



## **Cultural change and consumerism: Contemporary churchgoing in perspective**

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The means and modes, by which religion can reflect culture, and culture religion, are myriad and multifarious. It is never easy to say at what point culture has appropriated religion, and at what point religion has consumed culture, and then begun to sacralise it. In this paper the exploration is centred on the churches and Christianity, but with specific attention being paid to the contribution that religious studies can make to the analysis of the religion-culture debate. Of course, to consider a field as large as this would require more space and time than can be given, alas. Correspondingly, and for the purposes of contextualising the discussion in the concrete life of the church and contemporary life, will rest in a consideration of the impact of consumerism and choice on the shaping of religious identity and behaviour.

I begin with a confession: time-keeping is not my strong point. So as I drove purposefully down the road one wet, April evening a few years ago, I was already slightly late (as usual) to pick up my son from Cubs. But I mused that there was no need to panic, since the ever-enthusiastic Cub leader normally overran the meetings by at least 10-15 minutes. Sure enough, I arrived at the entrance to the church hall to discover a group of parents waiting somewhat tardily for their offspring to come out. But as I joined the small throng to show solidarity in patience, I realised I had walked into a reasonably terse and tense discussion. Each parent was clutching a letter from Akela, which reminded parents and Cubs that Sunday was St. George's Day, and that Cubs were expected (indeed, the letter stated that it was 'compulsory') to attend church parade. Smart kit and clean shoes were also recommended.

The parents stood around, discussing the word 'compulsory'. One looked bewildered, and cast around for empathy as he explained that his son played soccer on Sunday, so attendance was doubtful. Another mused that the family were all due to be away for the weekend, and that changing plans for a church parade was neither possible nor desirable. Another looked less than pleased that a 'voluntary' organisation such as the Cubs, which she added her son went to by choice, should now be using words like 'compulsory'. There was no question of obligation; attendance and belonging was a matter of preference. (Presumably the oaths her son had taken were simply part of a traditional and quaint ceremony that had little actual meaning).

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a small vignette such as this would not be untypical in Western Europe. In the post-war era, a nascent culture of obligation has rapidly given way to one of consumerism. Duty, and the desire to participate in aspects of civic society where steadfast obligatory support was once cherished, has been rapidly eroded by choice, individualism and reflexivity (see Putnam, 2000, etc). Granted, this is not the place to debate such a cultural turn. But its' undoubted appearance on the landscape of late modernity has posed some interesting questions for voluntary organisations, chief of which might be religious establishments. Increasingly, churches find themselves with worshippers who come less out of duty and more out of choice. There is, arguably, nothing wrong with that. But under these new cultural conditions, churches have discovered that they need to have much more savvy about how they shape and market themselves in the public sphere. There is no escaping the reality: the churches are in competition; for people's time, energy, attention, money and commitment.

But it is that last word, 'commitment', which has become such a slippery term in recent times. Few regular or frequent church-goers now attend church twice on a Sunday, which was once normal practice. For most, once is enough. Many who do attend on a regular basis are now attending less frequently. Even allowing

for holidays and other absences (say through illness), even the most dedicated church-goer may only be present in church for 70% of the Sundays in any given year. Many clergy now remark on the decline in attendance at Days of Obligation (i.e., major saints days, or feast days such as the Ascension). The Committed, it seems, are also the busy. The response to this from amongst the more liturgical churches has been to subtly and quietly adapt their practice, whilst preserving the core tradition. For example, the celebration of Epiphany may now take place on the Sunday nearest to January 6th, and not on the day itself. A number of Roman Catholic churches now offer Sunday Mass on Saturday evenings, in order for Sunday to be left as a family day, or for whatever other commitments or consumerist choices that might now fall on the once hallowed day of rest. In a survey of American Christians taken in 1955, only 4% defected from the faith of their childhood. Thirty years later, a comparable survey revealed that one third had left their spiritual and religious roots in search of something new (Foster, 1994, p. 23). The culture of choice is transforming churches into market-led spiritual suppliers, especially as worshippers expect their faith and religious values to be a matter of selection rather than obligation. (On this, see Ward, P., 2002, pp. 69ff).

It is not my purpose here to venture into a debate about the precise nature of secularisation. Whatever that process is supposed to describe, it seems to me that it can never do justice to the intrinsically inchoate nature of religious belief that characterised the Western European landscape and its peoples long before the Enlightenment, let alone the industrial revolution of the 19th century and the cultural revolutions of the 20th century. The trouble with standard secularisation theories is that they depend on exaggerating the extent and depth of Christendom. They assume a previous world of monochrome religious allegiance, which is now (of course) in tatters. But in truth, the religious world was much more plural and contested before the 20th century ever dawned. So what, exactly, has changed? Despite my reticence to accede too much ground to proponents of secularisation theses, I readily acknowledge that the twentieth century has been the most seminal and challenging period for the churches in all of time. Leaving aside its own struggles with pluralism, post-colonialism, modernity, post-modernity and wave after wave of cultural change and challenge, the biggest issue the churches have had to face up to is, ironically, a simple one: choice. Increased mobility, globalisation and consumerism have infected and affected the churches, just as they have touched every other aspect of social life. Duty is dead: the customer is king. It is no surprise, therefore, to discover churches adopting a consumerist mentality, and competing with one another for souls, 'members', or entering the marketplace itself, and trying to convert tired consumers into revitalised Christians.

One such initiative is the Alpha courses, begun by Nicky Gumbel from Holy Trinity Brompton, in London. The Alpha courses have attracted millions of followers worldwide, and have arguably achieved the distinction of becoming the first internationally recognised global 'brand' of Christianity. In an important and timely study of Alpha courses, Stephen Hunt (2003) uses the well-established sociological framework of the spiritual marketplace (drawing on Ritzer, Lyon and others), in order to illustrate something of the impact of commodification upon contemporary religion. Significantly, he demonstrates that the increasingly consumerist cultural turn adopted by the churches that advocate Alpha does not necessarily lead to an increase in the level of religiosity. Or, perhaps put more acerbically, the number of customers for the courses does not necessarily translate into a new army of dedicated converts.

Correspondingly, Alpha is more like a creature of its culture, and far less counter-cultural than many of its champions imagine. Its features chime almost too perfectly with post-modern consumer culture: a stress on relationships; a definite nod to the therapeutic; dogma presented with a distinctly 'light' touch; a course to try, but not necessarily a long-term commitment. This is not a criticism, I should add: merely an observation. Alpha is arguably the first example of 'mass branding' for Christianity, replete with its own logo, publications, clothing, cook-books and other non-essential-but-desirable merchandise such as baseball caps, fleeces, t-shirts, pens and the like. (On popular religious materialism, see McDannell, 1995). Just as Sidney Carter once lamented those churches that had made their version of Jesus or salvation 'copyright', we now have a version of Christianity that is 'patent pending': the Alpha brand enjoys legal protection, in order to distinguish it from any pale imitator.

Besides the 'marketplace' framework that Hunt deploys in his analysis, the book is also to be welcomed for its firm grounding in ethnography. As a discipline, it comes in all shapes and sizes: some is mainly quantitative, whilst other kinds can be mostly qualitative; some depends on formal questionnaires and clearly proscribed methods; other kinds are more like 'participant observation', and accept the partiality of the observer/interpreter as a given. Hunt's journeying through planet Alpha (he is both a pilgrim seeking answers and a stranger entering a world he does not belong to), enables the reader to glimpse, perhaps for

the first time, that a form of religion, far from challenging consumerism, has itself been consumed by it. Again, this is not a criticism so much as a commonsensical observation. Recent work by Giggie and Winston (2002) shows that modern cities (replete with their pervasive commercial cultures) and religious traditions interact in dynamic, complicated and unexpected ways, producing expressions of faith that aspire to rise above the conventional cacophony of everyday city life. Alpha is just such a product: a faith of the market and a faith for the market. As David Lyon perceptively notes,

‘consumerism has become central to the social and cultural life of the technologically advanced societies in the later twentieth century. Meaning is sought as a “redemptive gospel” in consumption. And cultural identities are formed through processes of selective consumption’ (Lyon, 200, p.74).

Put more strongly, we might say the regard of humanity for Western modernity is an expression of a piety in which capitalism has itself become a global religion, at least in practice, if not always belief (Goodchild, 2002). So, is Alpha doing no more than successfully marketing a specious brand of Christianity within the wider consumerist cultural milieu, wherein the ‘commodification of religion’ is taking place? Laurence Moore’s seminal study *Selling God* provides a partial answer. Moore argues that secularisation theories should give way to an understanding of religion in the modern world, whereby it has become one of a number of ‘cultured’ and ‘leisured’ activities that individuals now purchase or subscribe to. Once, religion might have been somewhat standoffish from consumerism, and only entered the marketplace to censor and condemn it. But now, argues Moore,

‘the work of religious leaders and moralists in the market-place of culture [is] immediately entangled in a related by distinguishable enterprise. Rather than remaining aloof, they entered their own inventive contributions into the market. Initially these were restricted to the market of reading material, but their cultural production diversified. Religious leaders...[started to compete] with the appeal of popular entertainments. By degrees religion took on the shape of a commodity...’ (Moore, 1994, p.6).

Hunt’s important study is devoted to showing just how far that process of commodification has been reified in Alpha, and how religion can both consume and be consumed by the processes of free-market capitalism. But we can also add a further insight here. Alpha is also a creature of culture. Its structure is a ‘fit’ for contemporary culture, where the therapeutic and relational have superseded the hegemony of rules and regulations in the formation of churches and Christian life. As one trinity of sociologists note:

‘the modern project destroyed religious culture based in interdiction (rules) and replaced it with therapeutic culture based in relations...’ (Hall, Neitz and Battan, 2003, p.25)

Quite so. But what does it really mean to talk about ‘consumer religion’? Hall, Neitz and Battan’s study of culture is riddled with references to the power of consumerism, one in which religion has been marginalized to a large extent: pushed into the sphere of the private (2003, pp. 130ff, 250ff, etc). So, if the Geertzian definition of religion advanced earlier was both reasonable and fair, some description of consumerism is also necessary here. The idea that capitalism had produced a consumer society is primarily a post-war perception. Typically, the ‘consumer society’ nomenclature identifies a series of trends that have moved in parallel: the shift from heavy industry to new technology, service providers and entertainments as the new ‘industry’; increased consumption as a focus of social activity; the gradual triumph of lifestyles and choice over discipline and obligation; the shift from associational societies to post-associational (see Putnam, 2000).

Of course, these remarks are mere characterisations, but they are not without foundation. Veblen’s account of ‘conspicuous consumption’ (1953) charts the rise (in modern societies) of a new bourgeois and leisured class that is identified less by class and occupation and more by its association with lifestyles that express choice and status. In a different vein, Horkheimer and Adorno (1972), in their discussion of the culture industry, suggest that late modern and post-modern life is a distinct mode of production. Commodities are then, perhaps strangely, those materials that society produces to combat alienation. The advantage of this view is that it rescues the ‘culture-consumer’ debate from the crude and unsophisticated charge that consumers are merely passive pawns within a clever capitalist conspiracy. Instead, consumers are colluding with the forces of material and social production, by ‘purchasing’ pleasure, meaning and fulfilment in what is an otherwise alienating and highly constrained mode of social existence.

The fusion of religious and cultural studies can be enriched further if one considers the central place of shopping in contemporary life (see Miller, 1995 & 1998). As an activity, shopping is not only necessary, but also for many, a pleasure. The phrase ‘retail therapy’ has entered the vocabulary of vernacular life. In

theorising from the perspective of cultural studies, shopping is 'quasi-utopian'; it points towards a future in which there is time and leisure to enjoy the commodities that have been acquired. Their acquisition symbolises a future with less stress and more time. The shopping mall (cathedrals of consumerism) provides a social focus that encompasses eating, entertainment and gratification, centred on an understanding of humanity that elevates the autonomy and individuality of the consumer. Consumption, then, is a major mode of social expression, and it is perhaps inevitable that it would find its way into religion. But in what ways can such influences be charted?

McDannell's (1995) work shows that Christianity's absorption with consumerist culture is long-standing, but has accelerated in the capitalist optimism of the post-war years. In her richly descriptive and analytical book, she examines how the production of religion has shifted from the textual (i.e., books, tracts, etc) to encompass the ephemeral (e.g., baseball caps, fridge magnets, etc). Inevitably, specious Christian critiques of religious and secular consumerism – themselves, ironically, a product of consumerist culture – are never far behind. Tom Beaudoin's *Consuming Faith* (2003) argues for spirituality that 'integrates who we are with what we buy'. Interestingly, the premise of this thesis is that what individuals buy, eat and wear says much about their deepest values. Correspondingly, this thesis calls for a deeper practical wisdom in engaging with consumerist culture (but otherwise sees no way out of it, and accepts it as a given).

A different perspective can be gleaned from Graham Ward's intriguing treatment of religion and consumption (2003). Here, Ward argues that religion is inherently driven by consumption because it is so tied-up in desire. In his illuminating discussion of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, he shows how some of that desire is misconceived, and equally how it is also shaped by events and destiny, and ultimately refined. However, he also warns that:

'...the momentous growth in consumer culture that began in the nineteenth century paralleled the new Smithsonian economics of free trade and the avaricious drive for conquest, are reflected back in the fears, fascinations and figurations of 'religion', the turns to cosmotheism, the Romantic metaphysics of the absolute spirit, the deity who dominates, and the aesthetics of the sublime. A series of related works cross and recross these various discourses: 'consume', 'consummate', 'consumer' (we might even add the medical term 'consumption'). This Promethian will, commanding and indomitable, is driven and haunted by a lack as infinite as it is unappeasable. The obsession is death-bound and mad with an absence it can only surrender itself to...' (Ward, G., 2003, p. 113).

This characteristically acerbic (but richly and densely expressed) critique is at variance with more empathetic critiques that can be harvested from that of other scholars whose work might be best expressed as a fusion of theology and cultural studies. For example, Pete Ward's exemplary *LiquidChurch* (2002) suggests that shopping characterises most of contemporary life. Drawing on the work of Bauman, Baudrillard, Bourdieu and James Twitchell, Ward notes that

'Our competency as a shopper is challenged not so much by the choice of products, events, and experiences but by what they represent: the hopes and dreams, the aspirations and pleasures. To shop is to seek for something beyond ourselves. To reduce this to materialism is to miss the point, or more importantly it is to miss an opportunity. For this "reaching beyond ourselves" indicates a spiritual inclination in many of the everyday activities of shopping. Rather than condemn the shopper as materialist...[the] church [should] take shopping seriously as a spiritual exercise...' (Ward, P., 2002, p. 59).

The turn towards ecclesiology and missiology takes us back to one of the more central concerns of these lectures, namely understanding and interpreting contemporary culture and its relation to religion. Ward continues his excursion into the world of the 'spiritual shopper' by reminding his readers that what consumer culture craves is not objects, but their meaning. Thus, conspicuous consumption is not rampant materialism, but is rather a means of exchange and the enjoyment of meanings. Citing the work of Twitchell again, Ward suggests that advertising culture can therefore be understood as being like religion:

'...[they are] part of a meaning-making process. Religion and advertising attempt to bridge a gap between ourselves and things, and they do this by offering a systematic order...' (Ward, P., 2002, p. 60).

Consumption is therefore more about meaning than acquisition; consumerism is more about identity than materialism. Strictly speaking, then, the threat posed by consumerism to Christianity is not the material versus the spiritual. It is, rather, a competition between systems of meaning and identification. In this regard, we can suggest that advertising has a teleological and Utopian dimension to it: it suggests a new



order that is to come. In effect, it offers a promise of salvation within a culture that is already saturated with meanings and materialism. Advertising – pointing towards, bearing witness to and proclaiming – is a fundamentally evangelistic art-science. That which is raised up on the hoardings, reflected on our screens or placed in our hands through mailings or literature, is offering ultimacy and dependency. In effect, it is a (seductive?) way out of multiple meanings and materialism through this offer, or that product. Advertising adds meaning and interpretation to the objects of desire. Advertising, as an industry and art form, recognises that desire, not need, drives our choices and shapes our consumption. It understands that the culture of obligation and assumption has ceded the moral high ground to that of consumption. Correspondingly, authority, institutions and ideologies have to be desired and liked; they can no longer be imposed. (But for an alternative view see bell hooks, 1994).

If evidence were needed that the age of the ‘Worshopper’ had arrived, one needs to look no further than the mega-churches of North America. These are churches that are catering for several thousand members, and employing large numbers of staff in substantial sites. I have visited several over recent years, and their most striking feature remains their capacity to engage with the scope of human desires. A drive to South Barrington near Chicago will surely draw you to Willow Creek Community Church, one of the largest and most prominent mega-churches. The church – in reality a giant conference and meeting centre, with a bookshop, several restaurants, lecture theatres and a large sanctuary – can accommodate about 5,000 people at any one time. So the church runs four identical services over the weekend: two on Saturday evening and two on Sunday morning (see Hoover, 2000).

The church as a whole is mostly devoid of explicit religious symbolism, and the services are a fusion of uplifting folksy Christian messages, moral advice (but not too prescriptive), and some singing. The services are ‘performative’ set pieces that adopt a ‘magazine-type’ format; carefully choreographed, sensitively hosted and thought-provoking. They are stirring and compelling, but without being demanding or intrusive. However, it is the resources centre that is arguably the more striking feature of the church. The sheer range of self-help, support and encounter groups is overwhelming. There are several types of social groups: bowling, soccer and other leisure pursuits for all ages. The therapeutic provision is comprehensive and engaging. There are groups for ‘Moms and Daughters Hurting’, ‘Fathers and Sons Bonding’, individuals coping with their own sexuality, or individuals who suspect that they might have problems with the sexuality of their partner. There are support groups offering counselling, help through bereavement, loss, eating disorders (obesity and anorexia), and more besides. On my visit there I counted more than forty different kinds of self-help, therapeutic and support groups, and several dozen groups devoted to sport and leisure activity. The total numbers involved ran into several thousand persons.

Compositionally, Willow Creek’s membership mostly reflects its context. The congregation are mainly white, affluent, college educated and working in the city, with a large percentage aged between 30-50. The sermons carry an evangelistic timbre coupled to a politically (slightly) left-of-centre appropriation of ethics. In some ways, the ethos of Willow Creek could be reasonably characterised as the ‘First Church of Christ the Democrat’. However, a fuller and deeper ethnography of Willow Creek would, I suspect, identify the gathering as a distinctive brand of consumer church: worship, lunch, family activities, leisure events and self-help groups fuse together in a seamless consumerist experience. The division between secular and sacred is utterly obliterated.

#### Christmas, Christianity and Culture:

The absence of clear or obvious divisions between the secular and the sacred is undoubtedly perplexing for many within the Christian tradition. This, added to the ascendancy of consumerism, presents a perplexing problem for the churches at a time when they are seeking to recover their identity within an age besieged by assumptions relating to the triumph of secularisation. Arguably, this is especially focussed in the meaning and purpose of Christmas. For many within the Christian tradition, the consumerist appropriation of the festival produces an almost neuralgic response. However, such concerns are hardly particular to modernity. As Jennifer Rycenga notes, the festival was

‘...shunned by the Puritan authorities of early New England because of its connections to pagan seasonal celebrations and to sexual and alcohol excesses, the colonial Christmas was celebrated mainly by the working class as an occasion for public revelry and carnival. The eighteenth century often became riotous...the transformation of Christmas into a domestic holiday coincided with the growth of consumer culture in the nineteenth century America ...’(Rycenga, 2002, p. 142).

Similarly, Nissenbaum (1996) argues that Christmas was a festival that was transformed in relatively recent times. True enough, the New English Puritans of Massachusetts banned the festival. They had their reasons, and argued that simply encouraged drunkenness and riot, with poor 'wassailers' allowed to extort food and drink from the well to do. Nissenbaum notes how seventeenth and early eighteenth century diarists described the festival:

'highly dishonourable to the name of Christ...[the people] are consumed in...playing at cards, in revellings, in excess of wine, and mad mirth...' (Revd Increase Mather, Boston, 1687 )

'The Feast of Christ's Nativity is spent in revelling, dicing, carding, masking and in all licentious liberty...by mad mirth, by long eating, by hard drinking, by lewd gaming...' (Revd Cotton Mather, 1712)

'...the festival is a scandal to religion, and an encouraging of wickedness...a pretence for drunkenness, and rioting, and wantonness...it is the occasion of much uncleanness and debauchery...' (Revd Henry Bourne, Newcastle, England, 1725 )

According to Nissenbaum, Bourne noted that Christmas Carols, although sung enthusiastically, were often 'done in the midst of rioting and chambering (a common term for fornication) and wantonness...' (1996, p.7). Yet by the 19th century the festival had been transformed into one of domesticity and consumerism. Nissenbaum shows how this social transformation depended, to some extent, on drawing upon earlier spiritual traditions, such as St. Nicholas, Baboushka and other popular folk tales. The practice of giving gifts (especially to children) also marked a new economic and social confidence, which also coincided with significant cultural and political changes in attitudes to children. The elevation of Christmas to its present celebratory epoch also draws upon older cultural traditions: the observance of the winter solstice; a brief period of leisure and plenty in an otherwise demanding agricultural year, and so forth. Indeed, the current 'tradition' is replete with ironic overlays. The origin of the legend of St. Nicholas (circa 300AD), a patron saint of children, can be traced to modern-day Turkey, a predominantly Muslim country. The story was subject to many variations over several centuries. The image of Santa Claus was transformed in 1844 by Clement Clark Moore's saccharine poem 'Twas the Night Before Christmas, causing many artists to portray Santa as an Elf-like figure in a green cape. But the red cape and white beard is primarily the work of another artist, Haddon Sundblom, who dressed Santa in red as a part of the commercialisation of Christmas that was propagated by Coca-Cola. The result was the white-bearded, red-caped, black-booted jolly old man we now associate with the festivities (Witzel & Witzel, 2002, pp. 1001-117). But Santa's journey has been a long one: a Christian saint from a country that later became Muslim, to being the icon synonymous with Christmas, who owes part of his identity to a global commercial corporation.

Santa's evolution shows that it is almost impossible to draw precise lines between consumerism, culture and religion. From the very beginning, the churches' collusion with eliding Christ's birth with a range of more secular or non-Christian celebratory themes has meant that the churches hold over Christmas has been rather tenuous. For some, it is a time of piety; but for many, it is carnival. Christmas is, ironically, a difficult holiday to Christianise (Nissenbaum, 1996, p. 8; Marling, 2000, pp. 321-355).

However, Rycenga, amongst others, argues that even the modern consumerist-saturated Christmas represents some form of deep, nascent 'residual Christianity'. The season has the potential for the 'consecration of dense symbols' in a cluttered calendar: the giving of gifts, the family, the vulnerability of a new-born child, and so forth. Thus, according to Rycenga, and using the work of Grimes, even something as 'simple' as Christmas shopping is at least a secondary act of religious ritual, for it is:

'performed, embodied, enacted, gestural (not merely thought or said), formalised...not ordinary, unadorned)... repetitive...collective, institutionalised...patterned...standardised...ordered...traditional..... stylised...deeply felt... sentiment laden, meaningful...symbolic, referential...perfected, idealised...ludic...religious...conscious, deliberate...(Grimes, 1990, p.14).

In such a reading, the shopping mall can be interpreted as a 'cathedral of consumerism': laden with altars, icons and votive opportunities, it speaks of gift, desire and fulfilment. Of course, such comparisons only take the analysis so far. But to its credit, it is the provenance of religious studies to locate and interpret the religious that is beyond the immediate or obvious bounds of faith traditions. And in a consumerist society, there can be little doubt that the synergy between consumer culture and religion is complex and interactive. According to David Docherty, the key to reading the relationship between religion and consumerism lies:

'not in the opposition between the symbols of natural and transcendent faiths, but in the analysis of the way the former appropriates the latter only to discover that it has swallowed

something alien, something that at some stage will burst out and consume the social order that initially consumed it...' (Docherty, in Walker and Percy, 2000, pp. 82-108).

Thus, Christmas is a place where culture and religion collide and compete for meaning. And beneath that synergy of consumerism and spirituality lies a battle for the control of Christmas. However, it cannot be obvious where, precisely, the battle-lines are to be drawn, for what some may regard as plain consumerism, will, for others, be gestures that richly and ritually symbolise gift, love and a gesture towards the transcendent. Susan Roll's fascinating exploration of the origin of Christmas (1995) goes further than most theological treatises, by suggesting that the key to the debate lies in developing a theory of time. Roll's central thesis is that the great feasts of Christianity are not, by nature, historical commemorations of actual episodes in history linked to specific and verifiable dates. The feasts are, rather, linked to the explanation of religious ideas (1995, p.23).

Epiphany can be taken as one example of this. The actual date of the coming of the Magi is, relatively speaking, of secondary importance in the Christian tradition. Indeed, some Christians may regard the story of the 'three wise men' as a myth. But this is unlikely to impact upon the celebration of Epiphany (literally, 'manifestation'). The feast, because it takes account of the flight of the holy family into Egypt, and Herod's massacre of the innocents, is habitually interpreted as being concerned with journeying, exile, violence, refugees, coming and going, visions, dreams, recognition and disguise, and 'true' wisdom. The story is laden with meanings that have embellished the tradition down the centuries. It can be taken to symbolise a range of representative powers recognising the lordship of the Christ child: gentile, occult, Eastern, non-Christian – all have scope within the brevity of the gospel account. Other Christian traditions emphasise the aspect of pilgrimage and searching; of surprise and gift; of the vulnerability of the Christ child. But in all these forms of ritual and theological remembrance, the actual time or history of the event is secondary: it is the meaning of the events that are primary.

This leads Roll to suggest that, for several centuries, commercial time has been 'normative'. The time of the church and the time of the merchant (or farmer) are no longer the same. This change can be traced back to before the industrial revolution, Reformation of Renaissance. In truth, argues Roll, it is the church that has always adapted to culture and the seasons, by investing them with particular meaning. There are three reasons for this. First, humanity does not look for meaning in time; it creates meaning in time. Second, human activity searches for meaning and sustenance beyond what basic needs, and seek to enrich life. Third, money and consumerism form the basic mode of exchange and interconnectedness (1995, p.38).

Building on this observation, Roll argues that there are two types of time in Christian tradition and culture (1995, p.236ff). Anticipative time refers to – a rhythm of time in which the build-up leads to a peak, followed by rapid decline. Extensive time, on the other hand, refers to the high point occurs at the start of the time-segment, and is developed during this period. The distinction is useful in several ways. For example, we can immediately see that 'secular' Christmas time is mainly anticipative in character: it can begin when the shops first start selling and advertising wares (September?), and ends on January 1 st. On the other hand, more formal Christian Christmas time is primarily extensive in character; its time of preparation begins in Advent, and the season officially concludes at Epiphany.

But the two become blurred, of course. Advent, although anticipative in one sense, is almost wholly lost on the secular world (except through Advent calendars). Churches also make significant concessions to (extensive) secular and consumerist time. Only the strictest churches will avoid singing carol services during Advent; many will hold Christingle services, nativity plays and other liturgical events, whereby the Christmas message intrudes into Advent. However, these observations merely strengthen Roll's thesis, since they show that in Christianity, at least in its multifarious vernacular forms, actual time (and what it signifies) is less important than the meanings that are attached to festivals.

To earth this discussion more practically, I need only consider the array of events that typically take place in my local former parish church during December. The most popular service is Christingle, which is developed from a Moravian tradition. The children are all given oranges (symbolising the world), with a candle stuck in the middle (symbolising the light of Christ). The oranges are made into orb-like objects by red ribbon that is wrapped around the middle (symbolising the blood of Christ), and four sticks that hold sweets or dried fruit (symbolising the gifts of the God in creation). The high point of the service is when the lights of the church are dimmed, and the candles all lit, and carols sung. This service always takes place on the Sunday evening before Christmas day, and for many families and individuals is their 'Christmas' service.

In contrast to this emergent and popular tradition, the celebration of Epiphany is markedly low key. In a number of churches, the festival will be celebrated on the Sunday closest to January 6<sup>th</sup>, and not necessarily on the day itself. Correspondingly, in my own home, we have a ritual of inscribing C + M + B, writing the date of the new year on our front door, and then processing around the house with the wise men from the nativity set. This is a deliberate counter-cultural shared activity that says something else about the nature of the season and time. However, it is a moot point as to which visitors to our house would understand the alphabetical formula that is chalked up in our porch each year. (C+M+B = Casper, Melchior and Balthasar – traditional names for the three wise men).

Given the drift of the discussion so far, it might be tempting to imagine that consumerism, coupled to notions of secular anticipative time, is eclipsing religious notions of time and their meaning. Is there, indeed, a distinct loss of sacred time against normative commercial time? Superficially, it would seem so. Where there is no link with consumerism, sacred time often suffers a loss of extensive meaning. One need only think of feasts such as Ascensiontide, or Whit Monday, and see that their celebration and marking within the public sphere has deteriorated significantly in the last twenty-five years. Once public holidays cease to be linked to religious events, the sacred loses something of its pre-eminence. On the other hand, Christmas and Easter flourish, arguably, because of the continuing consumerist links with the festivals, and the fact that the religious events are still marked with public holidays. However, lest this sound complacent, a number of northern European countries are ambivalent about Good Friday being a public holiday. Increasingly, this means that many who celebrate Easter may have fairly inchoate views about Holy Week. Easter Monday as a holiday, on the other hand, flourishes because of its consumerist ties, which is ironic, since Easter Monday has no significant Christian meaning.

However, there is a double irony at work here. The very fact that consumerism continues to draw upon and inhabit religious ideas and events for its own ends also means that religion continues to quietly peddle its counter-cultural message. As Roll points out, the sentimentalising of the nativity story at the height of consumerist indulgence creates alternative spaces for different meanings. The lighting of candles, the deliberate elevation of memory, the effort of kinship: each nuance of the Christmas story can act against the consumerist culture that has brought it into the public domain (1995, p. 239). Ironically, it is the commercialisation and inculturation of Christmas that saves it. It acts to: (1) give alternative meanings to consumerism; (2) give added meaning to consumerism; (3) take people from the material and functional to the transcendent and mysterious (Roll, 1995, pp.243-273).

Put another way, it is possible to see festivals such as Christmas as secular/sacred and public/private 'felt' days of obligation, in which many more will participate than those who actively identify with a formal religious group. Conceptually, this is an aspect of 'believing without belonging' (Grace Davie), or the social 'structure of feeling' (Raymond Williams) that revolves round a season (Roll, 1995, p. 240). Thus, we might return to our Geertzian perspective, and restate that it is useful to regard religion as a culture (Warren, 1997, p.23). It is a signifying system, which demands allegiance. Thus, religion and culture conflict and conflate in equal measure. It structures feeling and mystery; orders life, and is itself ordered by life. But it is precisely because religion is a culture (based on the resources of hope and vision), that it can critique contemporary culture (Warren, 1997, p.190). And it is at its richest when it does this in ways that chime with contemporary culture, and resonate with the totality of human life and experience. The duty of theology, then, is to be both temperate and engaging, for it can never easily divide religion and culture:

'...perhaps one way to express the task, or a task, of theology, is that of structuring mystery. One might go a little farther and call it even imposing structure on mystery, but this involves crossing a boundary into an arena where humans have little power, and what we have merely tends to encourage hubris...' (Roll, 1995, p.9).