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Diego Rinallo, Linda Scott and Pauline Maclaran
(eds.), "Consumption and Spirituality". London;
New York: Routledge, 2013, xiv + 280 pp.

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Book reviews

Diego Rinallo, Linda Scott and Pauline Maclaran (eds.), *Consumption and Spirituality*. London; New York: Routledge, 2013, xiv + 280 pp.

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This collection of essays examines, from a marketing perspective, the ways in which a variety of social actors – brands, marketers, consumers, religious organizations – create meanings considered to be spiritual. Study of the sacred and profane aspects of consumption is not new to business school contexts. Pioneer research in this field has been conducted by consumer behavior and marketing scholars, whose names, like that of Russell Belk, may sound familiar to most sociologists who deal with these topics.

The majority of the seventeen chapters are organized according to a formula which is rarely found: a 2x2 matrix whose cells include four different, albeit interrelated, entries summarizing the key dimensions of the analyzed phenomenon. The typology spans sacralization of the mundane, spiritual meanings in consumption, commodification of the spiritual, and consumption of spiritual goods. A fifth section brings the book to a conclusion by looking at issues of methods and representation.

The basic frameworks of the analysis are secularization, development of a religious market, and separation between institutionalized churches and spirituality. The thesis advanced in the book is essentially that developed by Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry [1989]: applicability of the concept of the sacred to the secular context of consumption within a phenomenon of shifting boundaries between the sacred and the profane. The thesis is confirmed, though these editors add that the conceptual category of religion tends to be replaced with that of spirituality. They further highlight a theme of secularization of the sacred, concerning the use of marketing strategies by religious organizations and the consumption of spiritual objects and experiences.

There are many intriguing themes pursued in this rich and dense book and it is only possible to mention a few. Diego Rinallo et al. present results of research carried out in Italy, by means of in-depth interviews, on the meanings that consumers derive from religious objects sold as consumption goods – specifically, a collection of high-priced rosaries launched by Dolce & Gabbana as fashion accessories. Russell Belk discusses deChant's [2002] theory that sees the economy of consumer culture as an alternate and increasingly dominant religion, in which the Santa Claus myth has become as sacralized as the original Christian story of the birth of Jesus, shopping is the chief ritual, department stores and malls are sites of pilgrimage, and the expenditure of money for gifts marks a form of sacrifice. Belk also finds in this argument a confirmation of the fact that individuals have a continuing and deep-seated need for the sacred that popular culture and consumption can fulfill. Mara Einstein's analysis of two advertising campaigns – "I'm a Mormon" for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints and "Inspired by Muhammad" for Islam – focus on the marketing and branding strategies adopted by religious institutions. Einstein shows how these campaigns are used "not only to bring people to the faith but also to change perceptions, solidify an identity, and strengthen sagging public reputations" [p. 134]. Linda Scott and Pauline Maclaran provide an ex-

cellent presentation of the results of their ethnographic study of Glastonbury, a small English town that has held sacred status over centuries and continues to be site of pilgrimages sustained by overt commercial practices. Finally, Robert Kozinets and John Sherry offer a look on the Burning Man, a countercultural and antimarketing event that occurs annually near Gerlach, Nevada. The authors interpret the Burning Man experience through ethnographic and netnographic data gathered between 1999 and 2005, analyzing it in terms of a pilgrimage-like search for the sacred during which the participants are able to create, both individually and collectively, “varieties of religious experience that can be and are used to rapidly transcend, and in some sense transform, systems of consumer culture” [p. 244].

Some short observations. First: the category of spirituality and its difference from religion should be further developed. It does not seem clear enough what “spirituality” actually means, although the book makes constant reference to this concept (expressions like “spiritual meanings,” “spiritual experiences,” and “spiritual goods” appear frequently throughout the texts). In the introduction, the editors offer a wide definition of spirituality, as “a subjective, personal quest to understand the ultimate questions about life, meaning, and the sacred” [p. 3]. In the following chapters, however, spirituality seems to mean more than one thing.

Second: key for the analysis is the notion of “market,” namely a model of consumption based on free choice and suppliers who have emerged to meet nearly every religious need that people express. One problem is that this is a way of looking at religion, not the way. There are, in fact, multiple models conflating together. For example, the metaphor of choosing implies the possibility of not choosing; plenty of people still operate on a model of obligation or inheritance, and there are also people who live in a way that takes no account at all of the transcendent. The latter consideration is theoretically significant because it corroborates a hypothesis of great importance: it is not certain that the need for the sacred is universal.

Third observation. When carefully viewed, most of the proposed essays agree on a fundamental point: the sacred is an inherent, essential drive of humans, to whom the book often refers to, although indirectly, as “consumers.” This fact is clear for Belk who, while contemplating what would happen to our notions of gods and religions if a being from another planet had the means to visit Earth, maintains explicitly: “It would no doubt shake our sacred ontologies to their core and at the same time prompt new ones. But it would not diminish our need for the sacred” [p. 76]. That the sacred is an essentially human characteristic seems to be no less certain for Kozinets and Sherry, who assert: “We see an important and noteworthy tendency in the shift from the search for things to the seeking of meaningful experiences, but we cast the quest for new experience as spiritually charged” [p. 245]. From a sociological standpoint, some critical aspects arise from this approach. The unhistorical assumption that the sacred is a motivating draw for all people lies firmly at the core of this book, which moreover seems to accept this rigid aspect without critically analyzing it, thus transforming an unhistorical element into a theoretical *a priori*. It might even be true that humans are driven by anthropologically scripted needs for the sacred and that these needs, in a period of crisis for institutionalized religions, are fulfilled by consumption. But this should not be taken for granted because it represents a major premise of the whole investigation.

Fourth and last observation. The book provides no answers to an important question: what social groups take advantage of consumer religion and spirituality? What is missing is a real analysis of the contexts and actors for whom a system of meaning and practice changes in a certain moment. That the world of consumption shifts from secular to sacred is certainly an important phenomenon, but why does this happen? Why do new notions of gods and religions flourish? Is it just because the old ones no longer satisfy us and, being impossible to live without them, we invent new ones? And who are the primary actors? In what historical conditions, and in connection to what other changes, does this phenomenon happen? A sociologist may find these and similar questions to be especially interesting.

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