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AN ESSAY ON SPIRITUALITY OF HOMO LUDENS URBANUS

Abstract

This essay discusses some aspects of the culture of urban consumption and how they could make sense or explain recent changes of religiosity in Finland. Shopping can be approached as a significant practise of orientating oneself in society both materially, symbolically and socially. The main argument is that this mental orientation originating from modern urbanity is apt to become generalised ethics of urban people of today with spiritual and religious dimensions. The aspects discussed include aleatoriness and serendipity, prolonged youth, urban sociability, inner experiences, authenticity of identity, animation of life, energetic flow, and mimetic self-relation. All these refer to constitutive dimensions of the human realm of play and playfulness. The theorising of play and games holds the theoretical framework for the analysis. The result is an analysis of the spirituality of the human character Homo ludens urbanus.

Key words: urban culture, consumption, religiosity, spirituality

Introduction

The Latin term Homo ludens urbanus in the title refers to Dutch historian Johan Huizinga and his classic book Homo Ludens (1938). By adding a word urbanus I seek to specify and contextualise the characterisation to the modern city life. Huizinga discusses the importance of the play element of culture and society. He makes it clear in the foreword of his book that he means the play element of culture, and not the play element in culture. For him, play is primary to the culture. Animals play, though they have no culture – nor religion.

Another classical theorist of play and games is Roger Caillois’ Man, Play and Games (1961). Also Caillois analysed play as a principle of creating and constituting culture-through action. For both, play is not only a leftover from ancient times previous to the civilization, but a constant form of human action taking place beside or inside the «serious» reality of all times. Walter Benjamin shared the same view when writing of the significance of mimesis in modern, urbanized world. Georg Simmel (1964a) argued that people’s sociability is autotelic or self-purposeful and thus playful action. Simmel wrote,
that «The more profound, double sense of ‘social game’ is that not only the game is played in a society (…) but that, with its help, people actually ‘play’ society» (1964a: 50). For Simmel playfulness is a society forming element.

These are the theorists I utilise when approaching the modern urban consumer culture and looking for its connections to today’s religiousness and spirituality. This essay is based on my doctoral dissertation (Mäenpää 2005; see also Mäenpää 2006) in which I studied ethnographically interaction and social order in urban public spaces, and the relations of the interaction to the practises of consumption in Helsinki during the 1990’s. The data consisted of 12 focus group interviews and participant observation in squares, streets, shopping centres and urban events in the centre of Helsinki, as well as in a shopping mall in eastern part of the city. The study aimed at explaining the modern consumerism by the sociality of the urban public life of industrial and post-industrial cities. The focus was on the ways people enjoy and entertain themselves, although this is not the case all the time and for all the people, of course. Nevertheless, it is the sunny side of the street of the city, so to say, that needs to be analysed and theorised in order to comprehend the modern urbanity of the affluent societies. In addition to those mentioned above, the ethnographic work was mostly informed by theoretical writings of Richard Sennett (1977) and Erving Goffman (e.g. 1967, 1972).

If we take a look at the place of Christian churches in Finnish cities, we see a spatial transformation. Old churches are still standing in their traditional places often dominating their environment and presenting power of Christian religion. A novelty we have today is a small chapel inside a large shopping mall. The Church argues that they want to be present where people move about. Their clergymen want to step down from the altar to walk amongst people like Jesus did. Socialism replaced churches with other urban functions, but capitalism seems to remove religion from its sanctuaries to spaces of its own logic. Place of religion seems to be only a part of the place of consumption side by side with shops, cafés, restaurants and so forth.

This spatial shift has parallels in other walks of life of society. In 1994 Finnish Society for Free-thinkers asked Competition Office to examine whether The Evangelic Lutheran Church of Finland is using their dominating market position in an illegal way when managing graveyards, organising confirmation class camps and operating in the market of ideologies in general. Their argument shamelessly equated the Church and its preaching with other marketing business (Alasuutari 2004: 258).

In this essay I will suggest a parallel view of the transition of the Church moving down from the podium to the shopping street of the society. This view is the religiousness of the citizens of the market society. What kind of transition of religion could be formed by studying the consumer of shopping streets? Could it be possible to approach everyday religiousness and spirituality through an analysis of the ethics of urban consumption?

The emblem of consumer society – often used of contemporary society – together with the fact that shopping has become the main function of cities, both lead us to take the banality of going shopping seriously from the point of view of spirituality, as well. It is reasonable to assume, that the practise of consumption habituates one not only to consume more but also to orientate oneself to other fields of life with the same kind of preoccupation. Further, this habituated orientation tends to take form of a fairly perma-
nent and generalised ability to think and act in a way we can call ethics. Here the reasoning follows pragmatist epistemology where action and knowledge are seen as part of the same process of the practises. Consumption is considered a constitutive way of being in the world and as such it has effects on consumer-urbanites’ religiousness and spirituality, as well. In a bigger picture, the approach suggests that spirituality is no longer bound to labour and production but rather to leisure and consumption.

Since I am not too familiar with sociology of religion, I will not refer to earlier studies in this field, nor will I comment widely earlier scientific findings in Finland or elsewhere about modern religiosity. The exception is the discussion on secularisation and how it leads to people leaving the main Finnish church, which I will use as a reference point for discussion. The idea is simply to bring the sociological findings of urban consumption to the fore of religiousness and spirituality, and to try to make sense of some cultural phenomena both at the side of consumption and that of religiousness. Implicitly this approach tends to cross and blur the boundary between those to spheres – which I assume is often the case in the sociology of religion and religious studies.

**Playful practises of public spaces**

Play is classically defined as free, separated, unproductive activity, which is governed by rules. Furthermore, the result of play is always uncertain and mentally it is based on the logic of make-believe, which means that it is «accompanied by a special awareness of a second reality or of a free unreality, as against real life». (Caillois 1961: 9–10.) Play is free activity standing quite consciously outside the realm of ‘ordinary’ life as being ‘not serious’, but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly (Huizinga 1984). Play is a self-purposeful (autotelic) and autonomous, imagined sphere in reality which aims at joyfulness and entertainment. It is an artificial world inside the world.

To put a long ethnographic story short, two main aspects prevail in modern urban and often consumeristic experience. They are unexpectedness and make-believe. That is why I call the urban play an *aleatory-mimetic* one. ‘Aleatory’ signifies the mental activity of adjusting the unexpectedness of urban life. ‘Mimetic’ refers to the idea of city as *theatrum mundi*, a worldly theatre where people are at stage presenting themselves to each other. Both of these aspects have been considered key factors of urbanity by many scholars and writers (e.g. Goffman 1967; Sennett 1977; Hannerz 1980).

The interconnecting concept between play and religion is *ritual*. Ritual can be defined as a myth realised. Myths, for one’s part, are main elements of religions, though all the myths are not exactly religious. The conceptual analysis of all these is not possible here. It is sufficient to say, that play and playfulness differ from ritual at least in four senses: 1) play is not necessarily bound to mythology, 2) play is not necessarily bound to time, 3) play is free and not sanctioned, and 4) play does not necessarily produce anything to the world outside its own realm, as ritual as rites of passage usually do. Play seems to be more profane and free of institutionally shared beliefs than ritual, though play is always
a matter of believing as if things are in some way special and specific compared to everyday reasoning.

If we follow Walter Benjamin and his thinking of mimesis or the mimetic faculty, we can find one perspective on the playfulness of the modern culture and its connection to religious thinking. Benjamin considered mimesis (mimicking, imitating) as the main cultural force and a theme with which he aimed at breaking down the positivism of the conceiving of the modern world (Peltonen 1999: 84–85). Like Caillois and Huizinga, Benjamin saw mimesis as a something primordial and bound to nature before the evolution of culture. For Benjamin, mimetic faculty means a way of thinking or reading the reality in a same way than reading the stars, the tee leaves or the liver. Modern man shares the same ‘superstitious’ aspiration with his predecessors in Mesopotamia. (Benjamin 1989; Taussig 1993)

Mimesis is a cultural current that works against modern rationality, because it represents an opposite relation to progress and evolution. In the mimesis, Benjamin thought, continuity and discontinuity of modern culture were challenged by a view of the simultaneity of difference and sameness. This way play can be regarded as a permanent change without progress. Playfulness of our culture is like a network of roads covering the whole world, but coming from nowhere and also leading nowhere. It does not have a starting point in mythology, nor does it provide any idea of our destination. The network of roads has neither an engineer which would give a meaning outside itself, nor a structure. It is just an endless interplay between what is and what could be, and as such it is like an energetic principle.

I think this pretty vague idea of non-progressiveness resonates with what has been thought in the discussions of post-modernity or late modernity with its lack of guiding narratives, end of history and a void or powerlessness of ideologies. History has lost its goal, and it has been replaced by trends and megatrends which are based on the extrapolation of parameters of some present phenomena. We could hypothesise, that the rise of playfulness is either a cause or an effect, or both, of this kind of secularisation of the modernism. However, there is another aspect of play and games which, according to my study, is quite essential when understanding urban life, and which I suggest could have an effect in the realm of religiousness. It is the already mentioned classic conception of urbanity prevailed by unexpectedness, which I have elaborated further to the idea of aleatory playfulness (of aleatory play see Caillois 1961).

**Game of chance**

Unexpectedness means either a feeling that *anything* can happen, as it did for Guy Debord (1994/1967) and for the artistic movement of *Situationists*, who pursued to brake the everyday urban life ordained by capitalism in the 1950’s and the 1960’s. Or, unexpectedness means at least that something *could* happen, as it did for Erving Goffman (1967), who saw it as the basic motivation for people to gather in urban public places. By aleatory playfulness, I mean that modern urbanites have habituated to the unexpectedness of the city, and that they utilise it for their enjoyment. The tradition of
urban studies is full of the downsides of the unexpectedness: insecurity, healthy risks, delinquency and so forth. It is the turning to the lighter side of the unexpectedness, to the serendipity of urban culture, that is the basis of my contribution to the urban tradition.

Aleatoriness of urbanity means a kind of lottery of the street: something nice could happen to me, whether it means encountering a friend, an elegant but cheap pair of shoes, or an inspiring art exhibition. The encounter requires a mass of people, mass of things, or mass of cultural supply in order to make one able to find it by chance, or at least with a feeling of being lucky. The aleatoriness involves romantic longing for something not yet precisely known but only desired, and then encountering of something which seems to fit to the fantasised image. This is what happens in shopping, and it has its roots in the very urbanity itself. It means anticipating something which is not exactly foreseeable, and this paradox is solved in the everyday practise of shopping.

What could be the effect of the everyday aleatoriness to people’s spirituality? I find the relationship of the game of chance and Christianity too difficult for me to cover here. We could argue that anticipating something one cannot foresee belongs to ‘the dialectics of the unattainable’ of the Christianity, as Finnish sociologist Jari Ehrnrooth (2000) puts it. We could realise that drawing lots is one the three ways of getting to know God’s will in the Old Testament. We may also focus on the idea that when one plays by chance one actively postulates a world, where one is thrown at the mercy of chance. Though it is done in an everyday basis, it is not a rational, purposeful action but irrational and romantic, and giving oneself up to some force outside of oneself. This again suggests our everyday life attaches rather to the logic of mimesis, in Benjamin’s sense, than to the supposed rationality of the modern man.

Urban consumption means reading of material and (other) symbolic culture in the way one reads the stars. It is crucial to understand, though, that the game of consumption is not fatal. It is for enjoyment hic et nunc, here and now, not for determining the rest of one’s life. As such, it could be set against to the Christianity’s striving for a place in Heaven, which is a fatal game, par excellence. We could at least speculate, that playing with one’s everyday destiny, so to say, in a way secularises the cosmos of the modern human. The tendency of the life in a welfare society, where one usually can and actively will expect good rather than evil to happen could perhaps make people to expect a pleasant lot in their afterlife, as well. The recent surveys reveal that most Finns believe in heaven but not in hell. The existence of hell has also been a subject of theological debate in Finland (see Kylliäinen 1997).

Prolonged youth and puer aeternus

Let us go back to the level of a playing urbanite, Homo ludens urbanus, to search for other empirical evidence or at least counterparts for the aleatory, the never-ending mimesis, imagining as if things were somehow more pleasantly than they do not seem to be actually. Seen from an anthropological viewpoint, we could say that contemporary Finnish society is characterised by a prolonged rite of passage from childhood to
adulthood. The period of adolescence has prolonged on both ends. Children take part in youth culture – such as rock music, make-up and sexual experiences – earlier than before. The phenomenon is not only cultural since the average age of females becoming fertile has gone down. At the same time the change in the average age of marriage and giving birth tells how the time of settling down with one’s life has been pushed later.

The present culture has been said to idealise youth. The youth has also become more significant group for capitalism: it is true that youth sells, but also that the youth forms the main target group for marketing novelties of music and technology, for example. We may argue that the youth has become a new middle class which leads the material and symbolic change of trends and fashions.

What is significant for the purposes of this paper is a certain ethics that is contained in being young – and wanting to continue being young. It is the ethics of what Carl Jung called *puer aeternus*, eternal youth. *Puer aeternus* lives not from actions he or she takes but from the possibilities to act in various ways, and from the experience of being able to live that way. The prolonged youth is a place where one stands at the front of numerous doors without entering any. Moreover, youth is a place for multiplying the doors of possibilities by imagining new ones. This becomes evident when we add to the picture an analysis of mental action of shopping.

Shopping for things means imagining of oneself as if a new self (when probing a new jacket for example). The key point to understand modern consumption is that shopping does not necessarily lead to actual purchasing. Modern shopping does not take place at the cash desk but in the fitting-room, whether actual or virtual one. It is the possibility to choose that governs, and the experience of freedom when pondering it. The freedom of the possibility of choosing involves also possibility of refraining from choosing something. And this freedom is what the *theatrum mundi* effect of urban public life provides us with by its peculiar sort of human interaction.

**Urbanisation of the divine service**

There is a phenomenon inside the Lutheran church where the consumeristic having a door open but not entering it is involved in the setting of youth culture. In 1988 a new mass called St. Thomas Mass emerged in Agricola Church in downtown Helsinki. The new mass became popular amongst young urban people and spread soon to other cities in Finland. It also paved the way for the reform of the institution of the Finnish Lutheran mass (Kauppinen 1996, 97). The new mass was embodied by plenty of music and participation of the assembly. During an interval people could wander around lighting candles in praying altars and meeting friends. The urbanity of the place of the church, the audience of young and single, the sociability of the gathering, gospel music, the dramaturgy, the atmosphere of the crowd with the general heightening of the level of experiential potency all connect the new mass with other urban events which became popular at the same period of time. In Finland the late 1980’s was a phase when the first
urban generation grew up and started a cultural upheaval with urbanity, aesthetics and consumption as their main themes (Mäenpää 2005).

The main urban happening was the Night of Arts since 1987. The Night of Arts is an evening when most of the cultural institutions of the city, such as libraries, museums, theatres, bookstores and art galleries, keep their doors open offering special presentations and discussions without admission. In Helsinki it has become an institutionalised annual urban event which finishes the summer period that the first of May has opened. It is not exaggeration to say that the Night of Arts has become a model for urbanity in Finland. My study (Mäenpää 2005) of the Night of Arts was crystallised in an expression an interviewee explained its characteristics: «It’s so free. The crowd in a way enables you to go places [like art galleries] where you somehow cannot otherwise go. But now you are part of a flock.»

What is the origin of the sense of freedom these urban events promote? It is based on the specific interaction order of the modern city life prevailed by anonymity. In streets and squares and shopping malls where lots of people move about, everyone is seen by everyone but everyone also lets everyone be. It is the simultaneous liveliness of the outside and the tranquillity of the inside of oneself which make anonymous public encounters a sphere of freedom (Simmel 1964b). They offer a place to look around in your own thoughts without, so to say, being caught of what you think.

The key to the success of both The Night of Arts and St. Thomas Mass is in the power of urban crowd to free people socially to encounter something new. In crowd you are allowed to take part on institutions like art performance or religious ceremony feeling free to go first in and then out without being necessarily an enthusiast of art or Jesus. This freedom is given by urbanity itself, and as an idea of ‘lowering of the threshold’ it has been utilised – both physically and symbolically – by museums and other cultural institutions recently, as well.

**Freedom of oneself to become oneself**

Let us continue with the idea of not having to be something or someone, of being anonymous amongst others of the same kind. Being no-one carries also potential to be someone. Let us go back to open doors and the possibility to choose. Gerhard Schulze (1992) has described our Erlebnisgesellschaft as a world of choosing. However, Schulze says also, that choosing does not aim so much to possessing but to being. Erlebnis, or inner experience in English, requires installing oneself to some part or role in life like having a role in a theatre play. This is the theatrum mundi effect that urban life carries and which comes true in the consumption of material or (merely) symbolic things, like art works or religious thoughts. The playfulness of consumption involves virtual role-playing in one’s own mind (Campbell 1987). And this is what urban public space provides as a stage-like theatrum mundi.

The anonymity of the urban crowd detaches one from one’s own personality. This situational impersonality then enables one to attach to something new, whether it was fashionable sun glasses, arte povera or the idea of loving your neighbour. Department store,
art gallery and church empowered by urban crowd are all places where one can imagine and invent new doors of possibilities to be kept open. Urbanity creates and solves the paradox or getting but not getting, of eating but being not eaten, because everything takes place in an imagined as-if setting provided by the urban theatrum mundi.

To sum up, the existential situation of Homo ludens urbanus, the consuming urbanite, is not governed by determining fatality of choosing, but by a continuous state of choosing within the realm of play. We can generalise this finding further by saying that there is an ethics of having a wide view to the world, and the widening of it even further is one’s main purpose. From the point of view of the Christian Church, it seems that people are basically open to its message. On the other hand, it may turn out that being a member of church is a too heavy bond, because it closes other doors, when taking part in gospel concert is not, since it involves only a playful attachment to Christianity. My point is not to repeat a general picture of uncommitted and free-floating personality type, but to argue that the tendency is an effect of habituation to the urban life, as is modern consumerism, as well. Further, rather than talking of free-floaters, I suggest that analysing people’s consumeristic action as playfulness we can better conceive of modern consumption and perhaps also modern forms of religiousness.

What unites the consumer culture and Christianity is a continuous longing and search that the longing motivates. However, when the Christian quest is governed by the idea of the eventual discovery, urban consumption is ruled by forgetting, leaving behind and wearing off of things and their meanings. If the Church would like to follow the logic of urban consumer to the extreme, it should become a department store, not just in order to offer something for everyone, but to offer always something new. It is the self-purposefulness and the insatiableness of desires that distinguishes modern consumption from its earlier forms.

I think we can define one rather general ethical value or principle of today in Finland. That is everyone’s right to pursue happiness and well-being through one’s own personality, which can also be interpreted as an effect of urban consumption. In consumer culture of the youth, identity formation is an important project. Having an authentic, personal, distinctive identity is something a modern adult has to gain. It may have even become sacred: when a bishop opens his or her mouth publically by moralising people’s sexuality, a thousand young adults leave the Church, to exaggerate a bit. The prevailing everyday moral says that one cannot blame on someone for his or her identity, since it is true and authentic.

Urban consumption and playfulness generally is profoundly imagining of oneself as someone else. The identity formation as an important project, together with the strong ability to imagine oneself like in a role-play may make one able to empathise others. In this respect, there is no good or bad in people’s fulfilling of their identities, which sexuality deeply is. Following this line of thought further, we can discuss whether this leads, not to immorality, but to a loss of the evil in the world. Who is a bad guy if everyone fulfils one’s own authentic personality? It is easier to say that criminals are unhealthy or mentally distorted people, distorted due to their unsuccessful identity formation. If we generalise the mental action of shopping to a world-view this way, we open a vision of a world where all the possible identities as places in society are right and good, a priori.
This would make it difficult for one to compose any ethics, because there is no negative point of reference. Through this reasoning we could explain Satanism, heavy rock and other phenomena articulating and calling for the evil as a kind of Christian fundamentalism, as a reaction to preserve the evil in the world in order to maintain the Christian cosmos. In Finland heavy rock has become mainstream popular culture, recently.

**Getting more, getting psychic**

There is one more aspect in St. Thomas Mass to grasp. It is the aspiration to strengthen the religious experience through participation, music and social contact. This can be approached as part of a general emphasis on experientiality (Erlebnis) of urban culture of consumption from shopping to tourism and hobbies. We want to get stronger and fuller experiences, and we get them by using imagination of the playfulness. From this viewpoint we can discuss the fact that witchcraft, shamanism and other nature-based forms of spirituality have become more common in Finland. Witchcraft as spirituality involves stronger ritualism, and shamanism is actually based on the mighty experience of making a journey behind the visible world. Both the rituals involve substances and things with which the experience becomes possible. This comes near to live action role-plays (LARP), which have become popular in Finland lately.

LARP involves also acting in an imaginary world animated by things and technologies used by the players. Animation – presupposing and producing of the anima – is the word pointing out the shared table of playfulness and spiritual thinking. We could see the table as a continuum where, in the middle, we could place a phenomenon called wellness. It signifies anything that helps one to feel good, and as such it covers the area between medicine, bodily enjoyment and psychic well-being. Wellness is big business and present in every copy of every women’s magazine in Finland. There is also a kind of wellness movement – in close connection to business – which has a motto of «exploring the possibility of the sixth sense», which shows its aspiration beyond senses to spirituality.

Common to the continuum of LARP – wellness – witchcraft is to animate, vitalise and empower the world around us. It is worthy to notice that they postulate a strong virtual, imagined world inside this world, instead of the afterlife. This is probably the main essence in the present consumer and spiritual culture that challenges Christianity.

**‘Easternisation’ of the West**

Colin Campbell (1999: 2006) has argued recently that the Western culture has been ‘Easternised’. He does not refer only to the fact of the spreading of the Eastern consumables like food, cultural products, life-styles or religions, but to the intrinsic cultural transition of the West. Based on Max Weber’s studies, Campbell argues that the traditional difference of the Eastern and the Western world-view is in the questions of transcendence and the essence of divinity. The Western view has a transcendent personal God, whereas the Eastern ideology believes in the presence of impersonal divin-
ity amongst us. By analysing empirical studies of religious beliefs in Britain, Campbell finds evidence to argue that there has been a shift from the ideology of one transcendent God to the ideology of the spirit in this world.

My analysis of the playfulness in consumer culture and its boundaries seems to stand on the same line with Campbell’s argument. The imaginary of consumption and the spirituality within its boundaries point to ideology of animism instead of deism. Campbell continues the argument by stating that the organisation of religiousness has been moving from the institution of church towards communities of religious searchers led by charismatic guru-like figures. Further, he writes that conception of the boundary between believers and non-believers has been replaced by conception of all creatures placing themselves in a continuum of spirituality, which may extend beyond life.

Evidence to the first can be found in the revitalisation of the charismatic tradition of Finnish revivalist movement, and perhaps in the fan culture of idols of scenes from pop music to sports. The latter seems to come true within the boundary of culture and nature, as Campbell also notes. There is a spiritual element involved in veganism, organic food, nature conservation and in other green or ecological ideologies. Historically they evolved – as social movements or popularities – in the movement and the era of the New Age. A tree-hugger may well say he or she is uniting with the soul of the tree, or a cat-owner say that his or her cat has a personality or spirit as we (the humans) all do. This kind of orientation to nature presumes urban life that is detached from the agricultural – and Christian – utilisation of nature. Spirituality under the emblem of the New Age probably should not be approached as new religion(s) but as an indicator of the general shift of religious thought.

In the relationship between humans and nature, the spiritualisation comes true as the oneness of body and mind. The ideology and business of wellness is rich of various therapies using herbs, flowers, stones, colours, baths, oils, acupuncture, massage – whatever. Many of them stem from the Orient, like reiki-therapy. What is explicit in reiki-ideology and at least implicit in most, if not all, other therapies, is the core idea of energy flowing inside the body. The aim of therapy is to localise and eliminate blocks of energy (which in reiki and some other therapies is called ki or chi). Blocks emerge from everyday scum of stress meaning misusing one’s self in physiological or psychological way, which may vary from bad ergonomy to traumatising childhood. Talking about energy bridges body with mind since energy is neither matter nor a mental substance. In therapy, releasing the energy to its sound state of flow makes one once again flow in a psychic sense, which means living fuller life in one’s natural and thus healthy condition.

Therapies of this kind are so popular that calling them alternative medicine should not mislead us to consider them a marginal phenomenon. The centrality of the energetic flow in the conception takes us back to the culture of urban consumption. Flow is a key metaphor of play and games, as well. Flow is a holistic experience of becoming absorbed in doing something, and while playing it is as its original action. Flow is an autotelic (self-purposeful) experience of state of thought and action. It is the most intensive moment of fulfilling oneself by acting. When one is in flow, everything seems to go well, and all the resources of the self will be utilised creatively. (Czikszentmihalyi 1975) We can say that
the experience of flow is the most rewarding state of being, a kind of individual Nirvana, though not a state of mere being but being by acting.

Both conceptions of flow, the energetic one and the playful one, share the idea of a fuller, or even the fullest possible life. Campbell connects the ideology of the balance of body and mind as well as the ideology of fuller life to discourses of ‘personal revolution’ and of ‘heightened consciousness’. Actually, by fuller life Campbell means fulfilling of oneself, which is again the main theme of modern consumption. Consumers fulfil themselves through imagining – and perhaps purchasing – consumables. Further, Campbell sees that this discourse of fulfilment is a way to bring divinity from the next world to this world. Moreover, it is a way to put divinity inside one’s self.

Divinity in me

There is one more trail for us to follow in the shopping street of the modern city. It is the fact that the anonymity and the *theatrum mundi* effect of the social order of urban public space detaches one from his or her personality. The effect of de-individuation in anonymous social settings has been identified and described by social psychology at least from 1950’s (see e.g. Hogg & Vaughan 1995). According to my study, anonymity has a crucial role in modern urban consumption. It makes one free to play with one’s identity, in a sense of imagining how one could renew oneself through consumption. This is the logic with which urbanity supports consumption, or even urges to consume. The playfulness of shopping is about opening up of the everyday ‘role’ of being personal self and projecting a new and idealised image of oneself, and then reaching for this image by representations, which the world of goods carries. This type of mimesis points towards oneself and not to others. Mimesis of urban scene is distinctively *mimetic self-relation*, seeing oneself in an as-if setting.

As urban sociologist Richard Sennett (1977) points out, urban *theatrum mundi* as presenting to others has turned inwards. It is no longer an act for others as much as an act for oneself. Or to put it in Erving Goffman’s (1972) terms, managing other people’s impressions of oneself (which was his key idea) is no longer the core of social behaviour in public encounters. Instead, it is the *management of one’s own impressions* that rules. Playfulness of urban consumption is *my* imaginary of *myself* possibly becoming a new *myself*. There is a certain narcissistic element in the consumeristic public space. On the other hand, it is not solipsistic, since it takes place and necessitates public space and other people forming the crowd and feeding information of styles and fashions of consumables, which all the people have gathered to display.

Anyhow, urban consumerism as mimetic self-relation involves practise that intensively directs to one’s own self. I have already argued that the playfulness of urban consumption in relation to consumables can function also in relation to immaterial cultural product, whether art or religion. If we now assume, that the logic of material consumption is bound to generalise to other fields of life, then it should be considered working also in the field of spirituality and religiousness. Then we could follow Campbell’s idea of searching for the divinity inside one’s self. The powerful imaginary of what or who I could
be may lead to seeing divinity and sacred inside the depth of one’s self. If the selfhood is seen as part of nature, and the nature is seen as divine, it is natural and even logical to place divinity inside the self. Sexuality and corporality in general, are perhaps the realms where the spiritual self-relation could prosper.

Conclusion

I will end up by telling a real life story and my reading of it, which illustrates my idea and perhaps communicates it better than mere conceptual analysis. If Campbell’s argument has lead us to see a cultural tendency against Christianity, this storytelling involves a tendency towards Christian God, but within the context of mimetic self-relation. From the point of view what I have suggested of the possible influence of urban consumerism, the story could be thought as a paradigmatic way of getting religion and finding God in our consumer society. The following is a sample of the material of an auto-biography writing competition organised by the Lutheran Church of Finland and directed to young adults in Helsinki region.

Let us call her Katja. Katja writes of her youth when she met lots of men while searching for herself and her place in the world. She describes herself in relation with men as a «chameleonic goddess of love». Sex and sexuality was the main arena of searching and fulfilling herself: «I turned my ‘I’m the woman of your dreams’ -shift on», Katja writes. She had a strong need to shape herself to meet the needs and expectations of her men.

The crucial moment of her life was when the compulsive urge of pleasing others was taken away from her. This happened during a personal crisis she describes as «the tearing down of all the facades». What followed in this moment of truth was «mercy that swept over» her, «filling her breast with approval», and leading finally to giving up herself «to be shaped by a master». The urge to shape oneself sexually desirable was replaced by the idea of the shaping Creator. Katja’s religious ecstasy of finding of God occurred through giving up carrying the heavy burden of excessive dependence of shaping herself, which aimed at pleasing others. Katja continues: «I gave up my divinity (…) How un-individualistic, typical. Happened and described hundreds of thousands of times over the history of humankind.»

It is worth noticing, that the outcome of the process is not the opposite of the starting point. Katja has not finished up orientating towards herself. Instead, she now calmly «listens to» herself – and God: «And how brightly I was the one who was created, nothing but a living soul, without any attributes. Just Me, and Him». Though there is now «Him» in the scene, «Me» is also written in capital letters.

From my perspective, what has happened to Katja is the brightening up of individuality through an un-individualistic event, not ending up individualism and the centrality of self-relation, as such. «Giving up one’s divinity» does not imply giving up the emphasis of individuality and the dedication to search the meaning of life inside one’s self. Instead, Katja has yielded the burden of the continuous defining and shaping of herself—the excessiveness of the mimetic self-relation — to the hands of another, to God. The mimetic self-relation had become a burden for her, because it had gone too far.
What I argue is that Katja’s personality – and that of all those young adults who try to fit to the many images our society bombards them with – is mentally constructed in the same way as all of us Homo ludens urbanus type of modern humans are. She just had become excessive in the shaping of herself, and had turned compulsive and addicted to mimetic self-relation. The sense of God as the master creator of her has taken the liability of being herself and thus relieved the excessiveness. Now there is peace of mind for relaxed imagining of, or «listening to», oneself, and this has been found satisfying. Imagining oneself as a new, always more true self is the lot of humans in our consumer society, and Katja has now well adapted to it.

Katja ends up her auto-biography with the theme of the triangle of her, her self and God like this: «When a pot has now been reshaped, it is still a human being. But the cosmic loneliness has gone. I even enjoy being alone, since I can better listen to myself and God. And there are pretty interesting things rising up there. It’s not empty at all. Nor dull, though it is a silent song.»

Notes

1 This essay is based on the key note speech in the 19th Nordic Conference in Sociology of Religion: Urban Diversity and Religious Traditions in 13th August 2008 in Turku, Finland.

References


