

The American Religion: consumerism

"An anthropological approach to religion involves seeing how symbols, myths, rituals, ethics, and experiences of 'the sacred' operate within, and are produced by, society". It is my argument that through the study of religion and symbolism the one religion, which is prominent in the US more than any other, is Consumerism.

Defining what constitutes a religion is a difficult, if not an impossible quest. However, before determining whether or not certain belief-systems and/or ritualized practices can be considered a religion, a definition is imperative. Bowie offers many different definitions of religion.

~ Melford Spiro defined religion as "an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings"

~ Horton has a definition which is "an extension of the field of people's social relationships beyond the confines of purely human society," in which human beings see themselves as being in a dependent relationship vis-à-vis their "non-human alters".

~ Ninian Smart has provided dimensions used to define religion. These dimensions are; 1. Ritual or practical 2. Doctrinal or philosophical 3. Mythic or narrative 4. Experiential or emotional 5. Ethical or Legal. 6. Organizational or Social 7. Material or artistic 8. Political and economic.

~ For Tylor, "religion is an attempt by human beings to make sense of their experiences and of the world in which they live" .

~ Geertz' definition says the following, "A system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic"

What these definitions clearly state is that religion is complex and hard to define exactly. As Americans we have grown up in an ideal of freedom of religion and have been made to believe that all religious beliefs are equally as valuable to the believer of that religion. This simply is not true though. The fact of the matter is that in US culture there is a religion that is stronger and more real to anyone who is American. The official United States religion is not Christianity, atheism, Judaism, or Islam. The official United States religion practiced by all Americans, allowed in schools, and pushed on individuals with stronger force than seen in history is consumerism.

If an entire society is based around its sacred ritualized practices, it is only right to consider those ritualized beliefs and practices as constituting a religion. In addition to this, it fits all the definitions used and deemed as valid at different points in Anthropology's history and therefore must be considered as a valid religion.

Consumerism is an institution consisting of culturally patterned interactions. It serves as an extension of the field of people's social relationships. People make connections with others initially based solely on the material possessions and physical appearance they have. These relationships are maintained and appreciated through the continued connection of consumerism. Gifts are given on occasions such as a birthday, Valentines Day, and Christmas. If one is missed or forgotten someone would question the relationship. People also grow to appreciate the same style. Best friends might look more like sisters wearing the same clothes, and listening to the same music.

Consumption is ritualized through gift giving, shopping, and expression of identity. It is practical offering the consumer products to fulfill his or her needs; the experience of belonging, nutrition, shelter, relationships, self-actualization, beauty, and knowledge. It is doctrinal with beauty and consumer magazines serving as the doctrine. It is mythic, the consumer believes that consumption is the salvation of his or her social soul. It is emotional

with value and attachment for material goods over all else. It is ethical allowing consumers to make a statement based on their purchases. It has rules and laws, you don't wear white after labor day, you should not buy something full price, you have to pay sales tax, and stealing something is not permissible. It is social containing connotations and identity through consumption and the ritual of shopping is often a social activity. It has material through the goods that a person consumes and is artistic allowing for creativity. It is political, those with more have more power and are the role models for those without. Lastly it is economic, the rise of consumerism was driven on economics and to this day that is why producers continue to produce as much as they do for the consumers to purchase and fuel the religious devotion to consumerism.

American people, in order to make sense of their experience and the world in which they live, use consumerism. Consumerism has symbolic representation and establishes powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men. It is fueled by advertising, which creates and gives meaning and value to a variety of products. It means something to drink Pepsi rather than Coke, it means something to wear Gap clothes, or not, it means something to have white walls vs. blue. These products act as symbols to the people who have put their religious energies towards consumerism.

A symbol can be anything used to represent something else. For anthropologists it is nearly impossible to understand the faith of a person but we can study and understand the ritual, just as we can with symbols as well, especially with symbols dealing with the body.

We experience our bodies first on an individual level, as an intricate part of ourselves, defining who we are. Second, our bodies are socially constructed, used symbolically, and subject to cultural modification. Finally, we have the body politic, the control of bodies on both an individual and a collective level.

Looking at the bodily symbols of consumerism we learn much about the Consumer beliefs as well as how consumerism is a religion.

Mary Douglas's work on purity and the use of taboos is the most obvious form of bodily symbols. In consumerism many of these symbols are used and taken advantage of. Not only should something look clean, but it should be clean. There are hundreds of salvation techniques found in cleaning products. Each one fights germs, bacteria, grime, and dirt, but this isn't enough they also need to smell fresh. Consumers believe in the germ theory and spend resources to cleanse all they are in contact with.

More important than dirt, the body symbols in Consumerism show identity. Fat thighs for instance hold many symbols. Including laziness, lack of self-control, and lack of determination. This symbolic representation is found universally in the propaganda of consumerism with salvation from the undesired look offered in products and services. Like many symbols though this one is not believed by all Americans. Symbols of identity include dress, hair, body size and shape, and fashion.

In the book, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, by Anne Fadiman, the way of life of the Hmong in the United States was stereotyped by certain actions that were misinterpreted by the American people. In the eyes of the American doctors, the Hmong people were incapable of raising a child. They stereotyped the Hmong people as a group that could not follow directions and were therefore incapable of nurturing their children. Traditionally in Laos, the Hmong woman gave birth by herself without making a single sound. No one even knew when she was in labor. Once they arrived in the United States, they changed their way of life by going to a hospital to give birth because they feared that if their child was not born in the American hospital, he or she would not become an American citizen. Normally in Laos, the Hmong would bury the placentas in the ground in their house because they believed that after death they had to retrace their steps and eventually return to

where their placentas were buried. Only then were they able to carry on to the after life. Now in the United States, they were not able to take home the placentas and bury it because the doctors feared the Hmong people would eat it and get diseases such as hepatitis B. This shows that the Hmong people had to change their traditions to satisfy the American ideal of what the correct way of doing things was. The next generation of Hmong born will not be able to give birth alone and carry on the old traditions. In each generation they are losing a part of what they practiced and what made up their culture.

To be American is not to be Christian, male, or white. Rather it is to be a consumer. Foua and Nao Kao would forever remain Hmong. Their children are Hmong, but also are American. They are successful, athletic, and beautiful. They have converted and taken on the values of consumerism and symbol system they have become American. This conversion, unlike in most religions allows for individual variation and therefore the children can be Hmong and American.

Consumerism fits the definitions used to describe a religion. Now this is heavy grounds for proof that consumerism is a religion. Or, it is grounds for proof that religion is not something that can be described as a science and social institution. There is more to religion than the ritual, and symbol. There is faith and belief, but these things can not be measured cross culturally with current techniques of ethnographic study. So are we left with consumerism as religion and if so, is that where we want to be?

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