Introduction

Consumption seems to have become one of the most obvious and determinant phenomena of our age. Even though various studies have examined the interactions between consumption and religion, which are important parameters of social transformation, the literature on this issue remains rather scarce. In this article we seek to contribute to it by considering the effect of consumption upon religion (i.e., Islam) and its religious values through concrete examples so that their interaction can be better evaluated.

Consumption and the Consumer Society

Consumption can be defined as the selection, purchase, use, repair and disposal of any product or service (Ritzer, 2000). The question of why these activities, which have existed in all past societies, has become characteristic of today’s societies, rather than those of the past, can be answered by approaching it from the consumption perspective for a broader perspective. This current reality means that consumption is more than just the use of a functional product, that it has psychosocial, social and cultural dimensions. As a matter of fact, Baumann examines this activity through the perspective of the consumption of objects, values, relations and one’s entire life. He differentiates consumption from consumerism by saying that the latter is the mode of social order that emanates from the transformation of ordinary, neutral human desires and wishes into a power that conducts the socialization, stratification, integration and formation of human relations (Bauman, 2007, p. 28).

Baudrillard notes that today’s consumption is not about products, but about consuming symbols and value systems (1998, p. 22). One can say that its definition depends upon which theoretical approach is adopted, as well as which historical period or society is being considered (Bocock, 1993, p. 42). Illich describes a consumer society as one in which life is organized around goods and social progress is measured by the power to acquire commodities (Illich, 1990, p. 26). Bauman defines a consumer society as one in which individual preferences are promoted, encouraged and manipulated in accordance with the consum-
ers’ lifestyle (Bauman, 2007, p. 53). Consumer society is also classified as a spectacle society because goods are used to display people’s constructed egos and identities (Debord, 1995).

At this point, we can define a consumer society as one in which consumption and goods are closely related to individuals’ psychological and sociological needs, are necessary elements in constructing not only their ego and identities but also their worldviews and have become a basic reference point of positioning at the social space.

Consumer society developed as part of the expansion of global capitalism, which has now impacted all societies. Consumption has become important due to the increased level of production, and capitalism has made its impact felt worldwide, for consumption has become a part of all cultures and has established the structural and economic base of a consumer society (Demirezen, 2011, p. 35). No social phenomenon has been inherently immune to the ensuing commodification processes (Wallerstein, 1992, pp. 12-13). Consumer groups with a sense of social identity have been observed in the US and Western Europe, where over-production began occurring during the 18th century (Bocock, 1993, p. 25).

Modernity, the Crisis of Values and the Return of Religion

According to Giddens, modernity is the rational social reconfiguration of the world as a society that does not depend upon traditions, customs, rituals and beliefs (Giddens and Pierson, 1998, pp. 15-16). The emphasis on rationality as the criterion in all spheres of social space has caused an over-rationalised world and hence, as Weber terms it, “the disenchantment of the world,” a phrase that implies the decline of belief and sensation. Therefore, modernity is more associated with its struggle against religion.

Bell identified modernization’s real problem as one of belief. He claims that humanity has been experiencing a spiritual crisis at a nihilistic threshold that has no past and no hope-giving future because it is understood that after the regression of religion, which was the support for the old bases, new solutions like science, art and culture have proved to be unsuccessful (Bell, 1976, pp. 28-29). The sense of self-consciousness that has now been liberated from all of its former binding ties, the product of the culture produced by modern industrial society, has led to extreme individualism. Therefore, belief in God cannot be re-established in its former form (Polama, 1993, p. 336). Bell explains this extreme individualism and self-crisis by the new capitalist mentality, which especially excludes spiritual values and transcendent morality, as well as shakes one’s belief in God and the soul’s immortality. According to Taylor (2007), this new worldview has resulted in both instrumental and spiritual individuality.

While lifestyle becomes a restricted sociological term used to describe the distinctive lifestyles of certain status groups, it has turned into a concept that, since the 1960s, has evoked and associated individuality, self-expression and self-consciousness in a consumer culture. With the dissolution of tradition in modern living conditions, the individual has gone through a crisis of becoming a self. Thus lifestyle, as a value, became a solution to the astonished individuals living in a consumption society dominated by the crisis of becoming a self (Stuart, 1988).
Consumer Society and Religious Values

Since the secular forms of the meaning of life and the world, as well as its promises are illusions, the way humanity holds on to reality inevitably undergoes a reinterpretation in some kind of religious context. Given the prevalence of the idea that the new world can be portrayed as unsettling and distressing, the essential element underlying the existential dilemmas is the threat of meaninglessness produced by a social circle, a circle that is technically sufficient but barren in the sense of morality (Giddens, 1996, pp. 181-208).

It is important that religious beliefs, practices and values become unconstitutional, ineffective or meaningless in the postmodern consumer culture, because the commodification and aestheticisation of one’s everyday life patterns must mediate one’s understanding of religion (Aktay, 1998, p. 309). In the new social life, religion is not a theological basis or a base, but rather a social and spiritual need. However, it has no power to determine every aspect of life, because now every individual’s mind is decorated and filled with consumption codes. The references of value judgments like “true,” “false,” “beautiful” and “ugly” are settled and expressed via consumption. Fromm openly refers to the psychological basis of the easy prevalence of consumption values in an environment where religion is weakened. In other words, the fundamental oppositions of the meaning worlds of religion and consumer society create a certain environment of struggle.

Image-Demonstration and Identity Appreciation in Religious Values and Symbols

In a consumer society, human existence finds its meaning in consumption and experiences individual identity as a purchased object, not as the constituent subject. For this reason, one of the impasses experienced in the shadow of consumerism capitalism is the dilemma of personalized experience-commodified experience (Giddens, 1996, p. 197-200). The products that sell a human lifestyle or an existence style now carry values at the same time. In order for better understanding of people and society, the anthropological approach draws attention to the idea that commodities help thinking. In other words, if people use words while writing poetry, it is necessary to treat a commodity as a non-verbal channel of human creation (Douglas and Isherwood, 1999, p. 77). In the world of meaning offered by Islam, existence finds its meaning through worship; Christianity lowers the body and recommends that it be disciplined; and advertisements offer a magical means of consumption as a remedy, in which modern people experience the impulses and emotional attachments to their troubles (Miller, 2005, p. 88).

There is also an on-going level of religious space into which practically all trends and fashions have penetrated. Islamic fashion, which opens at the intersection of one’s religious awakening and the spread of symbols and the religious bourgeoisie, is an invitation to the consumption of new experiences and excitement of the Islamic bourgeoisie in ways that are religiously acceptable (Kılıçbay and Binark, 2002, p. 501). Although Muhammad (a.s.) describes religion as sincerity, one of the common qualities of the consumer society is based on a culture of spectacle (Debord, 1996) and display (Taylor, 2007).
Meaning Losses and Slips of Religious Values and Symbols

In an era in which all that is solid is claimed to melt into air (Marx and Engels, 1975, p. 83; Marshall, 1994), there are losses and deviations in the meanings of religious values and symbols with special importance. According to Haenni, Islamic symbols, which are far from the holistic understanding of the basic Islamic unity, become more harmonious with everyday life and those who cannot adapt are ignorant and therefore neglected. While the verses and hadiths supported by this habitus become popular, texts that do not match the habits and value judgments are put aside (Demirezen, 2012, p. 499).

A Case Study

Developments in the realization process of hadj and umrah exemplify the interaction of religious practices with consumer culture. One expression of this new form is the VIP hadj and umrah organizations. The VIP application is based on a person’s status and a differentiation between people for earthly reasons. This rationale can be seen as the application of consumption patterns to the organization of individual worship. When looking at the planning and operation of these organizations and their evaluations, we are faced with a strange synthesis of the values of a consumer society and the basics of the worship associated with the hadj and umrah.

The simplicity, whiteness and openness of the ihram is held to cleanse all people of their worldly attributes, status, differences, equalize all participants as Allah’s servants and render everything else unimportant. When the hadj rites conducted at Arafat, Mina and Muzdelifah are considered, the ideas that all people are equal in Allah’s sight and that supremacy depends on how much a person beware of Allah, is reflected in practice. Its goal is to gain meaning in one’s individual and social life. But the VIP hadj and umrah organizations operate according to a different set of expectations. Thus, they seek to present the more luxurious, more comfortable ones to people via the advertising and marketing techniques they see throughout consumer society. It has become a common assumption that there is a one-to-one relationship between the nature of the worship and the level of the material conditions in which it is performed. People think that they will be better worshippers if they are more luxurious and comfortable. It is possible to read all of this as the effect of the habitus that consumer society has created.

Our interviews and observations from the news reflected in the media indicated that many difficulties are encountered when trying to realize the focal points of the hadj and the umrah and the goals that they observe. While individuals practice their religious practices, they cannot escape the thought patterns and behavioural habits of consumption.

1 Luxury hadj and umrah organizations are taken as a case in point. The organizers’ websites and advertisements are published in various media, and the news texts related to the topic were evaluated by the documentation method. Through in-depth interviews, VIP groups were interviewed by 7 people who had guidance/counseling in the Hejaz. Ten open-ended questions were asked in the interviews. Some short questions should be added to support the interview. The talks lasted for an average of 45 minutes, with the shortest one lasting for 35 minutes and the longest one for 75 minutes.
Kaynakça/ References


Demirezen, İ. (2011). Tüketim ve Din. İstanbul: Fotografika Yayıncılık.


