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Introduction: Postmodernity, malls and worship

One of the problems with the word 'culture' is that everyone lives in one, or several, and does so quite happily without being able to define and explain it. It has been likened to speaking one's native language. We just do it, and do not agonize over the grammar. Indeed, the best English grammar books, for example, have been written by foreigners who have had to learn the language as outsiders. Why, though, should we want to stop and ponder culture? John Drane asks:

> Are our efforts at cultural analysis truly describing what is there in any objective sense at all, or are we merely deluding ourselves with the thought that, if we are able to name a thing, we can also be in control of it, and therefore it becomes less of a threat to our familiar systems and lifestyles?[1]

The title of Drane's book is inspired by one dominating influence in the contemporary world, which is American in origin but is now part of global culture – McDonald's. He, in fact, took it over from a book by George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society*.[2] Drane says that McDonaldization is 'the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world'.[3] And he lists the characteristics as efficiency, calculability, predictability and control – all four of which are crucial ingredients in a consumer-based society.

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1 John Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church: Consumer Culture and the Church's Future* (Smyth & Helwys Publishing Inc., Macon GA, 2001), p. 2.

2 George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society*, rev. New Century edn (Pine Forge Press, Thousand Oaks CA, 1995).

3 Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church*, p. 32.

But McDonaldization is taking place in what is now commonly called either late modernity or postmodernity. Like the word 'culture', 'postmodern', 'postmodernism' and 'postmodernity' are slippery terms that can be dropped into conversations, learned papers and books, but that conceal far more than they reveal.[4] Stanley Granz cited Charles Jencks's claim that 'Postmodernism was born in St. Louis, Missouri, on July 15, 1972, at 3:32 P.M.' This was when the Pruitt-Igoe housing project, a landmark of modern architecture, was razed to the ground with dynamite, because the functionalism of modernism had failed as an experiment.[5] In fact the terms postmodern and postmodernism had been around for some time in the art world, and in the world of architecture and design. Later they would creep into linguistic analysis and textual studies, and then into historiography, and be associated with the names of Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, Frederic Jameson, Jacques Derrida and Jean Baudrillard (to name but a few), and in between would embrace more popular cultural art forms such as pop music and fashion.[6] All these are intellectual expressions. Most people do not drop the word 'postmodernity' into their conversations, but, like speaking one's mother tongue, just live in its popular everyday expressions without agonizing reflection or analysis. In the more popular culture it is the world of the internet and computers, of cell phones, iPods, BlackBerries, DVDs, MTV, Disney make-believe, virtual worlds, music, and contemporary fashion with teenage markets. But it is a culture where the methods and legacies of modernity and tradition still find a place. Furthermore, in so far as it is based around consumerism, it is a global corporate culture. The majority of those who do reflect on the change suggest that between the 1960s and the 1990s a crucial shift in how we *feel* about things began to occur. Drane gives a helpful, but rather general, summary:

> we are discovering that the rational-materialistic worldview handed down to us from the eighteenth, nineteenth and early

4 For the difference in these terms, see David Lyon, *Postmodernity*, second edn (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2005), p. 10.

5 Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids MI, 1996), p. 11, referring to Charles A. Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, fourth edn (Academy Editions, London, 1984), p. 9.

6 Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary*, second edn (Blackwell, Oxford, 1997); Gerard Delanty, *Modernity and Postmodernity: Knowledge, Power and the Self* (Sage Publications, London, 2000).

> twentieth centuries has led to lives that are fractured and broken, and has created personal dysfunction on the grand scale.[7]

This, of course, is an oversimplification. At the risk of further oversimplification, the following characteristics of modernity and postmodernity are often suggested. Modernity had the belief that progress was unending (a grand or metanarrative), and was optimistic about the ability of the human mind to solve major world problems. It elevated the rational and scientific methods, and also placed faith in 'experts'. It preferred simplified linear connections and relationships, and searched for universal norms. It emphasized mind over body, and concepts and words over the visual and experiential. In contrast, postmodernity is suspicious of grand narratives and denies notions of unending progress. It stresses that meaning is dependent upon relationships, and that there are few universal all-encompassing theories. It questions metaphysical realities and objective truth. It places mind and body together, and prefers the visual and experiential over concepts and words. David Lyon notes that postmodernism is about deposing reason, nature and progress, but 'in everyday life, the postmodern may be seen as a blurring of boundaries between "high" and "low" culture; the collapse of hierarchies of knowledge, taste and opinion; and the interest in the local rather than the universal'.[8]

Two crucial ingredients of this culture – be it popular or the more intellectual reflection – are simulacra/simulation, and bricolage. Simulacra – things look real, but are not – and we can list here things ranging from virtual reality on computer screens to theme parks, where castles are not castles; and bricolage or eclecticism – things from different cultures and different epochs placed side by side without any feeling that such things are out of context.

CONSUMERISM AND THE MALL

If there are dislocations between modernity and postmodernity, there are also constants and continuities, and first among them is the fact that both modernity and postmodernity are consumer cultures. Indeed, David Lyon commented, 'If postmodernity means anything, it means the consumer society.'[9] Of course, in broad strokes it is possible to see

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7 Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church*, p. 26.
8 Lyon, *Postmodernity*, p. 10.
9 Lyon, *Postmodernity*, p. 88.

consumerism as being born in the Enlightenment, where the Industrial Revolution put the final nails in the rural agrarian culture's coffin, hastening the growth of both urban sprawl and the breakdown of the old social order. Yiannis Gabriel and Tim Lang note:

> It is mainly since the Roaring Twenties in the United States that the meaning of consumption broadened still further to resonate pleasure, enjoyment and freedom . . . Living life to the full became increasingly synonymous with consumption.[10]

They note further: 'The major players in the consumerist game, the transnational corporations, are global players, the stakes are global, and the implications of the game itself are global.'[11]

Modern advertising makes no secret of its aims to stimulate desire rather than to propose the means for satisfying needs. John Clammer observed:

> Shopping is . . . adventure, safari, carnival, and contains unexpected 'risks' in what you may find and who you may meet. It is a kind of self-discovery. And by its very nature it possesses theatricality: one dresses up to go out and one shops to acquire the new persona, to modify the old one or to perfect the setting in which one is seen and known.[12]

He indicates that 'Shopping is not merely the acquisition of things: it is the buying of identity.'[13] Zygmunt Bauman noted: 'Reality, as the consumer experiences it, is a pursuit of pleasure. Freedom is about the choice between greater and lesser satisfactions, and rationality is about choosing the first over the second.'[14] It is, of course, the concern of any producer to effect desire rather than complete satisfaction, so that whatever one purchases, it is not enough – it is the desire that produces the excitement and satisfaction, not the goods themselves. Take for

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10 Yiannis Gabriel and Tim Lang, *The Unmanageable Consumer: Contemporary Consumption and Its Fragmentation* (Sage Publications, London, 1995), p. 7.

11 Gabriel and Lang, *The Unmanageable Consumer*, p. 10.

12 John Clammer, 'Aesthetics of the Self: Shopping and social being in contemporary urban Japan' in Rob Shields (ed.), *Lifestyle Shopping: The Subject of Consumption* (Routledge, London, 1992), pp. 195–215, pp. 203–4.

13 Clammer, 'Aesthetics of the Self', p. 195.

14 Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity* (Routledge, London, 1992), p. 50.

example the iPod, which is forever being updated and improved, and the new ones integrate a phone with music, internet access and video entertainment features. Tomorrow something even more spectacular will come along – buy one today, but next year you will be enticed to upgrade to something newer. James Farrell notes that the contemporary slogan is, 'I consume, therefore I am: Credit Card instead of Descartes'.[15] In addition, there are designated times during the year when retailers can be particularly seductive and alluring about certain things. The mall calendar is, after all, very much like a liturgical calendar – for example, in February there are sales for winter clearance, housewares and spring pre-season sales; there are promotions for Valentine's Day, and for spring colours and fashions; and in this month occur also in the USA Groundhog Day, President's Day, Bachelor's Day, frequently Mardi Gras, and Black History Month.[16]

Whether it is the Mall of America in Bloomington, Minnesota, USA, or Lakeside at West Thurrock or the Gateshead Metro Centre in England, or Souk Sharq Mall in Kuwait City in the Middle East, the mall takes its place as a centre for the consumer. Malls emerged in the era of modernity, taking the place of the older department store and its successor, the galleria. With the decentralization of the city, a different consumerist solution was required, hence the out-of-town mall, the first perhaps being Southdale Center in Edina, Minnesota in 1960. Farrell observes that the USA 'has more shopping malls than high schools, and in the last forty years, shopping center space has increased by a factor of twelve'.[17] Architects put a great deal of thought into the design of each space, both macro and micro. Writing on good retail design, architect Charles Kober claims to address the 'task of attracting a fickle consumer, keeping that person at the center longer, stimulating impulse purchases, appealing to the customer's self-image and aspirations, and making the shopping experience safe, convenient, and fun to ensure a return visit'.[18] The importance of lighting, colour and intentional music cannot be underestimated. Farrell claims that malls reinforce American values of individualism and choice. He writes: 'Shopping centers still contain such utopian promises of peace and plenty, stuff and sociability.

15 James J. Farrell, *One Nation Under Goods: Malls and the Seduction of American Shopping* (Smithsonian Books, Washington DC), 2003, p. 261.
16 See Farrell, *One Nation*, Table 3, pp. 48–9.
17 Farrell, *One Nation*, p. xi.
18 Farrell, *One Nation*, p. 16.

Malls embody the values and ideals of what we might call "commercial utopianism" – freedom, abundance, leisure, happiness, individualism, and community.'[19] He goes on: 'It emphasizes opportunity, but not equality. It evokes passion, but not much compassion . . . Malls sell "the good life", not the good society.'[20]

Both the variety of stores and the design of individual stores make the mall, born in modernity, an equally postmodern phenomenon. Gabriel and Lang comment:

> The reassuring quality of its anchor supermarket at one end, the familiar array of boutiques next to the intriguing shop selling Peruvian parrots and Colombian hammocks, the bars, the restaurants, the soft background music, the discreet lighting, the comfortable climatization, the instantly meaningful signs – this is a synthetic oasis, and none the less stimulating for being designed with people like you in mind. It is a clean, genial, graffiti-free space, where a cultural oxymoron can be acted out, [with] relaxed exploration. There are no worries here, no pushy salesman, no invisible pickpockets, goods have fixed price-tags and are covered by the Trades Description Act; if you run short of cash, plastic money is welcome. To be sure, this is a fantasy world; it brings exotica to the consumer instead of taking the consumer to the exotica.[21]

If Gabriel and Lang give the macro view, Farrell homes in on the Rainforest Café for the micro. It is, he says, Disney's Jungle Cruise as a dining experience, with the appeal to sight, sound, smell, touch and taste.[22] 'It is virtual tourism, a postmodern pilgrimage, a way of going everywhere without going anywhere, except, of course, to the mall.'[23] But like all consumerism, modern and postmodern, the mall is, says Farrell, the place where we let other people know who we are; 'at the mall, we're often just looking at ourselves by looking at commodities'.[24]

David Lyon asked the searching question: 'The dazzling displays of the shopping malls and TV ads may seem to offer a consumer cornu-

19 Farrell, *One Nation*, p. 265.
20 Farrell, *One Nation*, p. 266.
21 Gabriel and Lang, *The Unmanageable Consumer*, pp. 68–9.
22 Farrell, *One Nation*, pp. 238–9.
23 Farrell, *One Nation*, p. 235.
24 Farrell, *One Nation*, p. 144.

copia, but shall "we" henceforth discover our identity and integration in the market-place alone?'[25] One hopes the answer is no, because the gospel is concerned with humanity discovering its identity in God (*imago Dei*) and its integration into the koinonia of the Trinity. The Church, too, is in a marketplace, selling not just the good (God-like) life, but also the good society, and the fulfilment of desire.[26] It too attempts to woo the consumer, and the main commodity it offers is worship. But how does, or how might, postmodernity and the present generation that was born into a postmodern world impinge on the commodity of worship?

THE PRESENT SPIRITUAL CLIMATE AND GENERATION Y

At one point John Drane writes, 'the church as we know it is in decline. On the other [hand], there is the equally incontrovertible fact that we live in a time when the overt search for spiritual meaning has never been more intense than it is now.'[27] What Drane says here needs to be qualified. First, there are differences across the globe and across religions. While urbanization seems to go hand in hand with religious decline, clearly Islamic cities, however westernized, still give the appearance of a solid monolithic Islamic spirituality that is alive and well. In Africa and South America, Christianity is expanding rapidly. This contrasts with Europe, where religion is in retreat; however, in spite of all the talk of separation of Church and State, America remains quite religious, though here too there has been a decline since the 1960s. Yet, so many sociologists argue, if organized religion seems in decline, interest in spirituality is a growth industry. Here care has to be taken as to what the term 'spirituality' actually means. It has become an 'in' word, and covers everything from different moral and ethical codes to a diverse range of esoteric, sometimes occult, practices influenced by Eastern religions and New Age movements. Researchers point to the interest in films and books concerning ghosts, the supernatural, angels and miracles. However, since much of this is produced for entertainment (and consumption) it is sometimes difficult to separate the entertainment value

25 Lyon, *Postmodernity*, p. 92.

26 See Vincent J. Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (Continuum, London and New York, 2005).

27 Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church*, p. 65.

and interest from belief and conviction. A study undertaken by Heelas and Woodhead in Kendal, England, considered not only churchgoing in all the denominations represented (most of which are in decline) but also the para-spiritual activities, from mediums to aromatherapy, Wicca and astrology.[28] The findings of that study suggest an upsurge in what they termed 'spirituality'. Their definition was broad, and as subsequent studies have noted, they did not highlight the statistical fact that many patrons of New Age-type material happened to be women in their forties and fifties, or that there was less interest by young people. This raises the question of whether or not postmodernism is friendly to religion and spirituality, and more particularly, is the postmodern generation – Gen Y – open to spiritual things?

According to Karl Mannheim,

> a 'generation' refers to a group of people who experience and respond to specific socio-historical conditions in common ways, depending in part on age. In other words, people growing up, living through and responding to particular historical events, political structures, dominant ideologies and technical developments together form a generation with a shared world view that distinguishes them from other generations.[29]

Sociologists and cultural analysts tend to identify the following generations:

- the World War Generation, born between 1901 and 1924 (not many alive now)
- the Builder or Silent Generation, born 1925–45
- The Boomer Generation, born 1946–63
- Generation X, born 1964–81
- Generation Y, born 1982–present (but perhaps we are already into a Gen Z).[30]

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28 Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead et al., *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Blackwell, Oxford, 2005).

29 Karl Mannheim, 'The Problem of Generations' in *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*, cited in Sara Savage et al., *Making Sense of Generation Y: The World View of 15–25-year-olds* (Church House Publishing, London, 2006), pp. 5ff.

30 Mannheim, 'The Problem of Generations', pp. 5–7.

Given that Gen Y is supposed to be postmodern, and open to stories and images, and less concerned with rationalism, are they more spiritual than Boomers and Gen Xers?

We have to distinguish between the USA and the UK, and here I refer to two studies, that of Sara Savage et al., previously cited, and Lyn Schofield Clark's *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media and the Supernatural*.[31] The UK study suggests that belief in God is an optional matter, a consumer choice. If belief works, fine, if not, drop it. The supernatural, from Harry Potter to *Lord of the Rings* and TV sci-fi, suggests that it is valued for its entertainment worth. Young people use videos and DVDs to create meaning in their own lives. Films and soaps are a means of escaping into another world, and anticipating what the storyline may be. Valued are the qualities of strength of character, authenticity and good looks. Music plays a big part in their lives, but it is generally chosen to reflect what they already feel. It reflects rather than informs their attitudes, and it provides a comforting backdrop rather than a demanding presence. Important are:

- Consumerism. This is the first 100 per cent consumer generation. We are what we buy. At the heart is choice, as its emblem and core value.
- Electronic media. This generation has seen the move from book to screen.
- Globalization, and the collapse of time and space through the internet.

The research confirmed that conservative churches, particularly those that embrace charismatic spirituality, that engage the emotions as well as the rational mind, seem to have more appeal to young people than those of a more liberal and non-charismatic persuasion. However, overall young people in the UK show a great deal of fuzziness and uncertainty concerning traditional Christian beliefs. The research concluded that there was no evidence to suggest that Gen Y in the UK is a generation of spiritual seekers. This latest report does part company with some earlier reports, and perhaps what the cumulative evidence suggests is that while Gen Y is not *per se* a generation of spiritual seekers, the postmodern

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31 Lyn Schofield Clark, *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media and the Supernatural* (Oxford University Press, New York, 2003).

culture itself allows more openness to spirituality, and consequently young people themselves may be more open to spirituality.

The US study is one person's study, and utilized a much smaller sample of selected persons. Schofield Clark noted the supernatural in popular TV programmes, citing *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as a good example of a postmodern production. She also notes *Smallville*, *Charmed*, *Roswell* and *The Matrix*, which all illustrate the interest in the supernatural.[32] Schofield Clark grouped the young people she interviewed as follows:

- The 'Resisters', who love supernatural legends but hate organized religion.
- The 'Mystical' teens, who blurred the boundaries between religions and fictional legends. They remain believers of a sort, and are intrigued by the realm beyond the material world.
- The 'Experimenters', who appreciate both religion and the legends of the supernatural.
- The 'Traditionalists', who affirm the boundary between religion and the media.
- The 'Intrigued' teens who wish to separate religion and legend, but have difficulty doing so.[33]

The conclusion was that young people often know precious little about the traditions of religion. This conclusion is reinforced by the analysis of Robert Wuthnow and a survey by David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons.[34]

So what is the value of these studies? We live in a postmodern culture, which in theory is less rationalistic and more open to faith claims; but the culture is neutral, and has inherited the anti-religious bias of modernity. Thus, although in theory young people should be more open to religion than Boomers and Gen X, in fact many do not have the knowledge or experience to be more open to spirituality and faith.

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32 Schofield Clark, *From Angels to Aliens*, p. 69.

33 Schofield Clark, *From Angels to Aliens*, *passim*.

34 Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 2007). David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity . . . and Why It Matters* (Baker Books, Grand Rapids MI, 2007). See also Ken Ham and Britt Beemer, with Todd Hillard, *Already Gone: Why Your Kids Will Quit Church and What You Can Do to Stop It* (Master Books, Green Forest AR, 2009); Christian Piatt and Amy Piatt, *MySpace to Sacred Space: God for a New Generation* (Chalice Press, St Louis MO, 2007).

THE WORSHIP MALL

It is this context in which the invitation is made to look at the worship mall. Robert Wuthnow writes:

> Young adults are no longer born into faith communities that embrace them fully and command their allegiance over a lifetime. It becomes necessary to shop for a place of worship, rather than simply inheriting the congregation in which a person is raised.[35]

If people 'shop' for worship, the trends in contemporary worship can be described as a 'worship mall' on at least two accounts. First, religion is in competition with all the leisure and entertainment industries, and consumerism is both leisure and entertainment. The mall is open on Sundays and competes with the Church, and people have to make a choice. Consumerism promises desire and satisfaction. Faith offers satisfaction through desire for the Other. And we only need to remind ourselves of the mall's liturgical calendar which is a parody of the Church's liturgical calendar.

Second, the very fact that there are different trends in contemporary worship suggests that worship styles too represent a mall, offered by different churches to suit your personal taste or spirituality, all enticing in different ways, and in competition with one another. Who are they for? Who do they appeal to? Are they postmodern, or expressions of modernity? What is in them that might appeal to Gen Y? Are they worship, or something other than worship? Is current Roman Catholic rethinking of Vatican II really postmodern, or is it something else? Why is there great interest in Celtic spirituality and Celtic worship? Is it really Celtic, or is it like Disney – a simulacrum? What about blended services and alt.worship – are these just bricolage, or is bricolage OK? Is emergent worship really postmodern? Saddleback Church, Willow Creek and other megachurches appeal to the corporate achiever and to Boomers, but do they sell out to the culture, and are they survivals from modernity masquerading in postmodern disguise? And in the many praise and worship services, do contemporary music styles make the service postmodern? Where do snake-handling sects in Appalachia and the Amish fit in to the new high-tech world of the internet? The chapters that

35 Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*, p. 124.

follow are an invitation to walk through the worship mall and look around at some of what is on offer in the postmodern global culture. Unlike the real mall, though, apart from the purchase of this book, you shouldn't need your credit card.