



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

UNDERSTANDING RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY AS 'PRODUCTS' IN A CONSUMER SOCIETY: A SOCIOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

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Abstract: One of the most enduring phenomena which seems to go back to the beginnings of human culture, is religion. Its persistence continues in human society perhaps because of the important social functions that it performs. With the passage of time, one finds that religion may no longer play the role it did in the past as these roles, to a large extent, have been taken over by secular institutions. Moving away from organised religion is something that we are witnessing today - globalisation and consumerism play a key role in encouraging a more individualised religion and spirituality simply because they can be customised and packaged to suit individual preferences. Hence, although what we believe and how we practice this belief is an individual process, group activity is still required to in order to meet these individual spiritual demands. In this age of consumerism, religion and spirituality has come to be sold as products in the market. The focus of this paper is to present these emerging trends of the commercialisation of religion and spiritualities

The timeless fascination for understanding the “unknown” has been at the very root of human existence. The unknown presented itself in various ways, be it in the natural cycles of the environment such as floods, fires, lightning, thunder, be it in the fragility of human life which takes form in illness, tragedy, death and other uncertainties or be it in the questions that relate to the meaning of life, destiny and the like. All these unending fears and doubts have led man to search for various solutions, religion it appears, has been the mechanism to aid man in coping with these various dilemmas. Religion, in this context, has been addressed from a functional perspective. In an attempt to define religion, a common distinction made by sociologists has been between the substantive and the functional interpretations. The substantive definitions attempt to identify and describe the “essence” or “substance” of religion- what religion is at its core. The functional analysis on the other hand, views religion from the point of view of how it contributes towards meeting the functional prerequisites of society. The French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1965: 62; orig. 1915) maintained that the focus of religion is on “ things that surpass the limits of our knowledge”. Social phenomena, according to him, is defined in terms of the sacred and the profane. The profane deals with the ordinary elements of everyday life which are explicable, while the sacred deals with those aspects which are unknown or inexplicable, that is set apart as sacred as they inspire a sense of awe, reverence, and even fear. He thus defines religion as “a unified system of beliefs and practices related to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden.” According to James G Frazer(1959) religion is the belief in “powers superior to man which are believed to direct and control the course of nature and of human life.” Defining what religion is, what it means to people, and what it does for them becomes a Herculean task because of the numerous interpretations. Hence, we will simply identify the major components of religion which are:

- Religion is a group phenomenon.
- It involves a body of Beliefs.
- It involves a set of practices.
- It involves Moral Prescriptions.
- It involves the sacred.

Incorporating the above into the framework of religion, presents to us, a picture of a structured entity associated with ritualistic practices. In most instances, spirituality is linked to organised religion, which leads us to the question of ‘what is spirituality?’ Spirituality is a vast concept and can include within it numerous perspectives. According to Christina Puchalski (2013), “Spirituality is the aspect of humanity that refers to the way individuals seek and express meaning and purpose and the way they experience their connectedness to the moment, to self, to others, to nature, and to the significant or sacred”. The distinction between religion and spirituality has been explained very succinctly by Joerg Stolz and Jean- Claude Usunier (2018) as follows: “A religion is a cultural symbols-system that responds to problems of meaning and contingency by alluding to a transcendent (i.e., superempirical) reality, which influences every-day life but cannot be directly controlled. Religious symbol-systems incorporate mythical, ethical, and ritual elements. (See for similar cultural definitions Geertz 1993; Pollack 1995; Riesebrodt 2010). A Spirituality is a religious symbol

system that specifically expresses individual-level experiences, beliefs, and practices. Religions and spiritualities are often not easy to differentiate. Suffice it to say that in our terminology, religion is the more encompassing term. Religions normally include spiritualities.”

Apart from the early sociological thinkers like Durkheim, Simmel and Weber who devoted their scholarly energies towards understanding the role of religion in society, sociological interest in religion remained dormant until after the Second World War when there was a dramatic upsurge in religious activity, particularly in the western world in the form of increased religious services, and the establishment of new congregations which generated talks of religious revivalism. This, however, was followed by a trajectory turn towards eastern spiritualism by the 1950s and 1960s. As quoted by Hart (2015), “The social and political events of the late 50s and 60s produced the ideal environment for the rise of new religious communities until this period, most religious communities shared some link with the Judeo-Christian tradition, but the new communes of the said period adopted the religions of the east, as well as the ‘New Age’ spirituality, made popular during this time.” Popular among these eastern religions were ‘The Beat movement’ which used poetry and eastern philosophy, ‘Zen Buddhism’, and the ‘Hare Krishna movement’. ‘The Jesus movement’ was another example of the rebellion against traditional Christian belief. Distrust in the religious institutions of the previous generation led to a move of establishing Christian belief on individual interpretation rather than tradition. This was followed by a counter-culture spearheaded by an affluent Christian middle class to lure back the errant members who had strayed. Christianity was now packaged effectively by borrowing insights and tools from the fields of management, marketing, psychology and mass communication. Religion in all its forms, was here to stay, packaged, however, in various ways.

In recent decades, there is an increasing number of people seeking spiritual growth outside of established religious organisations, this phenomenon has often been referred to as ‘New Age’ spirituality. Although having its roots in the 1960s, under spiritual gurus - Maharishi Mahesh Yogi being a prominent one, ‘New age’ Spirituality today has been taken to a totally different level and it defines different things to different people. ‘To some it might mean finding answers to metaphysical questions, To others, it may mean using environment-friendly organic products or a lifestyle incorporating ancient practices of Yoga, Taichi and Pranayama. While some associate the word with certain types of books, music, aromatherapy and holistic treatments. In brief, phrases like ‘seeking deeper meaning’, ‘connect to the higher purpose’, ‘holistic development’, ‘conscious living’, ‘mind-body and spirit’ define the term new age spirituality.’ According to Rindfleish (2005), ‘new age’ spiritualism incorporates different combinations of eastern and western traditions, scientific practices and theories, which altogether serve as unique meta-theories to the follower.

The reason for the development in these new religious pursuits can be credited to the various historical events which had their genesis in western society. Some of which were:

1. The rebellion against the dominance of the church in western society during the enlightenment era of the 18th century led to the process of secularisation. Accordingly, the secular outlook and ideology de-emphasised the importance and role of religion in matters that are outside the realm of faith and the afterlife. Thus, progressive secularisation, in the western world, led to the dilution of the attachment to religion and a religious outlook. One important consequence of this trend was that various social institutions, particularly the economy and polity came to be guided by rational considerations, rather than by religious injunctions. According to Shiner(1966), the term secular has several meanings and one of them being the disengagement of society from religion. In this case, religion withdraws to its own separate sphere and becomes a matter of private life. Another of his interpretations of secularism is the movement from a ‘sacred’ to a ‘secular’ society which meant the abandonment of any commitment to traditional values and practices. The acceptance of change and the founding of all decisions and actions on a rational and utilitarian basis.
2. The industrial revolution of the 19th century initiated the birth of technological development on the one hand and the emergence of the capitalist economy that encouraged a relentless pursuit of profit. This had far-reaching consequences.
3. Modernisation, a by-product of industrialisation, brought about a new way of life and a new way of thinking. Advances in technology have bred new attitudes, beliefs and philosophy. Success has come to be measured in terms of possessions, quantity is prioritised over quality. Relationships have become impersonal and secondary and there is a movement toward a more individualistic approach to life. The disintegration of traditional ways of life destroyed ties that formerly bonded people to group life. In the wake of increasing occupational mobility, the earlier parameters of what determined social status has changed. As described by Yogendra Singh (1986), modernisation involves attributes that are pan-humanistic, trans-ethnic and non-ideological. Modernisation may in this respect be treated as a kind of ‘cultural-universal’. This has resulted in people becoming more individualistic, everything has come to be measured in terms of personal gain. Traditional values were set aside to allow people to make choices which served them personally. This also applied to religious identity, practice and belief.
4. These underlying forces coupled with changing world events such as the elimination of hegemonic powers including the authority of institutional religion, new economic policies of the western world, brought a shift in the cultural and political values, across the world. The development of the World Trade Organisation and advancements in technology and travel led to globalisation. The era of consumerism has emerged, birthing a global consumer society. A consumer society, according to Rasauli and Hollander (1986; Stolz and Usunier 2018) “is a society in which people consume at a level substantially above that of crude, survival level subsistence and obtain goods and services for consumption through exchange. In consumer societies, consumption is considered an acceptable and appropriate activity and people tend to judge others and perhaps themselves in terms of their consuming lifestyles. In consumer societies, individuals learn that products and services should be attuned to their needs.”

As analysed by Stolz and Usunier (2018), Religions and spiritualities do take on the form of products and brands, the emergence of televangelist, megachurches, branded religious sites(eg Lourdes) religious bestsellers(eg., the Left Behind series) and the blockbuster(eg., The Passion of Christ) are some examples of Christian products and branding. Other than these, there are numerous religious products which are sold as decorative items such as the Buddha or Shiva figurines or the well known religious symbols used as fashion statements like the cross for Christianity, the yin yang sign for Taoism and the om symbol for Hinduism to mention a few.

A product, in marketing terms, can be understood as an item offered for sale. A product can be tangible or intangible and religious organisations and entrepreneurs offer a variety of products and services using marketing tools that highlight their spiritual benefits, referred to as 'salvation goods' by the sociologist, Max Weber. Individuals in consumer societies are well aware that the market is there to fulfil their needs and religious organisations are no exceptions to the rule, products and services offered should be attuned to their wants. Yet again, many Studies undertaken, highlight the fact religious services are a source of entertainment. Members of various Christian denominations expect religious services to provide preachers who are excellent orators, entertaining music, a good sound system and convenient access to places of worship. In religious services, "consumers have a heightened expectation of being entertained, which is usually met with music and dramatic presentations." (Stolz and Usunier 2018). Religious organizations are increasingly replicating time tested formats from the entertainment world to ensure that people are kept entertained during religious services. Hence, globalisation has helped commodify spirituality as a highly personalised product. From reiki to taichi to herbal products or aromatherapy to literature on metaphysics delving into the deeper meaning and purpose in life, new age spiritualism is highly flexible with a choice to pick ingredients that can be customised according to one's needs. Owing to the easy accessibility of social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, and the like, promotion and awareness has been made a lot easier, moreover, the increasing popularity of spiritual gurus in the media have made them household names and access to their talks do not require physical presence as the virtual world also serves as a marketplace.

Many studies link spirituality to well-being and happiness, and marketers today don't shy away from reaping the benefits of it. They are fast realising the need to satisfy the consumer's search for purpose and meaning in life by adding spirituality in selling goods. The Spiritual market today is a hugely growing industry and according to a paper published by Mukkar and Joshi (2016), India's estimated spiritual and religious market is over \$30 billion dollars. It is not uncommon to come across innovative ventures like Onlineprasad.com which delivers prasad from different temples. It has a network of 50 temples and promises to deliver prasad anywhere in the whole country. Not just this, its founder Goonjan Mall has launched Zevotion, a brand that offers certified rudraksha beads and other yantras. It primarily comprises upper income educated women. Studies show that women comprise two-thirds of active spiritual consumers, however, the market for men and the youth, in general, is also expanding. The sale of scented candles, body care products, aromatherapy items, books, home decor merchandise and jewellery are the drivers of this growth. Consumers are reminded of the right type of yoga wear (Lululemon Athletica), use of fragrant oils to enhance meditation and create a soothing stress-free environment. It has boosted the sale of Buddha statues, prayer beads and many more. Spiritual organisations selling consumer products, Spiritual gurus like Rajnesh, Baba Ram Dev or Sri Ravi Shankar and their organisations 'show the right path' not only through their teachings but also through their products. Hence it's not uncommon to find product brands launched by them. There is a huge demand for products ranging from hair oil to fashionable footwear which have created a niche for themselves in the market. According to industry observers, these products have the potential to give competition to top-notch brands in the business. For example, Baba Ramdev's Swadeshi brand has a market worth Rs 2,000 crore and more than 4000 outlets in 2015 as compared to around 150 in 2012. A Times of India report says, Patanjali had a turnover of Rs1200 crore in the fiscal year 2015. This huge success of the brand is not surprising as its products are 30% cheaper than products of mainstream Multinational Companies like Hindustan Unilever(HUL) and Procter & Gamble(P&G). 'Organisations like these are widening their reach in the production and distribution of these consumer goods. Once sold only at their ashrams or particular outlets, today they can be found online or in supermarkets or in kirana stores. Giant retailer Marks and Spencer plans to give more shelf space in its store to these brands. While fast-moving consumer goods companies (FMCG) need to invest a lot of time, effort and money in branding and advertising their products, these spiritual gurus already have devotees as their loyal consumer base'. (Spirituality and Marketing: An Amalgam)

Many authors have noted that religions and spiritualities adapt to the emergence of consumer society (Carrette and King 2005; Einstein 2011; Gauthier and Martikainen 2013; Nardella 2014; Stolz and Usunier 2018). Hence, religions and spiritualities do indeed take the form of products and brands as there is a vast market of religious consumers who are eager to access these products. A consumer is defined as an individual human being who consumes in the sense of using up inputs of goods and services to produce satisfaction (15 Consumption Patterns-achieveriaclasses.com). Consumption, however, is not entirely an individual matter but has important social aspects too. 'What we consume is the result of the consumption of others. Often we imitate others because we may not know what to consume or because we wish to avoid being conspicuous through the omission of certain articles in our consumption. (15 Consumption Patterns -achieveriaclasses.com) Hence, there is competition in most societies as consumption patterns denote social status. This phenomenon has been termed as 'conspicuous consumption' by the American sociologist Veblen in his theory of the Leisure Class. Social Status, according to Weber(1920) refers to the distribution of honour in society. Hence, in most societies, one finds that different degrees of honour and prestige are accorded to different groups, or members of society, based on ethnicity, religion, or even lifestyles. (Haralambos 1980). Analysing the emerging trends of spiritual consumption, it appears that 'new age' spiritualism is more of a lifestyle statement, a confirmation that one has 'arrived' at the desired position. Since status groups are almost always aware of their common status situation, It may sometimes reflect a need to be accepted within a given social milieu. In some cases it may perhaps suggest the necessity to project spiritual 'enlightenment' so as to be perceived as having reached a superior intellectual 'space' in order to be accepted, or to be held in high regard by those around. Although religion and spiritualities are highly individualised today, it is still a group phenomenon because the activities required to fulfill these personalised religious experiences involve a specialised group of people to man the economic activities of production, distribution and the market.

In the past many theorists particularly those written in the nineteenth century had predicted the demise of religion in modern society. Taylor, Frazer, Marx, and even Freud, to name a few, expected religion to fade away as science has come to dominate the way of thinking in contemporary society. Others who thought of religion in functional terms, foresaw the disappearance of religion in the familiar and traditional forms to be replaced by something based upon non-supernaturalistic and non-transcendental foundations. We are indeed witnessing this trend, perhaps it is justifiable to assume that consuming may actually be the new religion of today.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This is to acknowledge and thank Leon Patrick Mawlong for the patience and time spent in discussing and providing feedback.

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