

Religion and marketing

Religion



Mara Einstein, in *Brands of Faith*, asks: “ How do religion and marketing interact in the 21st Century? ” (2008) She presents the ideas of the commercialization of religion and religion as a commodity, and also describes the development of secular products into quasi-religious icons. (Einstein, 2008) Her perception is not isolated, and discussion over the interactions between marketing and religion has been heated, with many disagreeing over the changing ways religion and marketing are associating and their implications for the current generations. (Sayers, *Consumerism as Spirituality*, 2008) (Campolo T. *Commentary on Mega-Churches*, 2009) (Ferguson, Ferguson, & Bramlett, 2007) (Gilley, 2005)

However, change in progressive societies is inevitable (Disraeli, 1882). It is necessary to understanding the changes and interactions occurring in order to respond to the changing social environment appropriately. According to the American Marketing Association, marketing can be described as “ the process of planning and executing the conception, pricing, promotion and distribution of ideas, goods, and services to create exchanges that satisfy individual and organizational objectives” (Belch & Belch, 2004, p. 7).

This is a very broad definition that could, by some, be related to any planned communication or interaction with targeted consumers by an organization, with the view towards mutual interaction. Indeed, Mara Einstein highlights that marketing in religion has been going on since before the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century (Einstein, 2008, p. 4), despite perhaps not having a formalized name for the theories of promotional activities being undertaken at that time. A lot of marketing focuses around illusion and perception through association and brand development

(Silverman, 2001, p. 1) (Cooke, 2008, p. 42), and with the rise of integrated marketing communication the focus is the brand story, (Twitchell, 2004) (Cooke, 2008) and underlying big idea, (Ferguson, Ferguson, & Bramlett, 2007) something easily associable with the brand name and image (Belch & Belch, 2004). Therefore, for the purposes of simplicity, a more relevant focus might center on the current examples seen by observing individuals and organizations in the marketplace, involving Religion and Spirituality interacting with brand development, message and focus.

The proliferation of Australian culture with American influences is observable, and there is a high degree of cultural convergence (Mahoney, Trigg, Griffin, & Pustay, 2001, p. 406). Marketers infer little differences in the youth market internationally which are a key focus market for generalized products (Belch & Belch, 2004, p. 675), and researchers have deduced that shared language indicates a high level of cultural similarity. (Mahoney, Trigg, Griffin, & Pustay, 2001, p. 80) Furthermore, the cultural cluster of Australia and United States (US) is defined as “Anglo” (Ronen & Shenka, 1985), and in International Business theory, Australian’s hold a closer connection to the British and US culture than even the US to Great Britain or Canada (Hofstede, 1980) (Mahoney, Trigg, Griffin, & Pustay, 2001). Therefore, in order to adequately analyze Australia’s connections with religion and marketing, examination of the British and US theories and examples are justified.

In 2006, of respondents to the question of religion on the Australian census, 79% of Australians identified with a set religion and 71% of Australians identified as Christian. (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008). Similarly, in America, religious faith is considered very important in the lives of 70% of

Americans, and 84% of Americans identify as Christian (Einstein, 2008, p. 16). In contrast, Religion is considered very important to 33% of Brits, compared to above 80% recorded by surveys in most African and Asian cultures and above 60% of most Latin American cultures (Einstein, 2008, p. 6). The multicultural nature of Australian society makes it impossible to adequately generalize for the whole of the population, but the goal of this analysis is to show a snapshot of changing worldviews and current practices observable in culture.

There has been an wide increase in diversity between religious practice, following the changes brought about by the baby boomer generation in the 1960's (Penn & Zalesne, 2007, p. 313) with the rise of different eligious and spiritual practices, such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Pagan Religions, Islamic Practice, Judaism, New Age Spirituality, Mysticism, Kabbalah, Scientology, various cults, and also agnosticism, atheism and secular humanism gaining popularity to name the key religious which receive widespread media attention. (Einstein, 2008, pp. 21-22, 198)(Twitchell, 2004, pp. 47-49) There are close to 10, 000 unique religious identities worldwide, with two to three new religions birthed daily (Penn & Zalesne, 2007, p. 12). However, spirituality in the 21st Century is complex (Campolo D. T. , Trends in Christianity, 2007), and doesn't hold the same influence previously observed in society. (Penn & Zalesne, 2007, p. 313) Despite figures showing a high level of self-identification with religious practice, other statistics showing the prevalence of secular influence such as the ratio of pornography websites to citizens in America at eight websites per ten people (Ropelato & Jerry, 2010).

The validity of religious identification and its true relevance to and influence on individual decision-making and moral foundations is being questioned. (Campolo D. T. , 2007) (Kimball & Dan, 2007) It becomes evident that individual spirituality is no longer given the same over-arching impact on individual choices as it former had. Therefore, despite the religious self-identity many claim, according to the Australian Institute of Management, the prevalent worldview in Australia considered is secular humanism (Elliott, 2002, p. 139).

Similarly, in America it is of secular liberalism. (Jenkins, 2002, p. 9) A common reflection by social analysts is of religion's demise in membership and influence in the western world, linked to secularization. (Campolo D. T. , Trends in Christianity, 2007) (Twitchell, 2004, p. 71). Secularization is based on idea that industrialization leads to decreased religiosity. (Einstein, 2008) In 1968, American Sociologist Peter Berger claimed that in the 21st Century religion would only be seen in fringe sects (Penn & Zalesne, 2007, p. 312).

He defined Secularization as the interconnected process of the blurring between the lines of the spiritual and the secular (Einstein, 2008, p. 17) (Penn & Zalesne, 2007, p. 312). Though Peter Berger has now reflected on the invalidity of his statement towards the decline of religion, stating instead today's society is filled with “ explosive, persuasive religiosity” (Penn & Zalesne, 2007, p. 312), the basic premise of secularization can be observed through the increasing alignment of brands with increased spiritual meaning and value, and the movement of the “ sacred becoming secular” (Einstein, 2008, p. 6) (Sayers, Consumerism as Spirituality, 2008). From this point, it's

easy to see the new form of spirituality occurring within western society around consumerism. (Consumerism as Spirituality, 2008).

For many, individuals have become brand identities and self-publicists (like Paris Hilton and Oprah, but mass-replicated for Generation Y on Facebook) (So Sexy it Hurts. , 2008)(Einstein, 2008)(Twitchell, 2004). But Mark Sayers claims we as individuals are becoming our own god, and marketing and advertising gurus are our High Priests. (What Paris Hilton Taught me about Training Leaders, 2008) Today's society has been equated with Implicit Religion, with the identification with symbolism, religious events, worship, appreciation of the sacred, community, meaning, purpose, identity and holistic commitment usually associated with religion now being projected onto secular activities such as sports, media, pop culture and consumerism (Sayers, Consumerism as Spirituality, 2008) (Einstein, 2008, pp. 6-77). For church consultant, Phil Cooke, the elements of religion are the same as of any successful brand, involving a creation story, a call to action and statement of faith, imagery, habitual rituals, special language, conversion into a community of followers, and a figurehead or inspiring leader. (Cooke, 2008, pp. 69-81) The idea of spirituality in marketing is commonplace in the secular consumer society.

Word-of-mouth (WOM) advertising, long considered marketer's ' holy grail,' is identified as the process of instilling into consumers the motivation and purpose for " proselytizing" brands and ideas, converting them (the consumers) into " evangelists. " WOM is termed " evangelism," and all these terms are strongly associated with the spiritual (Silverman, 2001, p. 102). Secular books of leadership focus strongly on purpose and vision founded

through spiritual connection and destiny, and speak of the spirit of leadership, with zeal, conviction, compassion and based on core values, all spiritual concepts (Elliott, 2002, pp. 23-154) (Man, 2009, p. 13) (Sarros, 2002, pp. 6-21) Recently, brand manager B J Cunningham gave a speech equating key biblical concepts to marketing. He took the “ Christ Story” as a metaphor for the perception of events, rather than the literal interpretation religious providers promote, and espoused Jesus as a marketer selling ‘ Love ‘.

‘ Life after death ‘ is a symbol of overcoming primary fear. Similarly, he points out the key branding questions are the same as those answered by religion, that of purpose, direction, core motivations, destination and the relevance of that to the individual. (B J Cunningham, 2009) The brand has become the manifestation of personal identity; Marketing, evangelizing truth to the unconverted, termed “ Seekers” (or in marketing terms, non-habitual purchasers). For example, Fred Pearce, a journalist and humanist, chose to title his penned journey to discover the origins of his possessions Confessions of an eco-sinner.

He relates the state of nature today to man-created “ environmental sin,” and his “ savior” women who give up their right to procreate (2008, p. 60). It is clear that individuals are now relating their secular activities to religious practice. Similarly, at Winter Sound System Festival 2010, the screens portrayed one of the DJ’s, Steve Aoki in the same light as Jesus on the “ Jesus is my homeboy” t-shirts that had previously been a big cultural trend. (Kimball & Dan, 2007, p. 87) The imagery was striking, with the “ Jesus”

beard, moustache, long hair and eyes silhouetted in a Black and white high contrast outline.

Watching the participants with hands raised while dancing to the music, it was hard not to equate the image with spirituality, the worshiping of man and music. For many Brisbane youth going out religiously on the weekend, their spirituality seems found in the Rev, the Monastery, and Mystique, no longer churches but now dance clubs. However, it's not just the individual's activities that are equated with spirituality, but also corporate concepts. In a story recently, on CEO of Apple, Steve Jobs, the Title was igod, with the byline " He's worshiped, feared, and has an uncanny ability to see the future. (Brinkbaumer & Schulzphy, 2010) The connection was blatant, and the popularity of the " Cult of Mac" shows the raising of brand and man into spiritual concepts formerly held as sacred.

Similarly, Philip Broughton, a graduate of Harvard Business School (HBS) recalls his experience, telling of the marketing of HBS as a " transformation experience" akin to " a form of religious conversion,"(p. 85) his classes " driven by faith in a religion called diversification" (p. 93) speakers " evangelical" about their passion for their work,(p. 15) and workplaces requiring complete " devotion," in what he described as " a cult of the leader. "(p. 216) Students sought the big answers to life's questions and solving of world issues from industry leaders like Warren Buffet (Broughton, 2008, p. 279), showing a generation still seeking resolution. There has been a distinct shift in roles and responsibilities from traditional religious providers to other organizations and individuals in society.

Corporations and state governments now manage many hospitals, schools and welfare organizations, originally started by religious groups. Twitchell, (2004) Indeed, capitalism was justified by early theorists on the idea of a social responsibility, (Braham, 2006) a role previous to that held by religious providers and institutions such as the Roman Catholic Church (Nitsch, 2005), Early Industrialist, Andrew Carnegie's views included that of the inevitability of idolatry in some form by man, and in the 1860's he wrote *The Gospel of Wealth*, reflecting his views that the affluent's duty is to distribute wealth into projects of improving society, reflecting the view of the time that the best "trustee of common good" is "the man of wealth" (Broughton, 2008, p. 81) This is reflective of the views of Adam Smith, founder of modern economics who believed banks and capitalists were the most successful influencers of improving community and human conditions, through simply amassing wealth and spending, more-so than those who traditional had fulfilled this role, like religious institutions. (Braham, 2006) From this the idea of "Corporate Social responsibility" and "ethics" became the basis for prevalent moral codes, rather than traditional foundations based in religious beliefs. (Salzman & Matathia, 2006, pp. , 72)

More importantly, the production model was based on the assumption is products are made to fill needs in society, but when a surplus of product in relation to need occurred, the marketing model was developed to create need and demand for the product (Belch & Belch, 2004). When products are being created which no longer fill a basic need, increased meaning must be added to it to make it relevant to consumers. The growing expectation is that we look to products to give us stability, security, personal identity and

improve our status and self-esteem, rather than getting this from religion (Sayers, What Paris Hilton Taught me about Training Leaders, 2008). And indeed, market strategy now focuses on changing consumers' beliefs, their priorities and values, and adding new beliefs. (Neal, Quester, & Hawkins, 2004, pp. 343-346) These values that consumers seek from products is created intentionally. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is common marketing theory, and products are developed, not on simple basic needs like security, thirst, hunger and need for sexual release, but instead with the idea of establishing self esteem, status, and a sense of belonging to other individuals in the community (Belch & Belch, 2004, p. 07).

While these needs were previously ingrained in a sense of foundational human rights and values core to religious teaching, now this is being downgraded to a consumer product instead, through both religious institutions and mainstream producers. (Gilley, 2005) A basic principle in marketing strategy is to aim marketing to audiences aged just under the target market of consumers, thus ensuring your product is new and fresh to those reached by promotional efforts and no brand loyalty to competitors has already been established. Twitchell, 2004, p. 78; Einstein, 2008, p. 156)

For many consumer products, marketers have identified the Tween-early 20's age bracket as the predominant valuable, ripe and growing target market, due to the high levels of discretionary spending, influence in decision making over other key market segments, and the likelihood of individuals within the market to be in the process of developing habitual purchasing decisions (Belch & Belch, 2004, p. 75). Generation Y is skeptical about new products, growing up with a proliferation of branding, and though

they are loyal, optimistic and dedicated (Sheahan, 2005), this age group has a high value for individualism, personal ambitions and freedoms (Belch & Belch, 2004, p. 675). They have grown up not being trusted or having honesty displayed to them, and are searching for truth, purpose, belonging and meaning (Sheahan, 2005).

For spirituality products, the target market generally is 20-30 year olds, as increasing value is found in spirituality and collectivism by older generations. (Einstein, 2008, p. 156) (Belch & Belch, 2004, p. 675) This particular target market is focused on by Kabbalists. (Einstein, 2008, p. 156) However evangelicals have been known to target teenagers (Einstein, p. 156) and Catholics, children still in their formative years, (Shaw, 2010).

This targeting can best be seen through Christian children's brands like Veggie Tales , Kelly and the Super Kids , Pastor Max Lucado's children's animated books such as You are special which has now become a video series (Koorong Christian Bookstore, 2010) and from a secular production company, The Greatest Adventure: Stories from the Bible, by Hanna-Barbera Productions Inc, the production company who produced popular secular cartoons such as Tom and Jerry, Scooby-Doo, and The Flintstones.