

Gustavo Guizzardi

The Eternal Struggle. Symbols, Religion, Marketing

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The Eternal Struggle

Symbols, Religion, Marketing

by Gustavo Guizzardi

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The field of economics seems to have distanced itself from the religious field once and for all: “Victorious capitalism [...] needs its support no longer,” “material goods have gained an increasing and finally an inexorable power over the lives of men” [Weber (1904-5) 1930, 124]. These were the words with which Max Weber concluded *The Protestant Ethic*, with the image of the “iron cage” which had become “the light cloak” of the care for external goods “which can be thrown aside at any moment” [ibidem, 123], but on the same page, he wondered “[...] whether finally, who knows?” [ibidem, 124]. In *Intermediate Reflections*, Weber [(1915) 1946] suggested more complex hypotheses as the characteristic of modernity [Ferrara 2005, 32], in which the late-modern individual is reconsigned to a renewed polytheism: “[m]any old gods ascend from their graves [...] and again they resume their eternal struggle with one another” [Weber (1919) 1946, 149].

Some aspects of that struggle are discussed here.

Although the two fields, economics and religion, do boast autonomy on one hand, they are porous on the other [Douglas 1966], but not symmetrically. One aspect which they have in common is that of the users of their respective goods. The various market sectors of economic goods and religious goods are fragmented, but there are some users who turn to both of them, with considerable overlaps as regards values.

Another aspect which they have in common is the symbolic dimension. For the religious field, this is the plane on which this dimension is clearly collocated;

for the economic field, it acquires ever-increasing importance. Produced goods are transformed at the moment of their use – real or perhaps only imagined – by their incorporated symbolic potential, which turns them into instruments of identification and distinction, belonging and recognition [Sheffield 2006; see also Jhally 1989].

Briefly, in both religious and economic fields, this is not only a matter of producing specific goods, but rather and above all of ensuring that they are used and enhanced. The key element lies in the consensus which product users assign to them; the dimension of consensus lies in the extent to which evaluation of their use – real or potential – is important for those users [Riou 2002].

Consensus is by its very nature volatile: producers' work consists not only of acquiring consensus on single products every time, but above all of transforming them into lasting forms, i.e., a patrimony of credibility, which they must continue to maintain in the future, beyond the definite form in which the goods present themselves now.

We propose here an interpretation which, together with the field component referring to producers and what they manage, accentuates the relational dimension with respect to the users of goods, both produced and producible by the field. Users are well-known to have a relatively autonomous ability a) both *not* to use the goods produced by the field, but also to give their use a meaning and function defined by themselves and valid for them; b) to combine partial uses and meanings in composite and original forms; and c) to act on several fields at the same time, even though field managers believe that those same fields are incompatible.

In this way, the polytheism of values is understood in a strong sense, not simply as a sacrifice at times made “to Aphrodite and at other times to Apollo” [Weber (1919) 1946, 148], but in the belief that: “something can be sacred not only in spite of its not being beautiful, but rather because and in so far as it is not beautiful” [Weber (1919) 1946, 147-148].

This is the eternal post-modern struggle, based on symbols, in which the true prizes are symbols, their construction and their use.

Control of the symbolic market has become a key sector for collective entities which already exercise a definite symbolic power, like the religious field, and which must face two partly autonomous, conflicting systems. One derives from the users of their products, and the other from collective entities located in other fields, but for whom the production of symbols becomes an essential part of the product they offer.

The Embarrassment of the Bishops

An example of how the symbolic power enjoyed by the religious field can be reduced to a critical state is illustrated by Bourdieu [(1994) 1998, 112 ff.] in “The Laughter of Bishops.” It deals with the move from the religious symbolic field to the economic one, performed by social actors who participate in both. In the specific case, these actors were sacristans, who inverted the criteria of relevance and considered their relation as located between the interpretative codes of the economic field (in their case, subordinate work) without at the same time refusing to participate, albeit subordinately, in the management of symbolic goods.

The bishops’ surprise lay in their seeing themselves transposed to a relation proper to the economic field (by means of a move which annulled their symbolic capital inasmuch as they were producers in the religious field) and assigned new powers to the group which had initiated the conflict.

The inconvenient, unthinking and unthinkable position in which the bishops found themselves was that, in their view, they were called upon to compare themselves in a relation belonging to the economic field; their embarrassment could not be resolved without a laugh of complacency, which recalled the symbolic capital they possessed, which should have remained their only valid capital, supplying interpretative contents, and which yet contained knowledge which legitimated (or should have legitimated) the existence of a hierarchical order among fields subordinate to the religious field [see Dianteill 2008, 13 ff.; Rey 2007]

These worrying effects occur when there is no longer consensus on the religious field.

This situation may represent the initial moment of a process which is fulfilled later, when exponents of the economic field claim their legitimate use of religious symbols and state the already existing supremacy of the economic goods they produce, according to the consensus they obtain from users.

Struggles for Hegemony

Conflicts and negotiations among several subjects now arise, expressed in a particular form of communication – marketing – understood as an action aiming at proposing meanings which are located in a perceptible, exploitable horizon by consumers, according to the canons and criteria of their daily lives and which open up to them the possibility of experience and action.

In this sense, on one hand a brand is an intangible asset, collocated in the horizon of experienced meanings. On the other, it contains an invitation to action, so

that the use of goods offered by producers is transformed into meanings, in a circular fashion by consumers.

We thus propose some lines of an economy of symbolic goods which is valid for both the religious and economic fields. This model recognizes spaces of con-creation with the users of those products, and obliges producers to create a symbolic surplus, continually updated in order to maintain their hegemony. At this point hegemony, and the struggle for it which emerges, is the most interesting aspect of the phenomenon of advertisements which exploit religious symbols. We give some examples below.

Points of Contact

The “From marketing to religion” movement shows how the world of enterprise and consumption is working to appropriate to itself contents of religious type, constituting a secular variable which intersects the religious one and sometimes overlaps with it [Potel 1981; Montieri 2003; Guizzardi 2007; Nardella 2012].

The contents of advertisements vary according to marketing sector and the particular medium, but they generally have one basic characteristic in common: the use of metaphor, in which the religious code functions as a transpositional factor. This use does not usually create conflict, but it does occur, in the simplest case, when the metaphor has only one transposed factor, leaving the context unaltered. Thus, the advertised product remains collocated in its secular space and does not exceed the territorial boundaries which the religious field considers to be its own.

Here are some examples: *Grown in Paradise*, describing the pure, unachievable quality of a food product; *Eternity*, suggesting the perpetual life of the (desired) effect of a seductive perfume; *I believe in them*, indicating confidence in a financial consulting firm; *Purify yourself, daughter, purify yourself*, referring to the beneficial effect of a laxative, through the image of a monk listening to the confession of an attractive but chaste young woman; *There are some temptations you can't resist*: referring to a family holiday in a tourist village.

Conflicts occur at the contact points, and involve the reactions of the religious field to “invasion” of its own symbolic sector. The “lines of resistance” offered by the religious field, whether successful or not, symptomatically represent both semantic shifts and the change of the power of control over one’s own field of meanings, which religious institutions are able to exert against a growing hegemony of commercial values regarding religious symbols and meanings.

We present these conflicts briefly below. In order to maintain a single macro-social context, all the cases described below refer to the current situation in Italy.

a. Religious Opposition and Negotiation by Those in Subordinate Positions

The Bologna Motor Show is Italy's largest international exhibition. One of the two main ads of the 28th edition (December 2003) shows the shiny exhaust pipes of a motorbike arranged like organ pipes (Figure 1). The other ad shows an engine's sparking plugs transformed into church chandeliers. The ambivalence of these images is emphasized by the slogan "Your place of worship," indicating how messages should be interpreted.¹

The interference between the fields of ads and religion was created by the metaphor underlying the message: the show is a church, or rather – in view of the importance of the exhibition – a cathedral, and the activity taking place in it is a *cult*, *worship*.

No-one was surprised when the vice-bishop of Bologna denounced this conflict, interpreting it as a public invasion of, in this case, a symbolic field: "The Christian religion is derided, one cannot use theological language to advertise engines."²

The word *cult* appeared to be the key symbolic concept triggering this manifest conflict, since the bishop identified "cult" with "religious cult" and interpreted the aim of the ad both as the intrusion of profane objects into a sacred space, i.e., unwarranted contamination, and as a profanation, because the message was understood as a shift of the sacred into the secular field: "One cannot set an organ, a symbol of the Christian cult of God, in the midst of stinking exhaust gases,"³ and "The advertisers are being sacrilegious towards the church."⁴

The manifest object of the struggle was *cult* which, however, indicates a deeper object, the value attributed to consumerism: "We cannot let young people 'adore' luxury sports cars and engines in general," said the bishop, and added: "They already 'adore' them too much."⁵

¹ The advertising campaign also comprised a short television commercial and a radio message. In the television commercial, the ambivalence of organ versus exhaust pipes was stressed, since the action took place in a cathedral in deep shadow, accompanied first by the sound of the organ and then the roar of a motorbike, metamorphosing into *organ = exhaust pipes*. In the radio message, a jokey motto was constructed round the ambivalence, not of any sexual sin confessed to a priest (as one might have thought), but of a police fine for speeding.

² *La Repubblica*, Bologna edition, December 2, 2003. The protest began with the bishop being interviewed by the staff of a local radio station.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ *Il Resto del Carlino*, Bologna edition, December 2 2003.



FIG. 1. Bologna Motor Show, 2003

Source: <http://www.motorshow.it/>

This admission reveals not only the church's weakness but above all the existence of another sacred space, that of "engines:" an autonomous space which, like religious space, does not admit of intrusion. In this way, the latent message, much stronger than the manifest one, and the related conflict, did not lie in the word *cult*

but in *place* – not simply Bologna, the actual place where the Motor Show took place, but public productive space. Thus, there was another sacred space (that of economic activity) which was not only distinct from religious space, but hierarchically superior to it. The space of productive goods, from which religion is of course excluded, thus gave rise to a complex space of symbolic goods, in which both religion and the economy appeared.

Their respective strengths were measured on their capacity to produce interpretations, symbolic goals, life-styles which have popular results, which mobilize consumers, arouse emotions, and provoke sharing. The convincing response of the ad firm was a picture of the enormous crowds who came to the show (see Figure 2) and its invitation to the bishop: “Monsignor, come and see for yourself [the crowd we attracted] and their passion for the world of engines.”⁵



FIG. 2. Huge crowd at the Motor Show, Bologna, 2003

Source: <http://www.panorama-auto.it/>

Decrypted, this means: “Our intrusion is explained by our strength, on one hand structural and economic and, on the other... well, see how many people have come!” and “There are no sacred spaces which cannot be invaded, the rules of the symbolic market are the same for the two fields, religious and advertising.” The confrontation had begun: the test of reciprocal strength lay in the crowds which the Motor Show had managed to gather.

⁵ *La Repubblica*, Bologna edition, December 2 2003. The radio message expanded the ambivalence of the word *passion*, linking it with the semantic field of *sin*.

The key message, therefore, did not lie in *cult*, a reference uniting both fields in question, but in *place*, understood as both objective and symbolic space (the Show versus the cathedral), focused on the identifier *your*: “The place where you belong is economic space, crowded and obviously passionately shared; not the other space, religious, discreet, solitary, and notoriously much less popular.”⁶

The upshot was that the bishop did not continue his comparison, and negotiation took place by means of a discreet slackening in advertising pressure: those who wanted to see what the problem was were deflected by subtle changes made to the Show’s internet site. However, this type of “religious” advertising was not repeated in later editions of the Motor Show.

b. Implicit and Self-Censored Religious Opposition

Our next example concerns the fashion house Girbaud, during the spring-summer advertising campaign of 2005.

A version of Leonardo’s “Last Supper” was presented in which the original context, spaces, attitudes and feelings were preserved, but a complex series of inversions was put in place (Figure 3).



FIG. 3. Marithé et François Girbaud, 2005

Source: <http://www.lacene.fr/>

⁶ The difference was more clear-cut in the television ad, but was abbreviated for the press version.

Together with the main inversion (elegantly dressed women in the place of men), there were also others: for instance, one of the characters, instead of facing the spectator, is viewed from behind, is naked, and is a man. This figure indicates the interpretative code hidden in the message: “The Last Supper” as interpreted by Dan Brown in his bestseller “The da Vinci Code.” In the book, the person sitting next to Christ is clearly visible, but his true identity is concealed (he is not the apostle John, but a woman, Mary Magdalen). In the Girbaud version, although the figure’s face is not revealed and thus conceals its identity, it does clearly express its secret: this person is not a woman, like all the other people present; this is a man.

This ad had been planned to appear on enormous boarding, but was never seen in Italy, being censured by IAP (the Italian advertising regulation authority). But what, and where, was the reason for the conflict, which threatened to be so severe that it was never even allowed to arise? The official reasons given by IAP was that, in itself, the picture “inevitably recalls the foundations of the Christian creed. Such a representation cannot be used, but it has been turned into a parody for commercial purposes, thus offending the religious convictions of at least some members of the population.”⁷

In fact, the reasons went deeper. This ad did contain a true case of desecration. Because of the unaltered context of the painting, which depicts the celebration of the Eucharist, and the complex series of inversions (both due to difference and to opposition) which appear in it, the central figure is not simply a “Christ-woman” (inversion due to difference) but an “Anti-Christ/person” (inversion due to radical opposition). The picture thus finished up by representing a holy mass celebrated by the Anti-Christ.

This ad did not merely represent an invasion of the religious field by means of the offensive use of religious symbols in marketing; however, it was a latent message of opposition to the religious field, and thus encroached on religious ground. In this case, the importance of the religious field, its inviolability, and not so much its boundaries as its meanings, were acknowledged by the economic field, or rather by its intellectuals (the advertisers).⁸

More recently, in January 2011, a similar case arose, highlighting the factor relative to the context. This was the picture of a crucifix by the stylist Carlo Chionna, a textile and fashion entrepreneur. The image (Figure 4) can immediately be interpreted, since it displays Christian religious iconography, and the slogan, clearly under-

⁷ Ansa.it, 7:05 am, February 4, 2005. One example of the positions adopted by the IAP appears in Termine [2007].

⁸ The complex law suits filed by the French bishops has been analyzed by Gianfreda [2012, 111 ff.].

standable to any average religious person, shows the transposition from the religious to the economic field. Instead of the words of Christ on the cross: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do,” the ad read: “... for they know not what they wear.”



FIG. 4. Carlo Chionna, 2011

Source: <http://bologna.repubblica.it>

Protests came from mid-level authoritative sources in both Milan and Florence⁹ (as in the case of the Motor Show, indicating the circumspection used in public space by the religious field in triggering protest).¹⁰ The clothing company replied by repeating the already identified pattern: transposition of the sector of relevance. It is a commercial company and generally appeals to defense of products Made in Italy “[...] one of the most precious things we have, which provides work for many people.” In particular, it protects the company “which, for over 45 years, has seen four hundred workers devoting their best efforts to their job.”¹¹

⁹ A canon of the cathedral, professor at the Theological Faculty in Milan and the director of the Office for Pastoral Works in Florence.

¹⁰ For the institutional differentiation in the practice of the religious field [Bourdieu, De Saint-Martin 1982].

¹¹ *La Repubblica*, Bologna edition, January 12, 2011.

The outcome of the complaints from the religious community differed according to the context in which the ad appeared. In Milan, it was highly visible in the city center, as in the Girbaud case, directed towards the population in general. The IAP censured it as “offensive to the religious convictions of the people,” thus acknowledging that persistent hegemony in the religious field existed on its symbols.

In Florence, the ad was placed near the entrance to the famous fashion show-place Pitti Uomo, where it remained, in spite of protests from religious institutions. As in the case of the Bologna Motor Show, economic pressure prevailed over religious sentiments, when the place of the struggle defined which interpretative code prevailed.¹²

c. Hegemonic incorporation of popular religious expressions

The third case describes an advertising campaign from a vehicle registration agency, Sermetra, in 2005-2006. Five texts appeared in daily papers and magazines, and on television and radio. The recurring themes were compulsory vehicle registration, in all its bureaucratic complexity; the need for help in emergencies; and the emergency services offered by the agency. The context was that of situations of great difficulty and/or danger, all resolved with a prayer for intercession to St. Sermetra, miraculous help arriving in the nick of time, and due thanks rendered by means of a votive offering.

The ad mentioned a non-existent saint, Sermetra, showing her icon in the form of a little card as a votive offering, with the sign of the “saint” (a steering wheel), indicating the sector of daily life of which she was patron (Figure 5), and presenting a simple, easy prayer which, in the radio version, was accompanied by a hymn-like tune.

The basic idea was derived from many drivers’ habit of keeping religious symbols, like the image of a saint, on car dashboards. Votive offerings are like the many small pictures in Catholic sanctuaries, and the psalmody of the prayer recalls the style of invocations commonly used in Catholic liturgy. Although this was a profane use of clearly religious symbols, no institutional conflicts with the religious field were recorded. Why did no requests for interdiction arise – for instance, something like “Don’t joke about sacred things?”

The explanation lies in the relationship of the official religion with popular religiosity, in the hegemony which the Catholic Church exerts (or believes it exerts) on

¹² For an overview of the French context see Saint-Martin [2006] and Cheyronnaud [2006]. Other cases of conflict have been analyzed by Mallia [2009].

manifestations of “popular piety.” In this case, a false saint was invoked, one occupying the place of St. Christopher in the official iconography, but the action was that of recourse to a definitely supernatural fount of aid, which the Catholic Church controls (or believes it controls). The actor is the well-known centuries-old figure of a “simple believer,” and the church knows its ambivalences and tolerates them undisguisedly.



FIG. 5. Sermetra, 2005

Source: <http://www.sermetra.it/>

The boundaries here had clearly been exceeded, but the request for aid was equally clearly real and probably capable of being accepted as in the Catholic spirit. This was a borderline situation, in which ambivalence remained and was even *de facto* tolerated. On one hand, the agency proposed a rational solution to common problems: “Turn to Sermetra (the agency, not the saint).” On the other hand, the religious field appeared to send an implicit message to popular religiosity: “For such simple but important matters, turn to *your* saints, but for really serious problems, come to *ours*.” This advertisement did not really question the hegemony of the religious field; in fact, in some ways it could strengthen it.

A similar instance occurred during the summer sports season in 2011. Protests against Sky Italia’s campaign “You want to see miracles? Watch Sky” (in Italian: “Solo su Sky lo sport fa miracoli”) signaled that the borderline had been exceeded. The campaign, composed of a series of short TV ads, was highly popular, and also appeared on large boarding and in the daily and weekly press, showing key images of the series as the sports season continued.

Its slogan illustrates our third case. The content was apparently the same: world-famous sports champions, from football to basketball and swimming, achieve miracles. The all-round visibility of this ad, far greater than that of Sermetra, explains the greater visibility and a certain greater “official-ness” of the complaints. The first to move was “*L’Avvenire*” (the daily newspaper of the Italian Episcopate), which began by publishing heart-felt letters from indignant readers and comments from the editor, and continued with protests from priests and lay people for about five weeks (July 12 to August 25). The difference with respect to Sermetra lay in the message and the system of relations involved.

The message was not “We at Sky do miracles too” – a simple metaphor remaining within its own sector of meaning (i.e., sports). The latent message was also: “We can do miracles too – like *yours*,” “We can do *your* miracles too.” Thus, we see the new Olympic swimming champion as if she were Moses, cleaving the waters (Figure 6); the basketball champion scores shot after shot with the same ease with which Christ multiplies the number of loaves and fishes; a popular football player rejuvenates an old lady; the statue of a famous football player is held on high in procession amid adoring crowds, like that of San Gennaro (St. Januarius), gleaming with blood/sweat. The outcome of this particular struggle was only that the last photo of the ad was deleted (Figure 7).

The interpretation we propose here is a refinement of the last type: the question at stake is still control over the religious product, related to the use and interpretations made by popular religiosity.

In the Sky case, unlike that of Sermetra, the popular dimension could not be assigned to a subordinate position. But popular consensus, that is, the mass consent enjoyed by Sky sports coverage, was too large with respect to consensus on products of the religious field. The “saints” at Sky clearly won over true religious saints. With one limitation: some saints and their miracles, like San Gennaro, still enjoy strong popular religious consensus and must thus be protected, so that, at least for the time being, the religious field manages to maintain its control over them and over the use of its symbols.



FIG. 6. Sky Italia, 2011

Source: <http://www.adeevee.com/>



FIG. 7. Sky Italia, 2011

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z6NKv-kQ5pg>

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The Eternal Struggle

Symbols, Religion, Marketing

Abstract: The eternal struggle that Max Weber wrote about reappears today, updated, in the conflict between religion and marketing concerning the use of symbols belonging to the religious field. Conflicts can arise when the religious field's hegemony is threatened. These are triggered by the religious field, when the semantic invasions of advertising are clearly visible in the public space and are therefore perceived as an open challenge. Ecclesiastical aggressiveness about the misappropriation of symbols is not always rewarding – in fact, it can end up showing that the religious field loses control over its own symbolic capital and that marketing increases its domination, even on the production of symbols. This article proposes a typology of relations between religion and advertising, by analyzing cases of conflicts, real or potential, recently raised in the Italian context. A key element is the consensus on the consumption of the goods produced, that both the religious field and economic field appear to have, think they have, or recognize that the opposing field has.

Keywords: Marketing; Religion; Symbols; Hegemony; Consensus.

Gustavo Guizzardi, sociologist, is Professor of Cultural Studies at the University of Padua, Italy. His research interests include religion, cultural change, and the study of mass communication. Some of his most notable work includes research on pluralism, changes in ethics, science and the media, and popular religiosity. On religion and advertising, he has directed a national project founded by the Italian Ministry of University and Research.