Conversations on the Sacred and Spirituality in Consumer Behavior

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In this roundtable, we question the ways in which the ‘sacred’ is distinct from spirituality, and ask whether the broadening of the concept has resulted in a reduction of its analytical power. The session will benefit all those interested in the sacred and spirituality in consumer behavior.

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Spirituality, once considered one and the same as religion, has attracted significant attention in the social sciences that, in the decades after the counterculture of the 1960s, have examined the secularization of society and the postmodern behavior of spiritual seekers, who mix and match from different sources to customize their spiritual beliefs and practices. In consumer research, spirituality per se has attracted limited explicit attention (for notable exceptions, see Hirschman, 1985; Holbrook, 1999; Gould, 1991; Moisio and Beruchashvili, 2010).

Spirituality is however an element of the liberatory postmodernist quest to re-enchant human life (Fuat Firat and Venkatesh, 1995) and magical thinking in consumer behavior (Dion and Arnould, 2011; Fernandez and Lastovicka, 2011; St. James, Handelman and Taylor, 2011). Moreover, it is implicitly inherent in two influential streams of consumer research: (1) materialism, and (2) the sacred (as opposed to profane). Materialism is the idea that everything is made of matter. Most religions see the Divine as transcendent rather than immanent, that is, the creator is separated from the physical creation, which is often considered a distraction to the soul’s spiritual journey, when not intrinsically evil. Accordingly, excessive pursuit of material goods is criticized as a hindrance to spiritual pursuits (see Belk, 1983). Materialism and spirituality do not, however, oppose each other. Religious/spiritual beliefs are reified in material culture (McDannell, 1995; Morgan, 1999; Moore, 1995), in the form of sacred images, devotional and liturgical objects, buildings and other places of worship, works of art, mass-produced consumption goods and entertainment products, and the practices surrounding these material objects (rituals, ceremonies, prayer, mediation, display, pilgrimage, worship, magic, study, etc.). Such consumption is not however exempt from critiques, ranging from bad taste (e.g., Catholic kitsch) to the more extreme accusation of spiritual materialism (Rindfleisch, 2005; Trungpa, 1973).

Gould (2006) warns against conflating spirituality with spiritual materialism. He defines the latter as “the coopting of spiritual meanings and practices in the service of the material life of the self and then conflating them by rationalising that one is engaging in spirituality. For instance, one may use spiritual practices to reduce tension so one can get along better in the world as opposed to using them to seek some sort of spiritual fulfilment or enlightenment” (Gould, 2006: p. 65). Based on a Buddhist perspective, Gould (1992, 2006) suggests that spirituality can fruitfully engage with matter in ways different from asceticism. For example, alcohol, whose abuse is condemned by ascetic religious paths, may be employed under the right circumstances for spiritual transformation, like experiencing altered states of consciousness that might accelerate one’s spiritual pursuits. From this perspective, consumption of goods, services and experiences can indeed provide the material means to achieve spiritual goals.

Sacred and Profane

In 1989, Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry argued that consumption may be a vehicle for experiencing the sacred, proposing that two processes are evolving in contemporary societies. One is the increased secularization of society and institutional religions. The other is the sacralization of the secular in the spheres of politics, science, art and entertainment. Since Belk et al.’s (1989) publication, the sacred has become a frequently invoked conceptual category to refer to those aspects of consumer behavior that go beyond the satisfaction of functional needs, including those that do not necessarily involve transcendent or ecstatic experiences.

For example, Fournier (1998) draws on theories of animism to develop brand-consumer relationship theory; others have conceived certain types of brand-consumer relationship as based on devotion (Pimentel and Reynolds, 2004; Pichler and Hemetsberger, 2007). Reference to the sacred, re-enchantment and transcendence is also frequent in studies of extraordinary consumer experiences as different as river rafting (Arnould and Price, 1993; Arnould et al., 1999), consumer gatherings such as the mountain men rendezvous (Belk and Costa, 1998) and the Burning Man event (Kozinets, 2002; Kozinets and Sherry, 2003; Sherry and Kozinets, 2003, 2007), skydiving (Celsi et al., 1993), and mountain climbing (Tumbat and Belk, 2011). Spiritual elements are present not only in experiences that immerse consumers in nature, but also in those referred to as artificial, marketer-made consumptionscapes, such as disco clubs (Goulding et al., 2002, 2009), art exhibitions (Chen, 2009) and retail spaces (Borghini et al., 2009; Dion and Arnould, 2011; Kozinets et al., 2002, 2004; Sherry, 1998; Sherry et al., 2009).

Brands are also sometimes conceived in spiritual or even religious ways. In their ethnography of Harley Davidson bikers, Schouten and McAlexander (1995) observe that the “Harley consumption experience has a spirituality derived in part from a sense of riding as a transcen-
dental departure from the mundane” (p. 50). Muñiz and Schau (2005), in their analysis of the abandoned Apple Newton community, identify several supernatural, religious and magic motifs in their informants’ narratives. Belk and Tumbat (2005) develop the notion of brand cult and identify the sustaining myths that underlie the religious aspect of Macintosh consumption. Also popular management books provide guidance on how to create brand cults and turn customers into “true believers” (Atkin, 2004; Ragas and Bueno, 2002).

Spiritual elements are perhaps even more prominent in entertainment brands based on science fiction, fantasy and horror genres (e.g., X-Files, Kozinets, 1997; Star Trek, Kozinets, 2001; Star Wars, Brown et al., 2003). By introducing “fantastic” elements, these brands familiarize their audiences with supernatural beings (e.g., angels, vampires, fairies, aliens) and phenomena (e.g., magic, miracles) that are not supposed to exist from a secular, atheist standpoint.

Starting a conversation on the sacred and spirituality in consumer behavior

The idea of this roundtable session is to reflect again on the sacred in consumer culture, disentangle the different typologies of the sacred, and put spirituality back in. To facilitate pre-conference discussion, and as a tribute to the conference’s theme of “appreciating diversity”, we will circulate articles exploring different theoretical perspectives on the sacred, spirituality and spiritual diversity, including some written for a forthcoming book entitled Spirituality and Consumption edited by Rinallo, Scott and Maclaran. We will also create a Facebook group, to be widely promoted, to ensure the conversation extends beyond roundtable participants.