

PIOTR KOPIEC

## ECUMENISM AND THE CONSUMER SOCIETY

### Abstract

The description of “the consumer society” belongs to the catalogue of diagnosis of the modern world, in particular of the western civilization. It should be interpreted as a result of various social processes including globalization, spreading of the popular culture as well as the dechristianization. The article examines how the consumer society refers to the ecumenism.

**Key words:** ecumenism, consumer society, Church, postmodernism, Christianity.

At first sight it seems odd to juxtapose ecumenism and the consumer society. Both are considered to refer to different dimensions. However, we hugely need attempts to establish relations between them. The description of “the consumer society” belongs to the catalogue of diagnosis of the modern world, in particular of western civilization. It should be interpreted as a result of various social processes including globalization, spreading of popular culture as well as dechristianization. Conspicuous is that lots of the features of “the death civilization” highlighted by pope John Paul II can be found in the sociological analyses of the consumer society. For the Christian Churches, therefore, the challenge is working out how to reach the man of today — the consumer. For the totalitarian systems of XX<sup>th</sup> century, Christianity was the enemy. For the consumer society of the contemporary world it becomes more and more an alien system of ideas. Pope John Paul II wrote about the anthropological error of the totalitarian system which negates the truth of the human person. Now Christian theology has to highlight another error that lies in the ground of the today’s civilization of the consumer society.

---

Dr. PIOTR KOPIEC — Assistant Professor of the Department of the Protestant Theology at the Ecumenical Institute of the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin; address for correspondence: Al. Raławickie 14, 20-950 Lublin; e-mail: petrko@kul.pl

## WHAT THE CONSUMER SOCIETY IS?

What the consumer society is? We need various keywords which are used to describe our reality. We talk about the industrial and the post-industrial society, the civil society, the global and the pluralistic society. The keyword of the consumer society is used more and more often as its features become conspicuous to us. It doesn't refer, however, to the one, unique specific society which lives in the specific territory and creates specific social institutions for its members. The consumer society belongs to the descriptions of today's world which concerns the cultural and economic patterns spread in western civilization.

Definition of the consumer society still remains a matter of discussion. Different sociological theories have been offered to explain it which resulted in a number of definitions. Lack of one theory is quite natural in social science and leaves open various paths of enquiry. However in this case, the question is often does the consumer society exist or not. Furthermore, the consumer society is considered both as cultural and sociological phenomenon, which appears to cause lots of misunderstanding, if they are treated separately. Finally, due to the different attitudes, values and outlooks concerning the impact of the consumption on today's society, it is hugely difficult to estimate its influence.

The first and the most famous description and critique of the consumer society has been proposed by the Jean Baudrillard, French philosopher and sociologist, associated especially with postmodernism, in his book *La Société de consommation* ("The Consumer Society"). Baudrillard has placed his critique in the perspective of the concept of symbolic exchange referred particularly to the exchange existing in primitive societies. Unlike the ancient world, modern civilization has deprived exchange of the symbolic patterns; the bond between the signifier and the signified has been broken and "the dream of symbolic exchange, a dream of the status of the object and consumption beyond exchange and use, beyond value and equivalence"<sup>1</sup> no longer exists. In the foreword to the English edition, consumption has been described as "a new tribal myth," which "has become the morality of our present world. It is currently destroying the foundations of the human being, that is to say, the balance which European thought has maintained since the

---

<sup>1</sup> J. Baudrillard. *The Ecstasy of Communication*. In: S. Reamond. *Stardom and Celebrity*. London: Sage Publication 2007 p. 53.

Greeks between our mythological roots and the world of the logos.”<sup>2</sup> In his works Baudrillard has enumerated lots of features of the society focused on consumption. Firstly, the changes referred to communication which is no longer “real symbolic and didactic processes,” “achieved through a symbolic medium” and has a “technical, aseptic” form.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, transformation of sense of time which, unlike primitive society, in present world becomes a commodity. Society of consumption treats time as something to be used and even to be wasted. An old cliché of “time is money,” used by Benjamin Franklin and related to the dynamism of the industrial society, stressed the value of not wasting time. In the post-industrial epoch, however, time is declared to be intended to both, work and leisure, and “leisure time is separated from work time and one is obligated, constrained to spend it.”<sup>4</sup> Unlike the industrial epoch, thus, production is no longer the organizing principle of society and was replaced by social reproduction: media, information processing, cybernetic control models, socialization and knowledge industries etc. Baudrillard declared present civilization to be an era of simulation in which society has been organized around reproduction rather than production. Labour is, thus, no longer a productive power but a sign of one’s social status.

Such is the specific commodification of time (using the term of post-Marxian theories), it introduces other signs of the consumer society. After Baudrillard, personal identity of the present human being is determined by consumption and people vary in how they use the opportunities to consume; social position and social status are earned by amount and kind of purchases and impressions, and the entire social life is increasingly organized around consumption. People are not able to distinguish between real and created necessities and to imagine other ways of living. One can observe alienation and reification of the objects. The consumption society doesn’t seek after the meaning of existence but it looks for continuous spectacle; it results in its inability to introduce changes or revolutions.

Identity of human being emanates from the following of patterns created in extraterritorial cultural centers. These are spread by the network of media. In the light of what was written about the causes of the society of consumption, Baudrillard argues, that “in media societies, processes of signification

---

<sup>2</sup> J. Baudrillard. *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. London: Sage Publications 1998 p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 18.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 43.

are no longer underwritten by a metaphysics of presence or the promise of recovering some kind of original, authentic or privileged meaning.”<sup>5</sup> In the reality of media communication, in the media and high-tech society “the entire world has today become, in a sense, a giant theme park, ... like Disneyland,”<sup>6</sup> where people are caught up in the play of spectacles and images. The reality of humans relations has been replaced with simulation and the “real” no longer seems to have any meaning. Thus, rather than direct relations and direct contacts, which would be grounds for social communities, our society appears to be a mass of individual atoms.

#### THE POSTMODERN APPROACH: SOCIETY AND INDIVIDUALS IN THE POSTMODERN CONSUMER WORLD

The studies on popular culture have let emerge the context of scrutiny of the consumer society: Zygmunt Bauman, Polish sociologist and a leading interpreter of contemporary social conditions and practices, includes a description of the consumer society into his studies on postmodernism. Society of consumption appears even to be identified with the postmodern and post-industrial society. Bauman has proposed an approach of research in which the consumer society is considered in the context of popular culture as it is the grounding of the present consumption. Thus, Bauman writes about post-modern consumer society. After the Polish sociologist, to the intrinsic quality of the consumer society belongs temporary and transitory character of consumption: any desire can be considered as fully satisfied<sup>7</sup>. Further, the present feature: consumption should be instantaneous and without special preparation. Continual movement has been considered as the next quality: in the consumer society people are collectors of impressions, even unpleasant and dangerous ones. The old opposition between “to have” and to “be” is out of use: in the new epoch important is to experience and as a result of it, the consumer is incessantly in motion. Furthermore, unlike the ancient societies, not the ethical but the aesthetic appears to be a fundamental principle of the organizing of society. And finally, social exclusion or inclusion are achieved through the participation in the consumption activity. It is related to the idea

---

<sup>5</sup> D. Holmes, *Communication Theory: Media, Technology and Society*. London: Sage Publication 2005 p. 36.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* p. 37.

<sup>7</sup> M. Halawa, P. Wróbel (eds.). *Bauman o popkulturze*. Warszawa 2008 p. 89.

of tolerance. Tolerance in the consumer society however means, that one's distinctiveness is reckoned a private matter. People are not living "with" but "next to" and the alternative styles of life appear to be a globe theatre stage. The tolerance of the consumer rejects a sense and importance of the missionary attitudes. The present idea of tolerance is thus not related to the principle of solidarity. It fragmentizes rather than integrates. The social bonds and the community are more and more faded. Social relations in the consumer society are constrained to casual contacts.

Another implication is that the state in the consumption society renounces its normative functions and delegates its authority to the consumer market. Bauman argues that in the consumption epoch we should talk about the representative state which, under the impact of the market forces, plays its main role of the agent only (agentic state). This phenomenon is associated with the process of adiaphorization of the public sphere (in the definition offered by Jürgen Habermas); After Bauman, adiaphorization (from the Greek "adiaphoron" — indifferent things, term used by Philip Melanchthon, referred to matters not essential to faith) means "the social action that is morally indifferent"<sup>8</sup>. It refers in particular to the state institutions and organizations that "make action morally indifferent, that is, neither good nor bad and actually beyond the meaningfulness of those terms."<sup>9</sup>

What the consumer identity is? Bauman argues that the structures of the society organized around the consumption and by the market, have an enormous impact on its members. One's identity is not determined by beliefs or functions within society but becomes an image creating. Thus, individuals must be always "updating," following the fashion trends. It is corresponding to the next quality: the consumers are impatient. Impatience is declared to be a "trademark" of the consumer society. For members of this society the principle to be learnt and instilled is the rule of not wasting time. It is reflected in the market trends and in the new social stratification. According to the Polish sociologist, the social position reflects one's ability to decrease time for fulfilling his needs and dreams. Furthermore, the impatience of an individual relates to the lack of engagement. People are no longer able to focus on their functions and tasks.

A picturesque image of the consumer society is painted through the specific phenomena Bauman marked off. The most conspicuous examples emerged

---

<sup>8</sup> K. Tester, *The Social Thought of Zygmunt Bauman*, Palgrave Macmillian: New York 2004 p. 126.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

from the reflection on popular culture. The first one, therefore, is the multitude of authorities, and a power of experts. Unlike the past, today's authorities are expected to be the advisers and experts only.<sup>10</sup> They take off responsibility to make a decision. Secondly, a new approach to the health and wellbeing: Bauman argues that health means no longer to be ready to fulfill the social duties and to feel well, in brief, health is not only a desired state of body and mind but it means to be ready to face the challenges and impressions presented by consumption. Thirdly, the rejection of death. The incessant consumption has led to the societal denial of death. People lost their eschatological point of reference and have no longer any chance and time to look for transcendence while partying. Socrates once remarked, that philosophy means to practise the art of dying. For today's society both, philosophy and dying are put aside. Death is not destiny but an accident only.

The scrutiny of the consumer society let finds that its key organizing principles belong to relativism and a kind of social impressionism: both fade all categories of reality and led to the world of deification of one's impression and one's experiences; thus to the world of highly topped individualism.

THE CONSUMER SOCIETY AND CHRISTIANITY:  
HAS ECUMENISM BEEN IMPACTED BY THE CONSUMER  
PHILOSOPHY ?

Due to methodological reasons it is not possible to describe relations between Christianity and the consumer society in a short presentation. It is however easy to guess that the consumer society poses an enormous challenge for the Christian churches. Yet, one of the labels of the consumer society is calling the big shopping malls contemporary temples. So e.g. David Loy in his article "The religion of the Market" suggests, that "our present economic system should also be understood as our religion, because it has come to fulfill a religious function for us. The discipline of economics is less a science than the theology of that religion, and its god, the Market, has become a vicious circle of ever-increasing production and consumption by pretending to offer a secular salvation."<sup>11</sup> Roy goes even further, insisting

---

<sup>10</sup> Halawa, Wróbel. *Bauman o popkulturze* p. 133.

<sup>11</sup> D. R. Loy. "The Religion of the Market." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65/2 p. 275.

that “the Market is becoming the first truly world religion, binding all corners of the globe more and more tightly into a worldview and set of values whose religious role we overlook only because we insist on seeing them as ‘Secular’.”<sup>12</sup> It is a matter of discussion whether such sociological approaches could be seen as plausible, in particular when they lose the theological dimension of religion. It is however obvious that in the western civilization of consumption Christianity lost its position of way of an individual and a community life.

Various Christian denominations face a problem of living and acting in the consumer society. It is worthwhile to ask about how these challenges have been interpreted in the place of meeting of Christian churches and theologies of what the ecumenical movement is expected to be. Yet, Christian churches communicate themselves with each other mostly in the ecumenical dialogue – doctrinal, practical and spiritual ones. Does therefore ecumenism have a specific position referred to the reality of the consumption?

One remark should be made in the very beginning—the descriptions and understanding of ecumenism are different and depend on the particular Christian churches. World Council of Churches even states lack of one definition shared by its members. For the shorter way of describing ecumenism one could use the definition included in the Decree on Ecumenism of the Second Vatican Council: “The term “ecumenical movement” indicates the initiatives and activities planned and undertaken, according to the various needs of the Church and as opportunities offer, to promote Christian unity” (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, point 4).<sup>13</sup> Here therefore, it is necessary to put aside confessional differences and to look on Christianity as on the one bloc, which faces specific challenges of anthropological counter-vision of the consumer society. Thus, two approaches are possible: firstly, negative one, which interprets the consumer society as dangerous for the ecumenical movement; secondly, positive approach which let us look at the increasing consumption as at the chance for the ecumenism.

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p. 276.

<sup>13</sup> *The decree on ecumenism of the Second Vatican Council: a new translation*. Paulist Press 1965 p. 38.

---

NEGATIVE APPROACH: THE CONSUMER SOCIETY AS A THREAT  
FOR THE ECUMENICAL DIALOGUE

How does the society of consumption impact ecumenism? An answer for this question appears to be easy if we recognize ecumenism as an element of Christian life. All ways of putting Christianity aside are experienced by ecumenical movement as well. Various statistics of the ecumenical meetings, the conferences and the fellowships reflect the crisis of ecumenical engagement. Furthermore, one could experience an ideological apathy or even a discouragement by lack of its results, though it would be directly proportional to the decrease in religious practices within Christianity. Yet, the ecumenical movement has also been impacted by the consumer society in another way: it is sometimes associated with some of its factors. There are different attitudes toward the ecumenism within the Christian churches. According to its critics, ecumenism intends to establish an universal Christian church by disregarding the theological doctrines of the particular confessions and by fading one's confessional identity. Pope Pius XI presented already in 1928 his suspicious attitudes toward ecumenism by the next words: "Certainly such attempts can nowise be approved by Catholics, founded as they are on that false opinion which considers all religions to be more or less good and praiseworthy, since they all in different ways manifest and signify that sense which is inborn in us all, and by which we are led to God and to the obedient acknowledgment of His rule. Not only are those who hold this opinion in error and deceived, but also in distorting the idea of true religion they reject it, and little by little, turn aside to naturalism and atheism, as it is called; from which it clearly follows that one who supports those who hold these theories and attempt to realize them, is altogether abandoning the divinely revealed religion" (Encyclical *Mortalium Animos*, point 2).<sup>14</sup> Pope's thought is still shared by a number of Christians, regardless of the confession.

But how does it relate to the consumer society and its impact on ecumenism? The famous German theologian, Jürgen Moltmann spoke about macdonaldization of religion, by paraphrasing the term coined by George Ritzer. What does it mean referring to the Christianity? It is Christianity which acts as a supermarket of ideas and life patterns, where we could buy suitable one for us. It is a Pop-Christianity, which lets us choose the confession currently fits our life period, our expectations, demands, needs or even moods. It is a

---

<sup>14</sup> *Mortalium Animos: On Fostering True Religious Unity*. Angelus Press 1998 p. 16.

spiritual shopping mall where we could make our consumer choice in order to satisfy our religious needs.

According to the critics of ecumenism, it paves the way for the Pop-Christianity of the contemporary world. They ask how is it possible to create a united Christian church without renouncing the truths inherent in the particular theological systems? And has the consumer society been built on the "religious any old way," which referred to ecumenism as well, has it not? Furthermore, they consider the ecumenical movement as one of the inducements to construct the spiritual shopping malls, which make flexible the choice of the religious "life kit." According to its critics, ecumenism and the consumer society share a common denominator of the free market philosophy and the religious and world view tolerance. Thus, ecumenism becomes a sort of interconfessional tourism involved Christians make.

It is an enormous task of the people involved in the ecumenical movement to deny the plausibility of such brought accusation. Ecumenism consists of discovering the common spaces churches should expose, in the common respect and in the perspective of Christian love. Yet, it is very easy to cross the thin line of Pop-Christianity, the universal religious project apart from the cultural backgrounds and conditions. Here, as the keyword, one should consider the term of the confessional identity.

The confessional identity appears to be the basic factor, having been used in order to organize religious categories through which we could interpret the world, and its processes. Homogenous cultural Christianity or Christianity without the cultural roots seems to be a word void of content. On the other hand, the "spiritual shopping mall" of Pop-Christianity becomes an empty word as well. Every Christian confession derives from the particular culture and speaks its language and its categories. It is a sort of "spiritual fatherland" and of the "spiritual shelter," which in particular helps to deal with existential crisis, when we need clear answers, and answers with no doubts. The mission of the church appears to be impossible without the confessional identity.

The question of confessional identity and its place in one's religiosity and hierarchy of values is today of high importance. Its crisis is by many referred to as the crisis of the European churches and of Christianity in general. This question includes sometimes an attitude toward ecumenism.

The theologies of the particular confessions have been evolved the norms and the rules related to the ecumenical dialogue. The ecumenical principles of the Catholic theology are included in the Ecumenical Directory which was

originally published a few years after the end of the Second Vatican Council. The directory covers an ecumenical commitment arising from the Council, which had particularly been expressed by the Decree on Ecumenism (*Unitatis Redintegratio*). Its important to avoid so-called false irenicism—which has been considered as an ecumenism irresponsible carrying out: “Nothing is so foreign to the spirit of ecumenism as a false irenicism, in which the purity of Catholic doctrine suffers loss and its genuine and certain meaning is clouded” (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, point 4).<sup>15</sup> Pop-Christianity seems to be the counter-ecumenism as well, if it is ready to use in the ecumenical dialogue philosophy and anthropology derived from the rules of the consumer society. Thus, the question of how to carry out ecumenism, finds its answer in the Decree of the Second Vatican Council which had been enumerated the next Catholic principles of ecumenical dialogue: “These are: first, every effort to avoid expressions, judgments and actions which do not represent the condition of our separated brethren with truth and fairness and so make mutual relations with them more difficult; then, ‘dialogue’ between competent experts from different Churches and Communities. At these meetings, which are organized in a religious spirit, each explains the teaching of his Communion in greater depth and brings out clearly its distinctive features. In such dialogue, everyone gains a truer knowledge and more just appreciation of the teaching and religious life of both Communions. In addition, the way is prepared for cooperation between them in the duties for the common good of humanity which are demanded by every Christian conscience; and, wherever this is allowed, there is prayer in common. Finally, all are led to examine their own faithfulness to Christ’s will for the Church and accordingly to undertake with vigor the task of renewal and reform” (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, point 4).<sup>16</sup>

#### POSITIVE APPROACH: THE COMMON CHALLENGE OF THE CONSUMER SOCIETY

As said above, ecumenism has experienced ideological apathy in the last years. It lost its energy at the time after the Second Vatican Council, which resulted in many dialogues, proceeding in both, worldwide and regional

---

<sup>15</sup> *The decree on ecumenism* p. 38.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

perspectives. However, it is hard to describe the causes of the ecumenical lethargy: one speaks about lack of the conspicuous results, or about spiritual, or dechristianization. During various ecumenical meetings and conferences one asks more and more often: What is ecumenism for? What its goal is? Where should we head for? The answer is obvious: The goal of ecumenism was formed by Jesus Christ himself: "May they be one." This is the long-term, strategic goal. We do need however to define the operational goals as well.

It seems that the new operational goal for the ecumenical movement is provided by the challenges of the consumer society. Representatives of the Christian churches stress how seriously they face various problems of today. Most of them argue that a number of those problems have a background in the changes, or loss, of one's hierarchy of values. The continuous consumption of the western civilization rejects a deep reflection, and according to many Christian theologians, there is a huge lack of anthropological and theological scrutiny of the social and cultural crisis in modern societies. Unlike this opinion, it considers rather the wrong economic decisions of governments and international corporations to be the only cause of today's crisis. It seems however, that using the economic antibiotics for all social diseases would be like applying paracetamol only to the serious heart problems.

Due to the challenges of the society of consumption, had many Christian churches been moved to organize a common Christian bloc, and to look for a common standpoint. Yet, ordinary Christians do not often care about deeply theological explorations of the differences between the confessions, which appear to be grasped only for professional theologians. Their revelation in the public sphere would be like the Marburg Colloquy between Luther and Zwingli about the Eucharistic real presence of Jesus Christ broadcasted by BBC One in prime time. Instead of the pure theology, various ethical questions appear to be of high importance.

It is just the common interpretation of the contemporary social and cultural processes, proceeding by the Christian Churches, which results in the ecumenical convergence. This would be impacted by the common answer on the different challenges of the postmodern, globalized and consumer society. The ecumenical dialogue must face various differences of ethnic, geographical, cultural, theological and anthropological character. On the other hand, one could enumerate many ecumenical agreements which would be an example of the accurate scrutiny of the society of today, i.e. *God loves all that lives*, the Joint Declaration of the Council of the Protestant Church

in Germany and the German Bishops' Conference, or the document of the World Council of Churches on the self-understanding of the Church in a globalized world. The common voice of the Christian churches is louder and more credible outside, and the ecumenical cooperation in the social matters seems to be the best way to achieve the goal of ecumenism.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Baudrillard J.: *The Ecstasy of Communication*. In: S. Reamond, *Stardom and Celebrity*. London: Sage Publication 2007.
- *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. London: Sage Publications 1998.
- Halawa M., Wróbel P. (eds.): *Bauman o popkulturze*. Warszawa 2008.
- Holmes D.: *Communication Theory: Media, Technology and Society*. London: Sage Publication 2005.
- Loy D.R.: "The Religion of the Market." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65/2.
- Mortalium Animos: On Fostering True Religious Unity*, Angelus Press 1998.
- Tester K.: *The Social Thought of Zygmunt Bauman*. New York: Palgrave Macmillian 2004.
- The decree on ecumenism of the Second Vatican Council: a new translation. Paulist Press 1965.

#### EKUMENIZM I SPOŁECZEŃSTWO KONSUMPCYJNE

##### Streszczenie

Określenie społeczeństwa konsumpcyjnego odnosi się do katalogu przemian związanych ze współczesnym światem, w szczególności z cywilizacją zachodnią. Może być rozumiane jako rezultat wielu procesów, łącznie z globalizacją, dechrystianizacją i rozszerzaniem kultury popularnej. Artykuł ma na celu ustalenie, jaka jest relacje między społeczeństwem konsumpcyjnym a ekumenizmem.

**Słowa kluczowe:** ekumenizm, społeczeństwo konsumpcyjne, postmodernizm, chrześcijaństwo.