Marketplace Shaping of Spiritual Experiences: Current Theory and Prospects

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This roundtable aims to bring fresh views on the role of marketplace actors and forces in the shaping of spiritual experiences. Building on the sacred and profane debate in consumer behavior, key themes explored in the roundtable will include marketers’ sacralization of the mundane; consumers’ search for spiritual meanings in the consumption of the mundane; the commodification of the spiritual; the consumption of spiritual goods; researcher reflexivity in studying spiritual experiences. We expect that these themes will attract a variety of scholars and generate a lively debate enabling a better understanding of the market for spiritual experiences in globalized, capitalistic societies.

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Extended Abstract

The goal of this roundtable is to gather together scholars interested in bringing fresh views on a cultural tension that is at the center of both age-old speculation in philosophy, theology and social science, and the life of countless individuals living in postmodern societies: the relationship between the material and the spiritual, the sacred and the profane. Speakers who have committed to be present at the session have conducted relevant fieldwork in a variety of empirical settings across the world. Despite a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches, presenters share the view that is that in today’s post-disenchanted world, a variety of agents—religious institutions, spiritual leaders, and increasingly marketers and consumers—interact and co-create spiritual meanings in a global “supermarket of the soul.” Specifically, a common premise shared by all presenters is that today’s consumers have an unprecedented degree of agency and creativity in the co-creation of authentic spiritual meanings from a variety of sources, local and global, and sacred and profane alike. We expect that the theme of this roundtable will attract a variety of scholars interested in the topic and generate a lively debate enabling a better understanding of how marketplace actors and forces shape spiritual experiences in globalized, capitalistic societies.

The theme we want to explore in this roundtable is arguable timely. Nowadays many competing religions, spiritual philosophies and approaches provide cultural and spiritual resources to individuals in rich western nations, who are however increasingly free to mix and match from different sources to customize their own spiritual life. Alongside this spiritual bricolage behavior by consumers in more secular societies, is the consumption behavior of immigrants who bring with them their religious practices that are adapted to local contexts and often made available to western citizens, thus adding to the spiritual resources made available to the mainstream consumer culture. In recent years, scholarly work from a variety of disciplines has touched upon related issues. In social science, many contributions have argued that the disenchantment of the world (Weber 1922) and secularization of society (Hammond 1985; Wilson 1969) has not really occurred (Berger et al. 1999) as in postmodern times new forms of faiths and spiritualities are flourishing (Detweiler and Taylor 2003; Heelas 1996; 2008; Lyon 2000; MacDannell 1998; Miller 2005). Rather, institutionalized religions have lost authority on public issues and, more generally, individuals are increasingly free to create their own religions based on the competing (and somewhat complementary) spiritual resources that are currently proliferating (Heelas et al. 2005; Roof 2001). Other work has instead examined the marketing practices of established and emerging religious institutions (Cook 2008; Einstein 2008; Moore 1995; Twitchell 2004, 2007), usually Christian Churches. Scholarship on immigrants in western countries has instead highlighted the political role and identity value of religious consumption practices such as, notably, those by Muslim consumers (e.g., Sandikci and Ger 2005; Kılıçbay and Binark 2002).

In consumer research, and specifically in consumer culture theory (Arnould and Thompson 2006), sacred and profane aspects of consumer behaviour have been at the center of debate for long time (i.e., Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989; see also Belk and Wallendorf 1990; Hirschman and LaBarbera 1990). However, while magico-religious metaphors have been widely employed since then (Arnould and Price 1993; Arnould, Price, and O’Cass 1999; Belk and Tummal 2005; Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003; Kozinets 2001; Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001; Muñiz and Schau 2005), most studies have only been concerned with the sacralisation of the secular. Only few consumer research studies have so far attempted to illuminate spiritual/religious experiences and their relationships with consumption and the marketplace (Bonsu and Belk, 2010; O’Guinn and Belk, 1999; Rinallo 2009; Scott and Maclaran, 2009) and, more in general, the material world (Gould, 2006).

To further the debate, we outline some key themes offered as starting points for this roundtable discussion, although we expect that interaction among participants will bring the debate in unanticipated directions.

- Marketers’ sacralization of the mundane—Marketers and brands increasingly call upon spiritual meanings to enhance the value of their products, services, experiences, and retail settings.
- Consumers’ search for spiritual meanings in consumption of the mundane—Consumers, often organized in communities, infuse their everyday consumption patterns with spiritual meanings, which are often not intended or even inspired by marketers.
- The commodification of the spiritual—Religious institutions and spiritual leaders “sell” products, services and transformative spiritual experiences in a competitive marketplace.
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- The consumption of spiritual goods. The marketplace offers an abundance of spiritual goods that are consumed in rich ways. Of particular interest are the discourses and practices that surround spiritual goods and the process through which consumers imbue spiritual consumption practices with meanings that often intertwine the political with the sacred.
- Researcher reflexivity in studying spiritual experiences. Studying spiritual experiences, particularly in interpretive consumer research, poses special challenges to researchers who have to question the impact of their religious worldview (or lack thereof) on their relationship with informants and interpretation of research findings.

REFERENCES