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Studying Religion and Marketing. An Introduction

(doi: 10.2383/79475)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 3, settembre-dicembre 2014

Ente di afferenza:

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Studying Religion and Marketing

An Introduction

by Carlo Nardella

doi: 10.2383/79475

The mixture of faith and business has become increasingly evident. On the one hand, religious organizations employ sophisticated marketing techniques to attract various resources, including members, volunteers, funds, and public support. On the other hand, the business world appropriates religious and spiritual content to publicize and sell its products and services. This complex mixture can be explored in both directions, from which several important issues emerge.

The relationship between religion and marketing is an object of study that reveals the presence in the society of a great ongoing change. A growing number of academics is examining this relationship, as witnessed by the intellectual work that has been developed over the last two decades and that has seen a rapid expansion in recent years.

The scholars' tasks were to identify the main dimensions of this relationship, recognize its characteristics, and place it within more general historical and social processes. This produced a debate which highlighted signs of mutual convergence between the marketing sector and the religious sector. These two worlds were traditionally considered to belong – at least from a theoretical point of view – to two opposite cultural universes, although areas of intersection and overlapping were actually quite visible for long time.

The following pages explore a series of issues and lines of research raised in this debate, with the aim of identifying some focal points and extricating a complex

of phenomena that, while they appear to be joined together, actually respond to different and partially autonomous logics.

As a general scheme, this introduction suggests that the relationship between religion and marketing moves on at least three poles: the pole of religion, the pole of marketing, and what this article refers to as the pole of consumers.

The Pole of Religion

The pole of religion is understood as a market in which religious organizations, all with the same legal status, compete freely with each other. As all markets, it involves an exchange of goods and the right for customers to choose on the basis of their preference.

The general underlying processes include the institutionalization of a variety of religious groups and movements, the privatization of norms and belief systems, and the rationalization – in the Weberian sense – of social conducts and structures.

From a socio-religious standpoint, the central outcome is pluralism, recognized both as a crucial institutional fact and as a cultural aspect. It interacts, in an interdependent process of cause and effect, with the phenomenon of privatization, by inducing particular adaptations in the configuration and behavior of the religious institutions.

Berger [1967, 138] was one of the first to point out that in all “pluralistic situations,” where religion “must be ‘sold’ to a clientele that is no longer constrained to ‘buy’ [...] the religious institutions become marketing agencies and the religious traditions become consumer commodities.” This happened in the United States, where pluralism resulted in competition.

A society, which prohibits a state church by leaving its citizens free to decide whether and how to practice their faith, moreover which organizes itself in accordance with the reasoning of free market, is a society where religious organizations have historically had to compete with each other and with other cultural institutions [Finke and Iannaccone 1993].

In a situation characterized by interreligious competition, the commercialization of religion plays an important role. Although it is nothing new to trace across centuries commercial aspects of religion, the transformations of market societies in the 1800s greatly affected this phenomenon, first occurring in the United States [Moore 1994, 7].

Historians and social scientists have provided many examples of how the religious and commercial spheres have interacted in the U.S. over time: from the selling

of Christian goods for personal or household use in the Victorian Age [McDannell 1995, 222 ff.]; through the revitalization and transformation of religious holidays for business interests during the Nineteenth century [Schmidt 1995]; to the eager embracement of advertising slogans and tools by liberal Protestants during the 1920s and the similar unreserved exploitation of television and radio by evangelicals in the second half of the century [Moore 1994, 205-237]. A turning point has been identified in the 1960s, when religious switching, including switching to no faith, became increasingly acceptable and popular among the American population, by compelling religious institutions to use marketing strategies to attract new parishioners and retain current ones [Einstein 2008, 21-24].

Religious marketing has become an area of growing interest for researchers over the past decades. Since the beginning of the 1980s, increasing attention has been directed to topics such as the application and usefulness of marketing techniques to religious organizations, the survey of the clergy's attitudes toward the use of marketing in religion, and the evaluation of marketing strategies in terms of growth of membership, mass attendance, funds raised, and number of people involved in church activities [see, e.g., McDaniel 1986].¹

More recent publications have expanded this area of research by introducing the concept of brand, understood as a symbol that the consumer uses to build his or her identity and interact with other people. Particular emphasis has been placed on the fact that the development of a brand implies the creation of meanings. A multitude of actors, both collective and individual, contribute with different levels of participation and emotional involvement to the meanings [see, e.g., Arvidsson 2006; Fourier 1998]. This has been seen by several authors as a primary feature not just of branding but also of religion in general. According to this view, both the modern commercial world and the religious world "tell a story" by creating meaning and identity [cf. Twitchell 2007, 73; see also Twitchell 2004, 89].

An innovative proposal, considering the wide interest generated and the general consensus reached, has been advanced by Einstein [2008, 7 ff.]: the proliferation of religious choices, the high level of media saturation and the ubiquitous presence of advertising have made it necessary for religion to promote its products and services as brands. The key concept is that of "religious branding," realized through the creation of specific "faith brands" [*ibidem*, 92-94]. These are religious products and services (books, religious courses, spiritual practices, etc.) which, like their secular counterparts, serve to distinguish them from others in the religious marketplace and assist consumers in making a personal connection with the product.

¹ For an overview of this literature, see Cutler and Winans [1999] and Cutler [1992].

The concept of religious branding appears to be relevant not only for Christian churches but also for other religions. A salient example of religious-marketing interaction in Islam is represented by the halal (Islamic permissible) industry, which now includes “sectors beyond the food market such as pharmaceuticals, cosmetics, toiletries, and services such as banking, insurance, and tourism,” by giving life to “a new market of consumer products, advertising, and commercial media programming [...] increasingly labeled ‘Islamic’” [Echchaibi 2012, 31-32].

Even among different Asian religions, the interaction between religiosity and commerce seems to have become an important aspect. Symbolic economies drive the production and veneration of Buddhist monuments and other religious places in Thailand and its neighboring region [Askew 2008]. A brisk retail market of Hindu ritual paraphernalia, including flowers, has developed in Singapore [Sinha 2011]. Religious practices associated with popular Chinese religion are monetized during spiritual festivals in Malaysia and China [DeBernardi 2008].

The marketing strategies applied by the Kabbalah Center founded by Philip Berg and the advertising campaigns launched by the Church of Scientology show that Jewish groups and new religious movements as well are affected by these dynamics [cf. Einstein 2008, 147-172; Einstein 2011].

Although different religious traditions may embrace different branding tools, there appears to be little doubt among researchers about the applicability of marketing concepts and practices to religion. And yet, the situation remains to some extent paradoxical, at least from the point of view of the religious institutions. As Voas [2014, xviii] pointed out: “[n]o doubt ‘Mother Theresa’ became a brand, and that brand was successfully deployed for charitable purposes, but many people would be offended by the suggestion that there was anything conscious about the way her name and image became trademark for altruism.”

Not all religious organizations, indeed, admit to be “enterprises” with a specific economic dimension and, for this reason, they function in a sort of permanent denial of such dimension. Bourdieu [(1994) 1998, 204 ff.] made reference to this “misrecognition” through the expression “double game,” by adding that “[t]he truth of religious enterprise is that of having two truths: economic truth and religious truth, which denies the former.” Bourdieu further argued that sociological analysis of religion should employ “two words, superimposed on each other, as if in a musical chord: apostolate/marketing, faithful/clientele, sacred service/paid labor, and so forth.”

This consideration leads to a knotty issue of the debate: if marketing has become so important in contemporary societies, what are the consequences of the commercialization of religion? The answers rely on different hypotheses. The adoption of marketing techniques by religious organizations, as well as the commercialization of

religious objects and icons, can be explained satisfactorily by making reference to the secularization thesis: religion is losing its power and authority, while other institutions like consumption and entertainment become dominant. From this perspective, it appears that consumer culture is ascendant, the sacred is being replaced by the secular, and religion is being forced to adapt in order to compete in a marketplace with multiple sources of meanings. But an answer can also be found by radically denying secularization. This happens if one accepts the axiom that religious demand constitutes an independent variable, is located at the level of the individual, and is not subjected to relevant variations over time. This solution postulates that the overall religious demand remains constant and shifts the explanation of the ongoing changes at the level of the institutions, which are assigned with the task of capturing and, possibly, enhancing the demand for religion, by adopting modern and increasingly sophisticated marketing techniques.

The Pole of Consumers

The thesis of the religious supermarket, since its first formulations, paved the way to an important shift: considering the individual as an actor who is more or less free to pick and choose whatever beliefs and practices satisfy his or her individual needs. Religion, according to this view, is understood as a personalized religion, related to aspects of the subjectivity of the individual and founded on personal autonomy.²

“Invisible religion,” “Sheilism,” “implicit religion” are only a few of the expressions used to emphasize the subjective dimension of religion, by following the hypothesis that proposes to separate the concept of religion from that of institutionalized religion and recognize that the paths of these two entities may diverge, namely that the former can exist independently from the latter [see Luckmann (1963) 1967]. If, on the one hand, this approach reduces the importance of the institutional control on religion, on the other hand, it maintains that religion in itself will always exist, although adopting a multiplicity of different forms. With this shift, a new path is established, that of researching the transformations of religion in the present society, understanding which are its new forms, and revealing where the unseen sacred hides itself.

New forms of religion have been identified in the sphere of economic consumption. Some authors, for example, have seen consumerism as a real religion. Starting from a functionalist approach, Loy [1997, 275] maintained that the functions once performed by traditional religions are more and more fulfilled by the market, which

² For a critical discussion of the privatization thesis, see Aupers and Houtman [2006].

has become “the first truly world religion, binding all corners of the globe more and more tightly into a worldview and set of values whose religious role we overlook only because we insist on seeing them as ‘secular.’” Cox [1999, 18], by developing a similar thesis, added that although the market possesses divine attributes, “they are not always completely evident to mortals but must be trusted and affirmed by faith.”

DeChant [2002] pushed the conceptualization of this new system of beliefs and norms even further by focusing on its structural aspects such as its rituals (shopping), its pilgrimage sites (malls and department stores) and its “liturgical calendar” (the major North American shopping days, particularly the period from the weekend before Thanksgiving until Christmas Eve). Central in deChant’s analysis is the idea that the world of commerce and consumerism has become a sort of cosmological religion remarkably similar to the archaic religions which were practiced before the advent of Christianity: “[a]s the ancients saw nature as the ultimate sacred power and worshiped it in all of its various expressions, so we today see the economy as the sacred power of our culture and worship it in an even wider array of manifestations” [DeChant 2002, xiv].³

Other authors have interpreted consumption and shopping as a vehicle to reach the transcendent. According to Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry [1989], consumers, both individually and collectively, are able to sacralize a wide range of consumer products like flags, sports stars, automobiles, and collections. The process through which this happens is based on a phenomenon of shifting boundaries between the sacred and the profane. This allows contemporary consumers to treat secular elements as “set apart, extraordinary, or sacred, just as elements of nature are sacred in naturistic religions and certain icons are sacred to followers of contemporary, organized religions. Although the specific focal objects differ, the same deeply moving, self-transcending feelings may attend each, and the same revulsion may occur when these objects are not treated with respect” [Belk *et al.* 1989, 2].

The sacralization of the secular can be much more easily experienced when consumers become members of “brand communities,” namely communities formed around brands, especially those “with a strong image, a rich and lengthy history, and threatening competition” [Muniz and O’Guinn 2001, 415]. Examples of brand communities have been found in cars (e.g., Jeep, Saab), computers (e.g., Macintosh, Newton), and even fantasy and science fiction (e.g., Star Trek, Star Wars). Key feature of these communities, which present strong magic and religious connotations, is the production of “transformative experiences in their consumers” [Muniz and Schau

³ For other literature that interprets and presents economics as a religion, see Benton [1990], Foltz [2007], and Nelson [2001].

2005, 746]. These magico-religious experiences have mainly been identified in the mythical and legendary narratives which the members of these communities share and exchange with each other. Moreover, brand communities can be transformed into “brand cults,” groups of followers whose loyalty toward the brand is so strong that its products become actual religious objects, for example, as happened with Apple and Harley Davidson [cf. Belk and Tumbat 2005].

It is worth noting that these theories have in common the premise that individuals are driven by a deep-seated need for the sacred and that this need, in a period of crisis for institutionalized religions, can be fulfilled by consumption and popular culture. In this sense, they appear to be rooted, on the one hand, in a field opposite to that of the secularization thesis, since they consider the demand for religion as a constant variable, while, on the other, they accept some of its conclusions (for example, the current marginalization of the institutionalized religion), by developing them within a post-secularization frame.

Two main problems emerge. The first comes from the fact that the unhistorical assumption that the sacred is a motivating draw for all people lies firmly at the core of this line of research, which moreover seems to accept this rigid aspect without critically analyzing it, thus transforming an unhistorical element into a theoretical a priori. It might be true that humans are driven by anthropologically scripted needs for the sacred, but the opposite might also be true. It is therefore important that this point is not taken for granted because it represents a major premise of the whole investigation [Guizzardi 1979, 17-29].

The second problem concerns the definition of religion. It is difficult to not agree with Stolz and Usunier [2014, 10-11] when they observe, referring to the sacralization of consumption theory, that: “the definition of ‘religion’ (or implicit, or quasi-religion etc.) used is so broad that it is difficult to conceive of phenomena that could not – at least in principle – also become ‘implicitly religious.’”

At the same time, it seems not to be sufficient to reduce religion to its functions and even less to conclude that in a secular society, where these functions are no longer performed by institutionalized religions, other social forces perform them. On closer inspection, even this approach conceals an unhistorical assumption: making religion overlap with its functions implies indeed, at the social level, the presence of a constant religious structure and, at the individual level, the existence of a human nature with intrinsic religious characteristics (*homo religiosus*).

The Pole of Marketing

So far, this article has considered the case of religions that adopt marketing techniques by promoting themselves as brands and the case of consumer products and experiences thought to be sacred and raised to cult status. However, there is also the case of religious meanings and practices used in contexts and for purposes that have little relation to religion. This latter case includes a wide variety of symbols, beliefs, narratives, and disciplines which are exploited or sold on the marketplace of secular goods. This ranges from the crucifix reproduced in the form of a jewel or body adornment, to Buddhist meditation used as a stress-reduction technique, to Gregorian chant marketed as a specific genre of popular music, to yoga transformed into a physical exercise program.

Although relatively little research has been conducted, these phenomena emphasize a series of issues such as the exploitation of powerful symbolic resources commonly associated with religious institutions, the public role of religion, and its increasing circulation outside a special “sacred” sphere.

A line of research dealing with some of these issues went through the use of religious themes and symbols in commercial advertising [see, e.g., Guizzardi 2007; Nardella 2012; Potel 1981]. It provided empirical evidence that a significant amount of religious content is employed to fulfill a multiplicity of advertising purposes, for example praising a product’s qualities, attracting the audience’s attention through word games or shocking images, and endowing the goods with a mystical or magical aura. The emphasis is placed on the fact that the advertisements using religious content, although varying with regard to the class of product promoted and the type of reference used, share the same process of meaning attribution, namely a process through which meanings already existing in the interpretative system of religion are transferred to goods and services that have no relation with the religious sphere (cars, articles of clothing, food, tourist destinations, et cetera).

From a sociological standpoint, the use of religion in advertising calls into question a recognized division of labor and, as a result, the group of religious experts that have created and maintained those meanings over time, who are expropriated from their accumulated symbolic work [Nardella 2012, 238-239].

At the basis of this theoretical model lies the idea that the advertising agencies, and the companies for whom they work, are not the only players and, at the same time, that religious institutions are not simply passive and indifferent spectators. Religious institutions play indeed an active role in the definition and maintenance of the religious discourse and have, therefore, specific interests on the way in which such discourse is reproduced and utilized. These interests emerge quite

clearly when religious specialists decide to react against the advertising field's appropriation of religious meanings, by exercising a power of control on those same meanings, which they consider to be under their exclusive competence [cf. Guizzardi 2007].

Other lines of research advancing a secularization hypothesis understood as declining religious authority due to the expansion of consumer economy have emerged in the field of theology and religious studies. One of these lines focuses on the process of cultural appropriation that has come to characterize contemporary consumer capitalism. The basic logic of this process is identified in the unhinging and re-hinging of signifiers and signifieds to boost the value of branded products and services.⁴ Miller [2008] called this process "commodification," by pointing out that it has two interrelated consequences for religion. "First, elements of religious traditions are fragmented into discrete, free-floating signifiers abstracted from their interconnections with other doctrines, symbols and practices." The second consequence is that, when abstracted from their contexts of production, these elements "are deprived of their links to the institutional and communal setting in which they shape the daily lives of religious practitioners" [*ibidem*, 3-4].

Other authors underlined the existence of a close relationship between consumer logic and the modern notion of spirituality. According to Carrette and King [2005], the growing popularity of the discourse on spirituality is an indicator of the silent takeover of religion by contemporary capitalist ideologies.⁵ In this view, the concept of spirituality is a means that companies and their consumers use "to pay lip-service to the 'exotic,' rich and historically significant religions of the world at the same time as distancing themselves from any engagement with the worldviews and forms of life that they represent" [*ibidem*, 17]. The world of religion appears therefore to be colonized by business and consumption, which use "the positive gloss of 'spirituality' to support its corporate interests and working practices" [*ibidem*, 171].

The confluence of economics and spirituality seems to have produced what Lau [2000] called "New Age Capitalism," namely an economic system in which various practices linked to different religions, especially Eastern traditions (e.g., aromatherapy, macrobiotics, yoga, and t'ai chi), are sold as consumer products along with the promise of a personal transformation at both physical and mental level.

⁴ A conceptualization of this process as a general mechanism of contemporary media culture is provided in Goldman and Papson [1996].

⁵ On this, see also York [2001].

Moving into the Symposium

The three poles outlined here represent three analytical perspectives through which the relationship between religion and marketing can be viewed and interpreted. They show that the phenomenon has multiple dimensions and that various hypotheses, which move for the most part independently from each other, have been advanced.

Studying the intersection of religion and marketing requires, from this point of view, the integration of different disciplinary approaches with the aim of addressing this topic not as much from a general standpoint, but rather from a definite and detailed standpoint.

In this symposium, six scholars from different academic fields – sociology, media studies, and marketing – explore specific manifestations of this intersection, by providing a new glimpse on its dynamics and structures. The essays collected here report the results of empirical and theoretical investigations, conducted on significant portions of the religion-marketing relationship, in which the recognition of the importance of symbolic production appears to be one of the dominant horizons.

The symposium begins with an article by *Mara Einstein*, which investigates how religious institutions are implementing marketing strategies and tools, including social media. Einstein analyzes the case of the Episcopal Church in the United States as an example of how a church can develop online strategies to market individual churches, by allowing congregants and prospects to engage and interact with them.

Nabil Echchaibi explores emerging branding landscapes in modern Muslim consumer culture through a focus on the Islamic music industry and the marketing of its popular artists. By analyzing the case of Awakening Records, a UK-based Islamic record label, Echchaibi shows the emergence of a new expressive and performative culture that, through the public significance of Islamic tastes, generates new habits of devotion and reinforces social sentiments and community bonds among young Muslims.

The contribution of *Stef Aupers* tries to go beyond the debate about the commodification of spirituality by focusing on an unacknowledged phenomenon: the “spiritualization of commodities.” By analyzing a randomly selected sample of advertisements for online role-playing computer games and twenty in-depth interviews with Dutch players, Aupers shows that these online games are explicitly designed and marketed by the gaming industry as an other-worldly world of re-enchantment, and that this game world can provide individual players with distinctly spiritual experiences.

In his article, *Adam Arvidsson* presents the hypothesis that contemporary consumer culture might have Christian roots, as well as his analysis of the American charismatic Christianity as a case in point, arguing that more research is required on this specific genealogy.

Gustavo Guizzardi proposes a typology of relations between religion and advertising based on an economy of symbolic goods in which hegemony, and the struggle for it, is the decisive factor. According to Guizzardi, open conflicts between religion and advertising arise when religious institutions perceive the semantic invasion of the advertising field as an attack against their symbolic power. But conflicts may also remain latent, when advertisers decide to respect the hegemony of the religious field, and not even emerge at all, when the institution downgrades the religious meanings exploited by advertising as belonging to the domain of popular religiosity.

In the final article, *Carlo Nardella* explores the portrayal of religious symbols in Italian advertising over the last forty years. Through a content analysis conducted on a large sample of advertisements appearing in popular Italian magazines between 1969 and 2013, Nardella seeks to determine the frequency of these portrayals, their nature, and the cultural values that they emphasize. He concludes by advancing the hypothesis that advertising, as a result of its growing use of religious symbols, will motivate a migration from the religious meaning system to its own meaning system, by objectifying them as internal citations within the advertising field.

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Studying Religion and Marketing

An Introduction

Abstract: The relationship between religion and marketing has become the object of growing interest among scholars in recent years. The convergence between these two sectors, traditionally considered to belong to distinct cultural worlds, has yielded a fruitful debate. The articles collected in this symposium represent an attempt to address some research issues relevant to this debate. This introduction provides the background for analyzing how religion and marketing may intersect, identifies some key concepts and lines of inquiry, and offers a brief summary of the individual articles within this collection.

Keywords: Religion; Marketing; Consumer Culture; Spirituality.

Carlo Nardella is a postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Milan. His research investigates the diffusion of religious symbolism in advertising and the relationship between religion and marketing. He won the British Sociological Association's Peter B. Clarke Memorial Prize in 2011 and was a visiting fellow at the University of Pennsylvania in 2010. His work has appeared in the *Journal of Contemporary Religion*.