

## Jesus in Dundrum: Between God and Mammon

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**O**n 3 March 2005 a Catholic priest, a Methodist minister and a Church of Ireland minister attended the opening of the new Dundrum Town Centre.<sup>1</sup> One prayed:

*God of Beauty, may we see in the magnificence of this centre a reflection of your beauty, variety, brightness and colour, may it fill us with wonder and may it raise our hearts and spirits to you.*

Another prayed:

*God of Creation, may we see something of you in the creative talents of the various teams involved in designing, constructing, coordinating and funding this development.*

These remarkable benedictions of global capital and consumer culture seem incongruous, even incredulous, given that the Christian churches see consumerism as corrosive of morality and spirituality and at the root of many social evils. But the event, and the attendance of representatives of the Christian churches, articulates the

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<sup>1</sup> R. Boland, 'A new religion', *The Irish Times*, 4 March 2005.

profound cultural change Ireland has undergone in recent decades, as well as the crisis faced by established religions in contemporary society.

Until relatively recently, religion, and in particular Catholicism, was a dominant force in Irish society. The Catholic Church exercised power and influence over every aspect of society: from state policy, through community, education and family, to individual morality and the bedroom. The Church was also seen as essential in maintaining and creating social cohesion and order. In the later decades of the twentieth century, however, it lost both its monopoly over morality and the trust of its constituency.<sup>2</sup> While this process was accelerated by revelations of hypocrisy and abuse within the institution, it was also facilitated by the drive towards modernity and the embracing of neoliberalism: the values, morals and ethos of the market.

In many ways the shopping centre and mall best represent the change in the material, social and cultural fabric of everyday life. Where once the churches dominated the streetscapes of village and town life, now it is shopping centres and malls that dominate and lay claim to the status of Mecca, Cathedral and Temple. Not only are they centres of social and consumer activity, but they are represented as places of pilgrimage and worship, as centres of meaning. For many, consumption is a new religion.

*Handbags, glad rags, totems and pagans: Consumption as a new religion*

The idea that consumption or shopping is a new religion is easy to dismiss as a silly, trivial media invention, a piece of postmodern playfulness or indeed a grotesque insult to established churches. But consumption and the practice of shopping is far from trivial, rather it is something that should be taken seriously. Consumer culture and ethos

<sup>2</sup> T. Inglis, *Moral Monopoly: The Rise and Fall of the Catholic Church in Modern Ireland*, Dublin: UCD Press, 1998.

increasingly infiltrate everyday life, exercising a new moral monopoly, a dominant moral framework through which social action is pursued and everyday life negotiated.

For Émile Durkheim, all religions are true, at least to the extent that they are a reflection of the norms, values and social relationships in a society or culture. Religion is a collective production of society, based on a shared understanding, and an attempt to give meaning to the nature of existence. Its function is to produce social order and to provide a moral framework for the negotiation of everyday life.

Durkheim defines religion as 'a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say things set apart and surrounded by prohibitions – beliefs and practices that unite its adherents in a single moral community called a church'.<sup>3</sup> There are a number of key elements in this definition. In the first place religions are collective representations that articulate the shared beliefs and values of a particular group. These representations are based on the separation of the sacred from the profane or the everyday. It is important to note that what becomes sacred is extracted from the everyday. At its most basic the sacred takes the form of the totem, an object or animal accorded symbolic power that has particular meaning for the tribe or clan. It comes to be an expression of identity, to the extent that it appears to take on a life of its own and gains power over the tribe and the individuals therein. As a system of meaning, the totem encapsulates the rules, regulations and constraints that surround everyday life and provides a template and moral framework for social action. While the totem is a symbolic declaration of identity by the clan, of how its members relate to the world and who they are, it also defines who or what the clan should be and brings with it the power to regulate and legislate. As such, religion, although a collective projection, is external to and coercive of its members.

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<sup>3</sup> E. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 46.

In contemporary society, commodities and brands appear to fill this function and take on the appearance of the sacred. Just as the totem in primitive societies was imbued with mystical qualities and meaning, so too the commodity is fetishised and accorded the power to give meaning: to articulate a set of values governed by rules and regulations of choice, taste, distinction and, of course, the economy. As Mike Featherstone argues, 'the sacred is able to sustain itself outside of organized religion within consumer culture'.<sup>4</sup> One has only to look at the power celebrity branding has on the consumer imagination. Commodities as diverse as Barbie and Beckham are represented as cultural exemplars and the bearers of meaning wherein moral codes are embedded and transformation and empowerment promised. They articulate values of style, self-esteem, desirability, adventure, glamour and beauty. Unlike the established religions, they offer the possibility of redemption, fulfilment and meaningfulness in this world, rather than the next, through a commitment to the consumption and performance of commodities and lifestyles.

Paradoxically, Fr Doherty, the Catholic priest who celebrated the Dundrum Town Centre launch, inadvertently captures the essence of the sacred nature of the commoditised culture. He reflects:

*Wherever there are human beings there is a sense of mystery, and at the depths of the ordinary we find what is extraordinary.*

While we can presume that he does not have Prada or Louis Vuitton in mind, he acknowledges Dundrum as a sanctified space: the location of God's creativity and magnificence. What he fails to realise is that the primary identity at play is that of the consumer rather than the Christian. If the

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<sup>4</sup> M. Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, London: Sage, 1991, p. 126.

consumer is open to the extraordinary, in search of redemption, absolution, enlightenment or the sacred, it will be found in the displays of commodities, brands and the 'Dundrum experience'.

*Beliefs, rituals and moral communities*

The sacred does not exist in the abstract or virtual. It is grounded in practice, performance and ritual. At its most basic, practice can be seen to operate at the level of shopping. The rituals and performance of shopping are much more complex than the mere purchase of commodities and the exchange of money. The mall is a place to stroll and peruse, to gaze and touch, to admire and disparage. It is a place to dramatise social standing, to lay claim to excellence in taste and distinction. Here the strolling consumer parallels the penitent pilgrim, although the 'stations of the cross' are replaced by icons of lifestyle – handbags on pedestals and the sights, sounds and aromas of global capital. Just as penitent pilgrims are united in their shared sense of guilt, reverence and awe, so too consumers are united in anxiety, admiration and desire.

Not only does shopping have its own discrete rituals; it has appropriated and translated the major Christian festivals and re-enacted them through the rituals of consumption. Christmas and Easter are now riots of consumption where the Christian message exists as an afterthought, if at all. The major Christian rites of baptism, communion, confirmation and marriage are more notable for their excessive displays and grotesque consumption than they are for any spiritual meaning.

Consumers' devotion is measured in terms of frequency and commitment to the consumption of commodities, brands or lifestyles and engagement in the rituals of consumption. Likewise the measure of a society seems to be most powerfully expressed through the lens of consumer confidence. Equally important is the ability to exercise taste and distinction through the cultured performance of fashion and

the exercising of choice in order to author meaningful narratives of the self.

The rituals and practices associated with religions and consumer culture are expressions of a core set of beliefs and values that give rise to what Durkheim refers to as a moral community or church. They are acts of supplication and declarations of belonging. It is within the moral community that the basis of social solidarity and cohesion is found and where obligations, social unity and identity are realised. A moral community also provides a moral framework through which society is understood and social action pursued. This might seem absurd. Surely the idea that consumer culture is a reflection of the moral compass of a society is ludicrous? Don Nugent, Director of the Dundrum Town Centre, does not think so, declaring of the Dundrum experience:

*It will define the way we live today and offer a holistic experience to enrich, indulge and inspire every aspect of our lives [based on] core values of quality, luxury and contemporary style.*

There is a clear morality to this liturgy: the morality of neoliberalism and the values of the market. It provides a moral framework of choice, a commitment to excellence and the integrity of the individualised consumer. It provides a way of living up to social commitments and responsibilities and, in so doing, legitimises and sanctions itself.

So above all, religion is a means of making sense of the world and taking action therein: its power and function is to regulate and to integrate. The mall is where integration and regulation appear in perfect harmony. It is where the private infiltrates and translates the public space. In malls we do not run, jump or play, talk loudly or indeed laugh out loud. Rather, disciplined bodies and blank faces stroll before the commodities arrayed, deferential to their power. The mall is stasis, an anaesthetised space, yet one that demands constant change and movement, shifting desires and infinite choice. It is a sanctuary from the mundane, from family,

work and the anxiety of everyday life. It is a place to be wooed, seduced and enchanted; a place to desire and be desired. It suggests that all is right with the world, family is intact, relationships are solid and the world is at peace. Unlike the vengeful gods of old, the new gods value us because we matter – *because we are worth it*. They offer redemption, salvation and, most importantly, immediate, if temporary, gratification.

If shopping does constitute a new religion, it is a paganish one. This should not take away from the remarkable achievements of consumer culture. It seems to hold us together in a moral community, despite the fragmented, fluid and individualised nature of society. It asserts that we are all individuals, and yet manages our disconnectedness into a moral community, albeit one based on a fragmented 'collective unconsciousness'. These religious manifestations stand somewhere between, or even combine, elements of a primitive commitment to totemism and the Catholic principles of a universal church or community. The ecumenical impulse of capital, its impulse to turn everything into a commodity, serves to unite the tribal commitment to totemic brands, (life)styles, celebrity, commodities and individualism. It articulates a wider system of meaning and commitment, a way of understanding and being in the world. Even as it materially and socially excludes and marginalises, it culturally includes through commitment to consumer choice, be it in Penney's or the House of Fraser.

*Religion as consumption: In search of a congregation*

This brings us to the dilemma for the established churches as captured in the coincidence of God and Mammon in Dundrum. Despite losing the monopoly on morality, the established religions maintain an important role in people's lives. While adult weekly attendance at religious services had fallen to 50 per cent by 2003, a substantial majority of the Catholic and Protestant population considered God

important in their lives and there were strong indications that 'religious orientations of some sort remain quite strong' across the main religious denominations.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, while 90 per cent of Catholics expressed a belief in Heaven, only 57 per cent believed in Hell. This is telling and reflects a key area in the loss of power of the Christian churches.

The monopoly of fear was a central regulatory tool of the major religions, especially Catholicism. While earthly existence may have been a 'vale of tears', failure to live within the values, beliefs and practices of one's religion offered much worse: eternal damnation and the torment of the fires of Hell. The salvation, redemption and peace offered by Heaven could only be achieved through faithful adherence to God's Word.

In contemporary society, fear and anxiety are products of consumer culture, as the consumer is invited to live up to idealised bodies, lifestyles and expressions of distinction. Failure to do so attracts ridicule, social isolation and exclusion. Here the media and culture industries play a leading role in the production of anxieties, as well as in communicating the power of commodities and appropriate lifestyle choices to absolve and assuage such anxieties.

Religion seems to remain important in contemporary society but has lost its exclusive mastery over its congregation. Not only is it losing its monopoly of fear, but it is also losing its monopoly of redemption. As such, the traditional religions are displaced and their congregations disembedded from the institutional constraints therein.<sup>6</sup> This does not herald the death or demise of established religions, but may represent an inversion of their position in society. Increasingly, 'practising Catholics' are à la carte Catholics, in that they decide which rules to observe,

<sup>5</sup> T. Fahey, B. C. Hayes and R. Sinnott, *Conflict and Consensus: A Study of Values and Attitudes in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland*, Dublin: IPA, 2005, p. 50.

<sup>6</sup> A. Giddens, *Modernity and Identity*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991.



especially in terms of sexual morality, and often supplement their moral frameworks by looking elsewhere.

Vincent Miller recognises the threat of consumer culture and the commodification of religion when he writes:

Consumer culture is a profound problem for contemporary religious belief and practice. Beyond the excesses of consumerism lie cultural dynamisms that incline people to engage as if they were consumer commodities ... When consumption becomes the dominant cultural practice, belief is systematically misdirected from traditional practices into consumption.<sup>7</sup>

Miller holds forth the possibility of a 'critical religious engagement' with consumer culture through 'interpretive practice'. In other words, rather than engaging with religion through the lens of consumption, he suggests that religious communities engage with the market and the practices of consumption through the 'interpretive practice' of the Church.

David Lyon argues that it 'makes sense to think of religion today as more of a cultural resource than as a social institution'.<sup>8</sup> Following Anthony Giddens, Lyon argues that we are now free to pick and choose and to construct our own narratives of the self. When the consumer goes shopping, he or she is not simply purchasing goods but rather is shopping for a self. As such, religions find themselves in the position where they offer a suite of philosophies and practices for the consumer to choose from on a mix-and-match basis. While some choose to devote themselves exclusively to the tenets of Catholicism, others will assemble a moral framework or narrative identity by choosing elements of Catholicism combined with the Dundrum 'core values of quality, luxury

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<sup>7</sup> V. Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith in a Consumer Culture*, New York: Continuum, 2004, p. 225.

<sup>8</sup> D. Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000, p. 88.

*and contemporary style*'. While this may be seen as a greater freedom for the individual, it might also be seen as an indictment of the culture and the corruption of human potential, where social action and consciousness are reduced to the values and ethos of the market.

Lyon also suggests that the exercise of choice does not necessarily result in the commodification or corruption of religion. Rather, it might be seen to represent the freedom from a puritanical, dogmatic relationship with religious institutions in favour of a more active and reflexive one. As such, the churches can no longer rely on their traditional position as the gatekeeper between Heaven and Hell, but must enter a religious marketplace, be reflexive, actively engage potential congregants/customers and compete in an entrepreneurial manner. Rather than God and Mammon meeting and competing in the same marketplace, each has their own marketplace. Consumers, be they in search of commodities or religion, appear to be stuck in – or maybe between – bewildering worlds where sense and non-sense are contiguous and interchangeable, and where the meaningless appears meaningful. For the churches, it appears to be a choice between a consumer ethos or a corporate ethos, both creatures of neoliberalism.

The attendance in Dundrum of the representatives of the Christian denominations recognises the power of the market and the primacy of the mall as a social space. While they endorse the mall as a place of God's beauty and power they also seek to position themselves as belonging and relevant. In doing so, they contribute to the sacredness of the commodities on display in sacred branded zones where niche devotions are articulated and meaning sought. The beauty of the mall is that it declares itself as the inclusive democratic space. From the inexpensive high fashion of H&M to the couture of the House of Fraser, all can stroll, peruse, touch and buy. While the rituals of consumption integrate and unite around a common morality, they also distinguish and exclude. They allow access to the totemic commodities to those desperate for identity and meaning.

The churches find themselves in the marketplace looking for an audience and a different way to offer their ethos. While this recognises that religion is now to be pursued through the lens of consumption, the danger for the churches is that they become a creature of market, a commodity that owes more to Mammon than God.

Karl Marx famously described religion as ‘the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions. It is the opium of the masses’.<sup>9</sup> Whether or not we accept the elevation of consumption to the status of religion it is hard to deny that consumer culture is now ‘the opium of the masses’, a reflection of false consciousness as humanity struggles to come to terms with the meaning of existence. As a reflection and production of society, it is imbued with the interests of the dominant classes and power interests, namely neoliberal capital. For capital, the beauty of capitalism is to turn all before it into a commodity, a thing to be bought and sold and, of course, fetishised.

### *Conclusion*

Although shopping as a pursuit may seem trivial, it is not. Consumer culture infiltrates, constitutes and informs how we understand ourselves in the world. It seeks to provide a moral framework through which we exercise choice and take social action. In doing so, it seeks to disempower, albeit in the name of empowerment. Everyday life, family, childhood, work and citizenship are translated and increasingly performed through the practices and rituals of consumption. Not only that, but consumption achieves an ecumenism that other religions struggle to achieve. The mall declares itself a broad church that caters for all styles, sects, clans and beliefs. While the collective conscience is united in the

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<sup>9</sup> K. Marx, ‘Toward a critique of Hegel’s philosophy of right: Introduction (1844)’, in L. H. Simon (ed.), *Karl Marx; Selected Writings*, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994, p. 28.

desire to consume, participation is achieved on the principles of distinction and individualisation. In such a way all appear included.

But the idea of consumption as the, or a, new religion is somewhat simplistic. While shopping does take on religious qualities, the emergence of consumption as a system of ideas has broader implications. Contemporary society is characterised by an increased fragmentation and fluidity, where individuals become disembedded from traditional religious institutions or organisations. Religion, in the sense of the sacred and a system of meaning, flows through everyday life, although meaning is more precarious and harder to achieve and maintain. While institutionalised religion controlled, defined and interpreted the sacred, this is no longer the case. Individuals are free to pick and choose, to embrace and discard, and to construct their own moral framework.

The cultural and social apparatus of capital may disembed from institutions and regimes of tradition and modernity, only to re-embed in a regime that claims innocence and represents itself as free of ideology. The trivial and fatuous nature of shopping and consumption disguises its terrifying power. As Marx has argued, commodification disconnects us from the social and alienates us from our 'species-being' or human potential. A commodity-based morality gives the illusion of freedom and empowerment, even as it enslaves. It renders invisible and excludes 'flawed consumers': the poor, the trafficked, the undocumented, the homeless and the marginalised. It renders invisible and silences the grotesque and poisonous exploitation of workers – children, women and men – in the sweatshops, fields and hothouses of the periphery. It renders the consumer-citizen complicit in this exploitation and in their own alienation.

However we feel about consumption as the new religion, we can see that the established religions have been displaced from their function of giving meaning to society. But in contemporary society the sacred has a new twist: not

only does consumption take on the qualities of a religion but religious practice is pursued through the morality and framework of consumption. In that sense it is not extraordinary that the three clerics find themselves in the marketplace. Dundrum also benefits from the clerics' attendance: they confer a degree of legitimacy on the enterprise and ordain it as a source of social and spiritual good. Just as the three wise men of the Bible, through their adoration, sought to both honour and be recognised and authorised by the new God, so did the three clerics in Dundrum.

On 3 March 2005 a Catholic priest, a Methodist minister and a Church of Ireland minister attended the opening of the new Dundrum Town Centre. One prayed:

*God of Blessing, may your blessing touch the lives of countless numbers who will avail of the services and facilities of this centre.*

Another prayed:

*God of Love, may a spirit of dedicated service be present here, making real your loving and self-giving care for us all.*

Meanwhile a customer complained about the lack of pizzazz and 'balloons, bells and whistles ... celebrities to meet, designers talking about their clothes'.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> K. Sheridan, 'Centre with the mostest opens to acclaim', *The Irish Times*, 4 March 2005.