

Casualties of image-mad society

IMAGINE that you are a young woman in today's consumerist, fashion-driven society.

You're remorselessly targeted by advertising that promotes not just clothing styles that change with bewildering speed, but promotes a specific body-shape. Fashion models with unfeasibly small waists stare out at you from giant billboards, actresses' photos are touched up on magazine covers to suggest they are size 6 rather than size 8, and celebrities promote dangerously unhealthy diets to remove every inch of fat.

You're even assailed with TV programmes showing people undergoing cosmetic surgery to try to achieve the perfect 'look'. What might that do to your self-esteem if you are one of the 99.99 per cent of young women who doesn't look like a supermodel?

And if you're lucky enough to achieve a figure that fits in with what today's society regards as attractive, how do your celebrity

the big issue



Today's consumerist, fashion-mad society presents impossible ideals that our young people can't live up to, hitting their self-esteem, argues university chaplain Canon Peter Jones.

role models suggest that you behave? Usually by flaunting as much of your flesh as possible. Having topless photos taken for a raunchy lads' mag somehow now qualifies as an achievement for today's supposedly 'strong, independent woman'.

Jesus of Nazareth once told people that "nothing that goes into a person from outside can defile him; no, it is the things that come out of a person that defile him." As a criticism of the near fetishism that Jesus saw as having replaced the original purpose of the Jewish law, we can see what he was driving at as he sought to explain his kingdom values. But today we are becoming increas-

ingly aware of just how much that goes into people can seriously defile them.

The onslaught of advertising messages we see are pedalled by industries whose values owe nothing to what Christians and other people of faith regard as the true destiny of humankind. So we must surely act to help those most at risk from this ruthless commercial psychological exploitation.

At this year's World Music Arts and Dance (WOMAD) Festival in Reading I found myself sitting next to a rather beautiful young Kiwi couple whose skin was like silk, whose eyes were like emeralds but whose dreadlocked hair and

henna tattoos would have to have been airbrushed out by any trend-setting beauty magazine editor. I asked the couple what they were eating as I couldn't readily identify it.

They had prepared a mixture of crushed seeds, yoghurt and beetroot juice as a snack. Their choice of food reflected their desire to enjoy the simplicity of nature's harvest in preference to the commercialised slimming aids that beguile the typical consumer.

These young people had made a conscious decision not to be victims of a culture whose gods are images decided by self-styled fashion gurus. It seems the trend-setters have managed to imprison our children by using advertising straplines that offer instant freedom and success – if only they choose the right sunglasses, trainers or deodorant.

Working daily among thousands of 18 to 30-year-olds who are being told that getting a degree will enhance their earning

power, I see a great deal of anguish around the drive to acquire the right image and identity to impress employer and suit-or alike. The prospect of failure can easily drive the so-called 'loser' into the oblivion of alcohol, drug or gambling addiction.

The western Christian tradition has much to learn from the Islamic and other faiths whose emphasis on modesty tends to allow maturing adults to see that their value and worth is rooted in who they are and not on how they look or smell. Perhaps this is why I'm repeatedly struck by the natural confidence of so many overseas students - many of whom bring a wariness of the glossy images stalking our marketplace.

Perhaps our congregations might consider how to impart Christian values of dignity and self-worth to the young people we engage with in a way that gives them the same kind of confidence.

11th DIVINE MERCY CONFERENCE

FAWLEY COURT
30th SEPT. 2006
10:30 AM - 6:00 PM

SPEAKER :
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