ in a Pluralistic Age*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press.

Cray, Graham A. 2000. "The Toronto Experience in a Consumer Society." In *Christ and Consumerism: A Critical Analysis of the Spirit of the Age*. Edited by Craig Bartholomew and Thortsten Mortiz. Carlisle: Paternoster Press.

Drane, John. 1994. *Evangelism for a New Age: Creating Churches for the Next Century*, London: Marshall Pickering.

Eco, Umberto. 1986. *Travels in Hyper-reality*. Harcourt: Brace & Jovanovich, San Diego.

Gabriel, Y. and T. Lang. 1991. *The Unmanageable Consumer*. London: Sage.

Goheen, Mike. 1999. "Towards a Missiology of Western Culture." *European Journal of Theology* 7/2:155–68.

Green, Stephan. 1996. *Serving God? Serving Mammon?* London: Marshall Pickering.

Kenneson, P.D. and J.L. Street. 1997. *Selling Out the Church: The Danger of Church Marketing*. Nashville: Abngdon.

Lasch, C. 1979. *The Culture of Narcissism*. New York: Warner.

Larkin, William J. 1998. "Approach to and Images of Biblical Authority for the Postmodern Mind." *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 8: 129–38.

Lyon, David. 2000. *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Lyon, David. 1999. *Postmodernity*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Măcelaru, Marcel V. 2021. "Naming the Issue in Contemporary Contexts. Part 4: Eastern Europe." In *Whole-Life Mission for the Whole Church*. Edited by Mark Greene and Ian Shaw, 80–84. ICETE Series. Carlisle: Langham Global Library.

Măcelaru, Marcel V. 2020. "Witnessing Christ in Eastern Europe: An Assessment of Context." In *Proclaiming Christ in the Power of the Holy Spirit: In the Face of Major Challenges*. Edited by Wonsuk Ma, 375–86. Tulsa: ORU Press.

Măcelaru, Marcel V. 2016. "The Context of Theological Education in Eastern Europe: Past, Present, Future." In *Re-Imagining Theological Education*.

Edited by M.V. Măcelaru, C. Constantineanu and R.V. Ganea, 35–54. Cluj-Napoca: Risoprint / Bucharest: Plērōma.

Middleton, J. Richard and Brian, J. Walls. 1995. *Truth Is Stranger than it Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age*. London: SPCK.

Miles, Steven. 1998. *Consumerism as a Way of Life*. London: Sage.

Myers, Ched. 1994. *Who Will Roll Away the Stone?* New York: Orbis Books,.

Riddell, Mike. 1988. *Threshold to the Future*. London: SPCK.

Scotland, Nigel. 2000. "Shopping for a Church: Consumerism and the Churches." In *Christ and Consumerism: A Critical Analysis of the Spirit of the Age.* Edited by Craig Bartholomew and Thortsten Mortiz. Carlisle: Paternoster Press.

Storkey, Alan. 2000. "Postmodernism Is Consumption." In *Christ and Consumerism: A Critical Analysis of the Spirit of the Age.* Edited by Craig Bartholomew and Thortsten Mortiz. Carlisle: Paternoster Press.

Sulkenen, J.P., H. Radner Holmwood and G. Schulze. 1997. *Constructing the New Consumer Society*, Basingstoke: Macmillan.

Walker, Andrew. 1999. "Consumerism, Personhood and the Future of Christian Mission." *Gospel and Culture Newsletter* 24.

Wells, David. 1994. *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans / Leicester: IVP.

Wells, David. 1998. *Losing our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover its Moral Vision* Leicester: IVP.

Wenham, Gordon. 2000. "Life and Death and the Consumerist Ethic." In *Christ and Consumerism: A Critical Analysis of the Spirit of the Age.* Edited by Craig Bartholomew and Thortsten Mortiz. Carlisle: Paternoster Press.