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Consuming a Cathedral: Commodification of Religious Places in Late Modernity

Abstract

The article is a case study of activities taking place in the most important church of Finland, the Cathedral of Turku. The article seeks possibilities to understand contemporary religious change by using theoretical ideas developed in the sociology of consumption. This is done through analysing four cases of how the cathedral has been commodified in different situations. The cases are a celebrity wedding, a dance performance, a marketing brand and a city festival. The results show that even traditional Christian communities have adapted to consumer society and that the ideas developed in the sociology of consumption are useful in understanding current religious change.

Introduction

Contemporary cities are laboratories of religious experimentation, cultural creativity and change. Cities are embodied handbooks of religion and, simultaneously, homes for the atheists, ultra liberals and hardcore conservatives of late modernity. If the face of religion is multiple anywhere, it is so in the contemporary city. The keyword in understanding the religious life of the city is pluralism and diversity (McLeod, 1998). The ever-increasing global connectedness,
embodied in the fluid ethnoscapes of people and mediascapes of images and ideas, keeps the urban religious stew steadily bubbling (Appadurai, 1996: 3, 32-41).

An important part of religion is the material and physical dimension: religious landscapes, buildings, cemeteries, artefacts (Park, 1994: 197-244; Smart, 1996: 275-88). Just the thought of any major European city brings forth panoramas of great cathedrals that dominate the cityscape. Most of the sanctuaries are still working churches and have a multiplicity of other functions as well. They can be museums, concert halls, art exhibition centres as well as religious sanctuaries. Moreover, visiting cathedrals is seen as a way to elevate one’s mind and to experience something special in the hectic pace of everyday life or a tourist’s day. They are part of Europe’s ‘vicarious memory’, as Grace Davie (2000) puts it.

Consumption and consumer society are central concepts for understanding life in the contemporary west (Featherstone, 1991). With regard to religion, this has become a well-established fact among scholars of new spiritualities (Heelas et al., 2005), but less so among academics studying traditional religious communities, even though there is growing attention to it (see Bruce, 1997; Luckmann, 1999). Generally speaking, consumer culture is now an extant theme in the sociology of religion, but its limits have not yet been tested and it has mostly been studied with regard to specific contemporary types of religion, such as the New Age Movement (Martikainen, 2001).

The aim of this paper is to explore aspects of the relationship between religion and consumer society. This is done through examining the usage of a major religious building in Finland, the Cathedral of Turku. The main argument proposed is that existing interpretations of the cathedral—what it stands for and how it can be used—are not solely connected to the church’s point of view, but that there are also other and differing views and usages related to them. These can be seen as expressions of selective choice that, with regard to religion, can be traced back to the secularization process and to the emergence of consumer society. The case of the Turku Cathedral will exemplify how the secularist, consumerist and expressive traits of contemporary culture infiltrate slowly even into the most traditional embodiments of European Christianity, the mighty cathedrals.

The study is based on literary sources on the cathedral, statistics collected by the local parishes and newspaper cuttings. Also a number of interviews have been conducted with people related to the cathedral and to the cases presented in the paper. The interviews have been essential for the analysis, as is typical with novel developments; existing data cannot provide a means to approach the new meanings given to an old entity. A starting point for the study has been a recently published history of the cathedral (Gardberg, Heininen and Welin, 2000) that was
brought out to celebrate the cathedral’s 700th anniversary and the 2000th anniversary of Christianity. The book has its merits in historical documentation, but it, interestingly enough, almost completely neglects the actual usage of the cathedral in its various functions today and concentrates instead on the history of the building.

The composition of this article is as follows. First, a short theoretical background is presented in order to position religion and consumption in late modernity. Second, a brief history of the cathedral and a description of contemporary activities in it provide the necessary background for the case study. Third, I shall apply the theoretical ideas and illustrate through examples how the commodification processes take place. Finally, I shall conclude the text with a discussion and central observations.

**Religion and consumption in late modernity**

In modern institutionally differentiated societies the place and influence of religion has been dramatically altered in favour of legal, economic, political and other institutions. The differentiation process with regard to religion has usually been called *secularization*, a concept to which a wide variety of interpretations have been given. At the core of secularization lies the loss of moral authority, which is the authority to decide what is right or wrong, in the sense that the churches do not any longer have the power to impose their moral norms on whole populations, or even on their members. There are competing moral standards, either religious or secular, which challenge the churches' views (Chaves, 1994; McGuire, 1997: 274-81).

Secularization does not, however, inevitably lead to the lessening role of religion as such. Religious organizations, communities and innovators have showed surprising flexibility and creativity in adapting to the changed conditions, where urbanization, industrialization and globalization have changed the traditional social order into which churches had been accustomed for several centuries (Luckmann, 1999: 252-53). Actually, religion is alive and well in the contemporary world, and it seems to be the religious organizations that have more problems dealing with secularization than the individuals (Chaves, 1994). This has left the door open for new types of religious manifestations to come out into daylight, manifestations that are not any longer controlled by the religious organizations.

The churches’ loss of moral authority is true also with regard to dogmatic religious truths and statements. Such matters can now be reinterpreted and used by other agents for their own interests (Luckmann, 1999: 253-54). On an individual level, the New Age spiritual *flâneur* is the perfect manifestation of a late modern religious consumer. He or she selects, composes and creates his or her own
religious world as an eclectic *bricolage*, independent of the content in the religious traditions from which his or her belief system comes from (Martikainen, 2001). It is worth noting that such orientations seem to be pervasive even in traditional religious organizations, for example, among the members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland.\(^1\) This is an extreme form of *individuation*, ‘the process by which the individual and his or her concerns come to be seen as distinct from the social group and its concerns’ (McGuire, 1997: 291). So the authority of religious organizations has been undermined both on a larger societal as well as on an individual level.

The production and consumption of religious meanings takes place in the framework of consumer society (Luckmann, 1999: 254). On the one hand, religious organizations consciously offer different services and products, such as various types of worship, which are designed for target audiences. The churches take their existing and potential adherents seriously, and try to provide them with products that are of interest. It might even be the case that some churches see these new types of products as a major way of socializing religion, as the role of families, schools, and so on, has become less important than it traditionally was. On the other hand, the participants or consumers consciously select between different options that they find attractive. Nevertheless, they still reserve for themselves the right to decide in what manner they accept the contents of the products. A major feature of the contemporary religious market is that it is full of products that emphasize aesthetic experiences, deep emotions and wholeness (Luckmann, 1999: 255-56). Also, a degree of novelty and uniqueness is often in focus. Gerhard Schulze has argued that we are living in an *Erlebnisgesellschaft*, where the search for deep experiences has become the focus of life and where people can fulfill their lives through consumption of the right products (Schulze, 1992: 58-60).

Religious organizations and individuals can principally react in two ways to the current state of affairs. They can take either a liberal or a conservative stance. The liberal option accepts the institutionally differentiated society and pluralism, and seeks ways to accommodate to the secularized world. Still religiously motivated in this task, it however provides more room for diverse interpretations of its message and, thus, becomes the target of criticism for losing the essential religious core of its work. The conservative option is critical of the differentiated society and pluralism. Its main goal is to establish a holistic religious life world, where religion dominates and also guides other spheres in life, or at least is distinct from the

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1. According to Gallup survey polls, many members of the Finnish Lutheran Church have beliefs that do not conform to the Lutheran faith, see Salonen, Kääriäinen and Niemelä (2000: 25-31).

secular sphere (Beyer, 1994: 86-93). These orientations can take place at the level of society, community or the individual. Often these competing orientations can be found in any single religious organization, where they struggle for internal hegemony.

To summarize, secularization has led to the loss of authority of religious organizations on a societal, group and individual level and the views of the churches are competing among other views. Individuals feel freer than before to form their own religious opinions and belief systems. The production and consumption of religious meanings takes place in the framework of consumer society, which is characterized by a search for deep, original experiences. Religious organizations and individuals can either accept (the liberal option) or reject (the conservative option) secularized society.

The Cathedral of Turku

The Cathedral of Turku is the main sanctuary of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland. This is a national majority church to which 84% of the Finns—4.4 million—belonged in the year 2003. The cathedral is the only Finnish medieval cathedral and is among the oldest buildings in the country. It is also the church of the Lutheran archbishop, who resides in Turku. It is the single most important religious building in Finland. The cathedral is a functioning local parish church and alongside the medieval Turku Castle the most important tourist attraction in the city. Beside religious activities a host of other events take place in the church.

A brief history

The cathedral stands close to the commercial centre of the city of Turku, which is the main regional centre in south-western Finland. The building is situated on a small hill next to the Aura river. The church—constructed mainly of red brick—is the tallest building in the city centre as well as a major feature on the local skyline. Only trees and open space surround the building, so that it completely dominates the surrounding milieu. The cathedral’s 92-metre high tower is visible from far away. The current landscape surrounding the cathedral dates back to the city plan of 1828, after a disastrous fire had devastated the town in the previous autumn (Gardberg, Heininen and Welin, 2000: 224-25).

The Cathedral of Turku was consecrated on 17 June, 1300, as a Catholic church and devoted to St Mary and St Henry—the first bishop of Finland—in the newly founded town of Turku. Roman Catholicism had already been present in the region since the eleventh century and it was officially organized from Sweden during the next century. Turku was the first urban settlement in Finland and the most central
administrative centre for the Swedish rulers of Finland as well as the hometown for the bishop. Finland remained an eastern province of Sweden until 1809, after which the country was a part of the Russian Empire until independence in 1917. Turku lost its position as the most important city in Finland to Helsinki in the latter part of the nineteenth century (Gardberg, Heininen and Welin, 2000: 22, 39-40; Kuparinen, 1985).

The Cathedral of Turku served for many centuries as an example both as a building and in terms of ecclesiastical life to the numerous parishes around the country (Pirinen, 1991: 176-78). The church building was originally rather small, but it was enlarged several times during the next centuries and received its contemporary form by the early sixteenth century. Since the Reformation in Sweden–Finland, in 1527, the building has not been changed significantly (Gardberg, Heininen and Welin, 2000: 100). The current form of the church and several features of its interior still retain many Catholic characteristics, even though it has been the main shrine of the national Lutheran Church for almost 500 years. The building is regularly mistaken for a functioning Roman Catholic church by the occasional tourist (von Schöneman, 15.10.2001). The official conservation policy has also stressed the importance of preserving the spirit of medieval times.

Functions and activities

The main users of the cathedral are two parishes of the local Turku and Kaarina Parish Union. The union consists of nine parishes and has 157,000 members—80% of the local population in 2003. The larger of the cathedral’s parishes is the Finnish-language Tuomiokirkkoseurakunta (‘The Cathedral Parish’), which has c. 14,800 members and functions mainly in the city centre. The other one is the Swedish-language Åbo svenska församling (‘Turku Swedish Parish’), which has c. 9,200 members and functions in the cities of Turku and Kaarina for the local Swedish-speaking population. Åbo svenska församling also uses another local church on a regular basis. In addition, the cathedral serves as a place of worship for the English-language Turku Cathedral International Congregation and the German-language Kapellengemeinde, but with regard to the general volume of activities they do not significantly contribute to it (Martikainen, 1996: 30-32, 35, 73; Turun ja Kaarinan seurakuntayhdistyys, 2001).

There is constant activity taking place in the cathedral. The annual number of organized events in the church varied between 500 and 800 from 1993 to 2000, as illustrated in Figure 1. In the year 2000 the number of events was 793, which was higher than the average because of the Jubilee. The annual number of visitors in the same time period shifted between 190,000 and 240,000, of whom around 40%
were participants in the organized activities and the rest tourists and occasional visitors (Figure 2).\(^2\)

The Turku Cathedral serves three main functions (Paarma, 2000: 17-18). First, it is a church for four local congregations, which means that it is a place for worship and church rituals for the parish members, as well as a place for prayer and silence for any visitor. The church is also often a venue for other religious events that are organized by third parties. The church had 62,000 participants in the various religious activities during the year 2000. The religious activities include the services on Sundays and holidays, other services and religious life rituals, such as weddings and baptisms. Burial ceremonies are held in the cathedral only in exceptional cases. In 2000, the average attendance in the Finnish-language parish in Sunday and holiday services was 275 and in other services 75. Attendance is obviously higher on major holidays, but often also lower. The church has 1,200 seats, which means that in any organized event the possible number of attendants cannot be much higher than that.

![The number of organized activities in Turku Cathedral 1994–2000](image)

Figure 1. The number of organized activities in Turku Cathedral 1994–2000.

\(^2\) Data about the number of activities and participants in them refers to the annual reports given to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (Suomen evankelis-luterilainen kirkko 1993–2000; Turun tuomiokirkko 1994–2000). Data about the number of other visitors refers to statistics collected by the church guides that was handed out directly to the researcher (Schöneman 15.10.2001). References to the data are not included in the text.
Second, the cathedral is a historical monument and cemetery and in that role it functions as a tourist site. The burial activity inside the church ceased by the late eighteenth century. However, in the church and its surroundings are buried c. 4,500 bodies that are protected by law against disturbance. In addition, the church is a tourist site and since 1929 it has also had a small Church Museum (Gardberg, Heininen and Welin, 2000: 207, 275). The church had 143,000 visitors in 2000, of whom 13,000 also visited the Church Museum. Approximately 20–25% of them are foreign citizens, many of whom are tourists from Sweden and Russia (von Schöneman, 15.10.2001). In Turku, the castle and the cathedral attract more or less the same number of annual visitors. In the whole region, only Moominworld in the nearby town of Naantali is a significantly more visited sight with 226,000 visitors in 2000. Furthermore, the church and its surroundings function as a coulisse for various events, which draw thousands of people to the closeness of the church. These include the annual Medieval Turku festival, the Proclamation of Christmas Peace and the Scout March ceremonies.

Third, the cathedral is a place for cultural events, mainly concerts, but also art performances and lectures, and thus it functions as a stage. Most of these events have a religious dimension, but religion’s role in them varies from central to peripheral. During the year 2000, 33,000 people took part in the cultural events. Concerts are held in the church regularly and there is even an annual festival for organ music: Katedraali soi! (‘The Cathedral Is Playing!’). The most popular musical events are in December, when people gather in churches to sing Christmas carols. This tradition was initiated by the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission in 1973, and since then it has become one of the most popular church activities all around the country with half a million annual participants (Salonen, Kääriäinen and Niemelä, 2000: 66). Other cultural events are not so common, but they include
church dramas and lectures on various topics. According to the former cathedral
dean and current archbishop, Jukka Paarma, the cultural events have received a
more prominent role in recent years (Paarma, 2000: 17-18).

Further, the cathedral is a main symbol of the City of Turku as well as of
Christianity in Finland. Any changes, threats of change or malfunctions in the
church or in its surroundings immediately receive public attention (von
Schöneneman, 15.10.2001). The cathedral is a constant topic of debate in local
newspapers. Usually the writers refer to it as an especially important historic
building, but also distinctly religious themes are present in the articles. Finns
generally value their historic religious buildings highly (Gustafsson, 2000: 101-106).
Last but not least, the toll of the cathedral’s bells has marked noon on main
national radio channels since 1944 (Salonen, 2000: 350).

The multifaceted cathedral

So far, we have seen that the Turku Cathedral hosts an impressive amount of
diverse activities and that it has many different faces and functions. In this section
my aim is to interpret this multifunctionality, which differs distinctly from the
more common notions of churches as places for prayer, service and religious
sincerity. However, I wish to stress that this perspective has its limitations and does
not negate other interpretations. Still, I argue that the proposed perspective hints
at a significant change in the role of religion in the contemporary West as well as to
a conscious or unconscious strategy by the churches to adapt to the changed social
reality, as described in the theoretical section.

The multifunctionality is not unique to the Cathedral of Turku, even though in
the national context its scope might well be. Among others, Salonen, Kääriäinen
and Niemelä (2000: 54-60, 65-66, 69, 72; for Sweden, see Gustafsson, 1997: 57-58, 64-
65), have noted a trend in many Finnish Lutheran parishes for an increase in the
variety of worship and in the amount and diversity of other activities. Many new
types of church services have been created, some of which emphasize the
experiencing and socializing dimensions of the service more than traditional
services have done. The principal example of this is the growing popularity of the
so-called Thomas Mass, which combines many liturgical traditions and emphasizes
the meditative nature of religiosity, praying and lay participation in ceremonial life
(Helander, 1999: 68).

The trend towards diversity has not been analysed in detail yet. Partly it reflects
the conscious strategies and efforts of the Lutheran Church to modernize its
activities. This process started in the 1950s and was intensified in the 1980s
(Helander, 1999: 56, 66-67). For example, the popularity of new types of mass is an
obvious result of the 1990s liturgical reform project within the church (Salonen, Kääriäinen and Niemelä, 2000: 46-54). However, as Eila Helander (1999: 66-67) notes, the changes in the church have caused ambivalent reactions among church members, from approval to disapproval. It is a tricky issue to change traditional religious forms, when the role of the church for many of its members is the opposite, namely the preservation of tradition (Salonen, Kääriäinen and Niemelä, 2000: 40).

In the following, I will analyse the role of Turku Cathedral from four different perspectives, which should shed light, at least, on an aspect of this general trend of multifunctionality. First, the cathedral is obviously a church where religious services and rituals take place. Second, it functions also as a stage or a place of performance for other religious and non-religious activities. Third, the cathedral is a museum and a tourist site for people who visit Turku. Fourth, the church functions as a coulisse for certain events taking place outside it.

**A church: a celebrity wedding**

The Turku Cathedral is one of the most popular wedding churches in the city and its 100-meter long main aisle witnesses annually the footsteps of around a hundred young and old couples. Church wedding ceremonies are open events, to which passers-by and other interested persons are free to come. The ceremony is considered to be a church service, which should always be open and free of charge. However, congregations decide individually exactly how they interpret this basic rule of church as a public and open space. The Finnish-language cathedral parish has stated a negative attitude towards commercial exploitation of the church (Turun Sanomat, 5.3.2001b).

The cathedral was the venue for a celebrity wedding on 27 January, 2001, when Jasmin Mäntylä and Mike Rautio were joined there in marriage. Jasmin Mäntylä is a young model, who has been a regular face in national tabloids for some years. The pictures and the story of the wedding were sold to the 7 päivää magazine, which is a national weekly specializing in celebrities, scandals and gossip. Employees of the magazine prevented uninvited guests and other journalists from entering the building, and the magazine thus violated the above-mentioned rules against commercial exploitation of church weddings and the openness of the ceremony (Turun Sanomat, 30.1.2001). The case made major headlines and was even reported on national television news.

The case is a good example of how a commercial enterprise tried, and succeeded, to take advantage of a religious ritual in a way that is not approved by the church. The wedding was commodified and sold as an experience to readers.
The celebrity cult of contemporary times is based on providing experiences to readers and, obviously, weddings are among the most interesting. It is understandable that the people from the magazine stopped other journalists from entering the building, as they were just fighting for their right of the unique event. The irony in this case is that the wedding was, supposedly, from the beginning not meant to lead to a married life, but was more likely a publicity stunt. The marriage broke up only months later, providing more stories.

A stage: dancing Johann Sebastian Bach

Church services and rituals are obviously a kind of drama and theatre themselves, but alongside the common worship activities the Christian churches have had a tradition of specific church dramas. The roots of contemporary church dramas in Finland go back to the 1960s and the activity made its breakthrough in the 1980s. A sideline of this development has been dance performances in the churches. Being even historically a controversial issue, the church dramas and dance performances have caused heated debates at the same time as they have become established as a common activity (Kinnunen-Riipinen, 2000: 19-32).

In the national religious tradition the role of Pietism has been strong. In Pietism, the attitude to bodily pleasures has generally been negative and dancing has been a target of harsh criticism. Dancing is understood to be a social activity that can lead to sinful behaviour. It is seen as a physical activity undermining reason, the guiding principle of life. For example, Lilja Kinnunen-Riipinen (2000: 30, 50-52) analyses a case from 1968, when a dance performance in the city of Lappeenranta created a long newspaper debate. The majority of the published letters to the editor were negative towards the event and accused it of being, among other things, blasphemous, sinful, disturbing and a nightmare. Similar arguments have been related to corresponding events. The view was based on the strict division between religious and secular activities as found in Pietism.

Turku Cathedral was the venue for a religious dance performance for the first time in its history in February 2000. A local dance theatre, ERI, presented a performance titled *ERilaista Bachia* (‘Different Bach’ or ‘ERI-type of Bach’), which combined the music of Johann Sebastian Bach and modern dance. The performance was a part of the *Katedraali soi!* music festival and the Jubilee festivities. The dancers used the church and the music to give impressions without a unifying story, with the expressive body as their main tool (*Turun Sanomat*, 26.1.2000).

The performance created a small but heated debate in the pages of the major local newspaper *Turun Sanomat*. The debate, altogether seven letters to the editor, was initiated by accusations of blasphemy as dancing was considered to be a secular...
activity and thus undesirable in a sacred place. The following pro and contra replies to the original message further centred on dance. The debate did not continue to any great heights, but merely ended after both the organizers and a few outraged individuals had stated their opinions.

The debate can be understood as an expression of the inherent conflict between the liberal and conservative options that was described earlier. Dance represents a secular activity to those who felt insulted. Dance should not be performed in a holy place. This resonates with the idea that the body is dirty, which is deeply embedded in Pietism, and, thus, in segments of the national Christian tradition. The organizers argued in a different way: they saw that there are different kinds of dance, some of which can indeed be religious and expressions of the sacred. In this case secularization had opened new horizons for expressing the sacred.

A distinctive feature of the event was that it was a combination of religious and secular activity. It was an art performance that has usually belonged to the secular sphere, but which took place in a non-secular place, a church. The production maintained many secular characteristics: the performers were professional artists who expressed their intuition on their own terms, there was an audience and an entrance fee was collected. In a way the event followed more the rules of a modern dance performance than that of traditional religious activities. However, the event was given a religious meaning, it took place in a church and it was marketed as a religious art performance.

The current cathedral dean, Rauno Heikola, has stated in a newspaper interview a commonly shared view about the success of many non-traditional activities in the Lutheran Church.

I would like to see that it is also a question of rising religiousness. That people have a need to come to the church... The churches are grand places for performance. Whatever the reason is, I do not consider it an unsound development. These kinds of events lower the threshold for coming to church for people, who would not otherwise come at all (Turun Sanomat, 5.3.2001a).

This comment should be understood against the background that attendance in traditional religious services, with the exception of a few life rituals, has steadily declined. So, it is understandable that many religious leaders are satisfied that at least some other events bring people to the churches. However, it is also an expression of acceptance of a different kind of religiosity, one that is not as church-bound as traditional Lutheran religiosity. Whether the development is also a matter of rising religiousness, as Heikola suggests, is another question that will not be addressed in this article (see Heelas et al., 2005).

My interpretation in this case is that the church had commodified a secular art form for its own purposes. First, to bring people into the church and, second, to
hope that people will in this way somehow become interested in the rest of the church’s activity. The event was marketed as any other art performance and as ERI is both nationally and locally a well-known group, it could be expected that many people would attend the church. In other words, the art performance was a kind of missionary work.

A tourist site: www.christmascity.com

Christmas is the main religious festival in Finland as well as the single most important period of commerce. Beside the avalanche of commercial messages the church wants its voice to be heard about the message of Christmas and also succeeds in it, as the presence of religious themes in national media is significant at the time. At Christmas, religious services and concerts attract many participants, nativity plays are performed in schools and, generally speaking, Christmas is all over the place. The Lutheran religion is then more at the centre of Finnish society than at any other time of the year. Even though Christmas is traditionally a family celebration, it has become more common to travel elsewhere and to enjoy commercial Christmas services.

The City of Turku declared itself ‘the Capital of Christmas Peace’ in 1996. Earlier in the same year the city government had decided that ‘the City will start to work to get together the traditional and beautiful cultural offerings that are related to Christmas in Turku and make them known elsewhere’ (Turun kaupungin tapahtumatoimisto, 20001b). The background for the project was an interest to improve the image of the city, to increase tourism in the winter period and, thus, to bring money into the local economy. The project has also a local dimension as the city wishes to raise its Christmas profile in the eyes of the local inhabitants. The campaign has from its beginning been conducted in collaboration with the city, the local parish union, local entrepreneurs and an advertising agency. ‘The Capital of Christmas Peace’ has been created and used from its beginning as a marketing brand.

‘The Capital of Christmas Peace’ brand is built around many religious themes, which can even be seen in its logo which is composed of a picture of Turku Cathedral and a Christmas tree, surrounded by snowfall and stars. Alongside the cathedral there are two other religious factors at the core of the brand: a preserved medieval tradition of the Proclamation of Christmas Peace and a new tradition of an international, ecumenical appeal for peace. Both events play a major role in the Christmas City marketing and they are also televised internationally. Further, among 300 or more particular events taking place in 2001, there are many specifically religious happenings (Turun kaupungin tapahtumatoimisto, 2001a,
If the future plans of the Christmas City project proceed as planned, it seems that the aim of the organizers is to create an urban, religiously marketed spectacle. The multidimensionality of the project would lead to a situation where ‘everybody is not merely an observer, but a participant observer, and the prominent features of the spectacle may depend on one’s perspective’ (Hannerz, 1996: 133). It would become an experience just to come to the city, where Christmas would surround the visitor from every direction and make visitors part of the event. Even though this is a remote scenario at the moment, it reflects the nature of contemporary urban tourism and of efforts to create such tourist spectacles.

With regard to the Christmas City project, the cathedral and the two major religious events have been commodified for the purposes of tourism. The religious events have been turned into marketable products and become a part of a tourist brand, the aim of which is to create experiences for visitors. Religion represents the message and attraction of Christmas as a time of peace, while the main purpose of the project is to attract people to shop and stay in the city. The case is a good example of how religious resources can be used for commercial purposes. The event is good publicity for the church, so I do not expect any major conflicts to arise from the commodification of religious events.

**A coulisse: The medieval Turku festival**

The Finnish (Catholic) Middle Ages (thirteenth century—the 1520s) are an integral part of the national history of religions. Long devalued and seen as an expression of a primitive period in national history and folklore, the Middle Ages resurfaced during the 1990s as something interesting and stimulating for the general public as well as for academics. Where the renewed interest has its background is not entirely clear. Its origins might be found in international trends or in the re-evaluation of national history and identity in a uniting Europe (Anttonen, 1996: 15, 33-34, 1998). But wherever the original roots are, the resurgent interest has different existing manifestations, of which the medieval Turku festival is the best known in Finland.

The annual medieval Turku festival has been organized since 1996. The event has grown remarkably from a humble beginning and the organizers estimated that c. 90,000 people visited the five-day event in 2001. The festival’s main attraction is the Medieval market, where many kinds of ‘medieval’ products are sold. At the market, salespeople are required to dress in medieval costumes and there are actors who perform medieval roles among the visitors (Niemimäki, 2.11.2001; 6.11.2001). The organizers describe the experience in the following way:

Theatre companies, troubadours, craftsmen and country people in their shops and stalls live the medieval everyday life of the oldest town in Finland and want you to join them. Soon you will feel how the life in the Market affects your thoughts: ‘This is real, or this is how it really was. Maybe somebody has stood on this very spot already in the 14th century and wondered from where...’ (Medieval Market in Turku, 2.11.2001)

Alongside the medieval market there are diverse activities in the surrounding area and in the museums of the city.

The old medieval Turku was almost totally devastated in the fire of 1827. Furthermore, the new city plan of 1828 changed the city’s face completely, so that the area around the old market square, where the medieval market is held and which was the old town centre, bears almost no physical resemblance whatsoever to the actual times in question. The role of the cathedral, which is one of the few surviving buildings from the Middle Ages, is important in this setting. The Cathedral of Turku, situated a few hundred meters from the old market, provides, in a sense, a magnificent ‘medieval coulisse’ for the event.

The local parish union is one of the collaborators in the medieval Turku festival. Its role is to provide education about religion for the participants and to organize some particular events, including the popular concluding vespers of the festival. The main role of the cathedral is one of a coulisse for the festival, which included being the scene for the Jokamies (‘Everyman’) play in 1998 and 1999. The play, based on a medieval morality, took place outside the church on a temporary stand. The final procession starting from the old market square ends in the cathedral, where a ‘medieval mass’ or vespers is performed. One year the mass was performed, rather anachronistically, by a female Lutheran minister (Niemimäki, 6.11.2001).

My interpretation of the role of the cathedral and the church in the medieval Turku festival is that both the cathedral and religion are seen as commodities by the organizers, who emphasize the medieval nature of the event. The Middle Ages are understood in the popular imagination as a religious time, so religion needs to be included in the programme. The Lutheran parishes play along and provide specific numbers to support the festival. Their interest is to offer the interested special experiences and emotional moments. No one has, however, considered seriously that the local Catholic parish would execute the ‘medieval mass’, even though that was the religion of the time.

So, both the organizers and the church take advantage of each other. The church leaders are pleased to be part of an event where the cathedral is given a major role. The organizers are also pleased that the church provides credibility for the medieval nature of the festival. The medieval Turku festival is obviously a post-modern replay of ancient times, providing opportunities for consumption and
aesthetic experiences for the contemporary people, where both the Middle Ages and religion are commodified.

**Discussion**

The topic of this article is the relationship between religion and consumer society in late modernity, exemplified by the multifaceted activities taking place in the Cathedral of Turku. In the above description of the usage of the cathedral and in the analysis of specific cases it was possible to see how the Cathedral of Turku has been used in different ways. The cases highlighted how the cathedral has been commodified to suit specific purposes.

The cases revealed different aspects of the commodification process. First, the celebrity wedding showed how outsiders, in this case reporters from the yellow press, commodified a church wedding in order to produce and sell experiences to the readers. The church did not approve of the action and condemned it as exploitative behaviour. Second, the dance performance can be understood as a commodification of a secular art form to promote the cause of the church as a kind of missionary activity. Here the criticism arose from within, where the alleged secular art form was considered to represent improper religiosity. This case revealed tensions related to the renewal of church activities. Third, ‘the Capital of Christmas Peace’ tourist brand uses religious themes and symbols to attract tourists to Turku. Christmas events and experiences are made into a product and religion is used to promote the spirit of the event. Fourth, the medieval Turku festival uses religion generally and the cathedral as a coulisse to legitimate the medieval nature of the event. The last two cases have not created significant controversies.

A typical feature of all the events in question is that aesthetic experiences hold a central place in them, which has been seen as a central feature of the late or postmodern times by many scholars, for example Mike Featherstone (1991). This invites the obvious conclusion that the churches are changing along with the rest of society and it is also in their interest or they feel the pressure to offer their activities in a contemporary manner. Traditional events, such as the Proclamation of the Christmas Peace, have been reinterpreted to be first and foremost aesthetic experiences and also marketed in a novel manner. The reinterpretation can, however, lead to conflicts in religious communities, if the division of the traditionally religious and secular is blurred, as the dance performance case illustrates.

Many of the cases also revealed the ambivalent nature of the religious and the secular spheres in the contemporary world, which is also a constant topic of debate in the churches. From the viewpoint of research, it is not the question of desirable
or undesirable forms of religion, but rather a manifestation of changing definitions of the sacred and the profane: the more individuation, the more variety of the sacred. The situation obviously causes stress to various partakers in the definitional battle. Especially if a participant wants to keep a monopoly of interpretation, as there are not many efficient sanctions.

It is also a major observation that the commodification of religion happens to a large extent as an internal process within the church and not only because of outside pressure or exploitation. This means that the church leaders have internalized the current market logic and adjusted it for their own purposes. Church events are to a growing extent marketed as experiences and special occasions, something that is already common and deeply embedded in secular marketing. The events themselves are also created from the outset as targeted products, which aim to please people. This observation is quite the contrary to the self-understanding of many churches, which raise a critical voice towards the market economy and to the way it affects people’s lives.

To conclude, the relationship between religion and consumer society is an interesting field of inquiry that can shed light on some contemporary conflicts in religious communities as well as explaining some developments within the churches. The churches have consciously or unconsciously adopted the logic of the marketplace, which already guides a part of their activities. To see religion as something that works only outside the realm of secular consumer society or against it is outdated and based on a notion of religion which no longer does justice to the realities of the late modern world.

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