

Candidate's Name

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HWA CHONG INSTITUTION JC2 PRELIMINARY EXAMINATION 2008

GENERAL PAPER**8806/02**

PAPER 2

Duration: 1 hour 30 minutes

Date: 26 August 2008

Time: 1015 - 1145 hrs

INSERT

READ THESE INSTRUCTIONS FIRST

This insert contains the passage for Paper 2

*In this article John Schumaker writes about **The New Religion**.*

- 1 Given the choice of becoming the CEO of a major corporation, the president of Harvard or Yale, a Navy SEAL, or a celebrity's personal assistant, nearly half of the teenage girls surveyed chose to become an assistant. In another telling statistic, the majority of respondents who were provided with a list of famous names with whom they could share a meal picked Jennifer Lopez over Jesus Christ.
- 2 Fascination with fame is nothing new. Long ago, the Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus observed that 'the desire for fame is the last affliction cast off even by the wise.' But celebrity worship as we know it first emerged in the 1880s when the notion of 'cultural hero' began to shift from a noble, duty-driven upholder of standards and virtues (scholars, inventors, great political leaders, 'captains of industry') to a person celebrated primarily for being prominent in the popular consciousness. According to Smithsonian Institute historian Amy Henderson, this was spurred by new mass communication technologies of the 1920s and 1930s as well as by 'a staggering machine of desire' created by the ballooning entertainment industry. All this formed part of a wider consciousness shift from character to personality, substance to image, and community to narcissism. But celebrity mania is at new heights at the beginning of this new millennium and its dire consequences are becoming increasingly apparent. We are suffering from an insidious addiction that we have only just begun to properly diagnose.
- 3 Ironically, sociologists maintain that the decline of organized religion has played a large role in spawning the new cult of celebrity. As the level of our faith in traditional organised religion decreases, the tendency to worship celebrity increases. Celebrity adulation helps fill what the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre called the 'God-shaped hole in our consciousness' created by modern secular society. Celebrities are our new pagan deities, representing a vast and ever-changing pantheon of media-dwelling gods and goddesses. Whereas the ancients strode with heavyweights like Zeus, Ra and Odin, we moderns limp by with puny idols like Halle, Oprah and the Osbournes.
- 4 Indeed, some argue that many of us are suffering from what has been termed 'celebrity worship syndrome' (CWS), an obsessive-addictive disorder. One research team from the University of Leicester found that 36 per cent of British residents are afflicted with CWS. The worst affected inhabit a joyless world ruled by delusions and pipe dreams about a celebrity who has been distorted into an empty parody. Once possessed by their celebrity demons, they become solitary, neurotic and even self-destructive. Those with less intense CWS can still function, but their over-involvement with 'their' celebrity consumes a lot of time, energy and income.
- 5 In economic terms, fame has become the ideological and intellectual fabric of modern capitalism. Ours is an economy of fame. Our culture is about the commodification of the individual and the individual image. Beyond that, the frivolous playground of fame and celebrity is now the major staging ground for the mass manipulation of consciousness and behaviour. In the United States, celebrity worship is the new designer drug. It is one of the country's most invasive and dubiously valuable exports to the world, and it is the fast-burning fuel for a relentless, corrosive media machine where television shows and tabloid rags incessantly deliver their product to consumers like a dealer to a junkie. As part of this engineered addiction, contrived distraction and endless hype have become the foremost means of capitalist control. In advertising, celebrities have long prescribed our tastes in things like automobiles, breakfast cereal, hairstyle, body shape and so forth.
- 6 As well as controlling consumer choice, celebrity worship infects every part of our culture. As we continue to celebrate (and elect) counterfeits and pretenders, we are losing the ability to recognize true human greatness. In theory, a person becomes a celebrity as a result of achievement. In practice, being a celebrity is widely seen as a great achievement in itself. A disturbing symptom of such cultural decline is the widespread malady of 'fame fever' ensuring no shortage of celebrities – or future politicians for that matter. The hysterical stampede for public glory is showcased in the growth of the 'reality TV' industry. Last year, over 70,000 wannabe celebrities auditioned for TV's American Idol – a fame free-for-all where karaoke, exhibitionism and 'stardumbness' collide in a neuro-

degenerative tribute to sham and mediocrity.

- 7 We are fighting a losing battle. Our fundamental values are being systematically slain by the forces of fame and fortune that celebrities command. Thanks to the cult of celebrity, we live in a world where style triumphs over substance. Who cares if a celebrity is inexpressibly shallow as long as he is incredibly glamorous? Who cares if their idol is stupendously vain as long as she is stunningly gorgeous? Just as style has triumphed over substance, money has also trodden morality into the dust. Not only have we become obscenely materialistic individuals whose lives are devoted to self-indulgence and instant gratification, we will also resort to any form of deception or dishonesty to sustain our hedonistic existences. The most tragic casualty in the war to save mankind's collective soul has been the new generation, utterly vanquished by the decadent celebrity lifestyle which they all crave to emulate. With the media glamorisation of drugs, the glorification of violence and the proclamation that promiscuity is 'normal', is it any wonder that the youth of today have become empty-headed, self-obsessed, emaciated clones of MTV? 50 55 60
- 8 As if all this were not enough, the political impact of celebrities in modern society is also a new and disturbing trend. Celebrities have great appeal as political candidates – which explains why so many are weaselling into the political picture. In a world where image is everything, they have the winning formula – name, identification, perfect teeth and big hair, wealth, media savvy and public adulation. The recent election of Arnold 'Terminator' Schwarzenegger to California Governor is only the latest depressing example of this trend. Not to be outdone by their celebrity rivals, once earnest politicians are jumping on the celebrity bandwagon, borrowing all the phoney gestures, presentation styles and special effects that pay off in Tinseltown. We are experiencing the 'Hollywoodization' of political culture where the line between politics and entertainment is blurred. This inbreeding of politics with showbusiness is trivialising the political agenda. 65 70
- 9 An accompanying phenomenon is the celebrity as do-gooder. In our media dominated culture, saturated with soundbites and nanosecond attention spans, the ability of stars to galvanize public opinion is second to none. It has become almost impossible to direct political energy toward issues that do not entertain or have visible celebrity backing. Issues without this lustre – boring old problems like poverty and hunger, which are not cute and rarely photograph well – stand little chance of reaching the political limelight. If they ever do, they need celebrity backing (how could we ever solve the problem of world poverty without Bono and the obligatory rock concert, or free Tibet without Richard Gere?). When such celebrity heavyweights do pitch in, their vehement condemnations, misinformed statements and simplistic solutions not only distort the truth but make matters worse by offending the very people who have the power to effect real change. Moreover, celebrity activism is also open to charges of hypocrisy. At the recent Live Earth concert which aimed to raise awareness of climate change, the biggest impression left by pop stars was the huge carbon footprint made by their private jets. If all this were not enough, the organisational ineptitude of such stunts is staggering – witness, for instance, the mountain of plastic cups and litter discarded by 'concerned' fans at the same event, which only served to make further mockery of the entire event. 75 80 85
- 10 How does all this affect our political well-being in general? Fixating on the stars in the media skies is a process that tends to be mind-numbing. The more awed we are by their wondrous activities, the more stupefied we are likely to become. They make news, and we devour it. Today's media script often features celebrities – from Hollywood and Silicon Valley to Wall Street and Washington – glorifying a few rich and powerful Americans. The rest of us are mostly cast as incessant consumers of insignificant public worth or relevance. In terms of our democratic health in particular, we have become political couch potatoes, more fascinated by a candidate's recent plastic surgery than concerned with his proposed programmes. In a spectator mode, looking up to movers and shakers, we are not likely to rock a lot of boats. Instead of engaging in heated ideological debate or energetically lobbying for change, we wallow in apathy and bask in blissful ignorance. 90 95

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