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Commercialization / commodification

As terms used in the economics of religion, commercialization and commodification denote a manifold but also very specific array of processes and strategies in religious markets. As general analytical terms they have been applied since the 1950s to industrialized economies and their developing consumer cultures. Intensified mass production, mediatization, and marketing have had great effects on religious organization. Branding plays a pivotal role in identity construction, overlapping with cultural, national, local or religious forms of belonging. Commodification is connected with a re-enchanting of modern life by ascribing meanings to products like the enhancement of self-realization or having blessing powers. Prosperity religions are one of several coping reactions to rapidly changing economic conditions. Marketing contributes to these changes with dynamics and a logic of its own. These issues are studied in terms of consumption research. Critiques of consumerism and counter-discourses are also a part of this discursive field.

Commercialization of religion sounds as if there were a genuinely non-commercialized form of religion. This impression is reinforced by public debates and discussions among religious experts which speak derogatively of the commercialization of religion, or even of “consumer religion” (Miller 2003). This concern is expressed with regard to a wide range of different religious subcultures, from traditional to New Age (Zaidman 2003). Here we will use the term as a key concept in the economics of religion, referring to a manifold, but also very specific array of processes and strategies in religious markets.

The commercialization and commodification of religion is not only a modern phenomenon. The Medieval Latin church, for instance, invented a franchise system for indulgences, a new product that shortened the time spent in purgatory. The pope established a parallel distribution structure involving newly licensed mendicant orders alongside the parochial structure. The resulting competition not only solved the principal-agent problem in respect of agents who were difficult to control when they were far away from Rome, but also maximized the profit for the principal (Schmidtchen/Mayer 1997). And yet commercialization, as part of the economization of modern life, has reached new dimensions in the industrialized and post-industrialized era. Consumer culture is regularly referred to in the debates, and is the focus of this entry. With regard to the difference between commercialization and commodification, the latter term tends to be used more for processes involving the distribution of goods, whereas commercialization is a more general term, if indeed there is a difference in their usage. The marketization of religion, another terminological option, has a slightly different and more limited use: the market as a place for producing, distributing and consuming products is an alternative societal coordination system, besides non-market symbolic exchanges, alliances, and habits, and besides the religious household production for its own consumption.

Re-enchanted identities?

As a part of material culture, religious commodities and performances mediate between consumers and the respective entities, worlds or values (McDannell 1995). As such they may be seen as a form of enchantment, giving attractivity and promises to products, and unlocking new sentiments and ways of self-realization. This process is part of the integral magic of modernity. But in this sense sales organizations may also be enchanted, like the North American direct sales corporation Amway, which promises the reintegration of work, family and politics through the creation of family businesses that interlink with bigger social networks (Bromley 1995). According to recent modernity theories, lifestyle and consumer habits are a primary source of social identification within the broader political economy (Cosgel/Minkler

2004). Think, for instance, of evangelical witness wear (Hendershot 2004). This process of developing an identity deeply alters the consumers' subjectivity in a popular consumer culture. But this alteration does not necessarily lead to social alienation (Kline 2007) among the consumers, nor should it be coopted by theology as the worship of consumer culture (deChant 2002). The expression "Divinity, Inc." has been coined to express the commodification of the "numinous essence of faith", as in the case of "proper" Muslim-ness (Comaroff/Comaroff 2009, 136). This presupposes the naturalization of cultural property as something given, and not as something negotiated. Identity constructions are the result of ethnic and national branding, intellectual property and cultural heritage discourses. Identity is transformed into property. In this context, there are plenty of cross connections with law (property law, commercial law, trademark law) which emerge in court proceedings and which affect the actions, claims, and organizational structure of religious institutions. We may think here for instance of the attempt by the Indian government to protect certain yoga positions as Indian cultural property, the US trademark of Iyengar Yoga, the changing of yogic self-representations from being a sport to being a religion (and a form of healthcare) after the introduction of a tax on "recreation, games and athletic events" in Missouri, US, or the battle of the chipmaker Intel against a gratuitous yoga program in schools named "Yoga inside" because it claimed that this violates the ingredient brand "Intel inside". Once recognized as property in a legal sense, that is as distinctive signs, religious symbols, practices, body postures, melodies, and wordings may also be subject to exclusion or restriction of use.

Prosperity religions

Correlating with the economic boom at the end of the 20th century, some East Asian countries in particular were characterized by the emergence of so-called prosperity religions. These are religious movements that are based on wealth, and which aim at increasing wealth, as much as at obtaining salvation. Prosperity religions combining spiritual symbolism with consumerism are mostly very innovative in their rituals, and often reflect a new national confidence. In Thailand, for example, one movement worships the spirit of a king, and more generally monarchy as such, while others venerate ascetic monks or bodhisattvas because of their supernatural powers (Jackson 1999). Practitioners use innovative combinations of elements, mixing prosperity rituals with luck-enhancing protective ritualism, and with Chinese or Thai Buddhist practices. This has been criticized by monks, intellectuals and politicians as 'commercialized Buddhism'. These commodified rituals retained their significance as a highly popular form of religious expression, even after the economic crash in the mid 1990s, and need to be seen in the context of Thai political economy. Popular religion, consumerism, movements outside the *shangha* hierarchy, temple-construction projects with merit-making donations, and new shrines are complex and intersecting phenomena of a commercialized religious market.

Commodification through branding

Marketing and availability are important supply-side factors that steer religious commodification to some degree (Morrow Long 2001). Sometimes religious populism may converge with marketized spirituality, especially when the mass media and non-institutionalized religious structures accompany the movements. Charismatic personalities, mighty places, or essences may be manufactured and circulated in an inflationary manner by the media, only to become deflated later with the death of the worshipped person or the passing of a fashion for certain tinctures.

Marketing and branding are essential processes within these multi-layered changes. The tools of economic market research can therefore be applied to the positioning of religious groups, their branding, mass production and distribution systems. Marketing works as a motor of commercialization and creates new esthetic, behavioral and social structures. The implicit

logic of growing market shares finds expression for instance in the need to megasize, as seen in the esthetics of oversized megachurches. Most often it is the marketing of goods that creates the religious value of products in the first place. A study of pilgrims at saints' tombs in Israel suggests that the mediation of the authenticity of the good through a retailer is important in the context of religious consumption, and that similarity of taste on the part of the retailer and the customer is a success factor for marketing in general, and for religious goods in particular (Zaidman/Lowengart 2001). Branding is a prerequisite in order to be heard in a saturated media environment. Branding and mediatization are related dynamics in this regard. Osteen's Lakewood Church, the protestant evangelical church courses called "40 Days of Purpose", or Neo-Kaballah are examples of exorbitantly successful "faith brands" (Einstein 2008). And Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ* was promoted by a famous spokesperson and a built-in audience. Even before the film was released, the potentially controversial theme was purposely presented by the producers as controversial. Marketing combines a product with services. In this sense, the commodification of religion includes services in the offered package. It is essential for the marketing relationship to take care of buyers, to bind them and to personalize the relation by suggesting applications or issuing a guarantee. This interaction creates loyalty and future demand. Consumers relate to some religious commodities in terms of entertainment and fun, the fan in terms of an affective alliance. An example of the interaction between producer and consumer is charismatic worship, where the consumer has a desire to encounter God, and the liturgical and musical worship apparatus creates an affective alliance in which this desire is met (Ward 2003). Some observe a connection between commodification and privatization. The Western reception of Taoism, Buddhism and Yoga is seen as a privatization of Asian wisdom (Carrette/King 2005). The context of this statement is the spiritual growth market, where spirituality becomes a signifier of personal development with transpersonal or humanistic psychology in the background.

Is there Specific Religious Consumption?

Much more attention should be paid to consumer behavior in order to evaluate the degree of commercialization within a religious production site, even though a lot of work has been done in this field, for example on the significance of purchasing the Bible, portraits of venerated persons, angels or amulets at specific times and places. In the identity-related consumption approach, there might be a dynamic of becoming dependent on consuming certain products to enforce one's social identity. The counterpart to this position stresses the power and thus the responsibility of the consumer and his consumer choice. Consumer goods substantiate categories and values around which the cultural world is organized. Current research has discussed the issue of how different users perceive religious goods, and what makes the products religious (Zaidman 2003). For some New Agers, for example, it is the effect of calmness and peacefulness. It would be important to study in more depth the similarities and divergences between secular cultural consumption and religious consumption. People tend to be more selective in the sphere of religious consumption than they are with regard to cultural consumption (Baker/Park 2007). But multimillion-dollar sales are made from the consumption of religious goods and not from the consumption of religious services. The buying breadth in respect of religious products and the amount of money spent is wider among young Americans. Secular consumption might be a trigger for increasing religious commodification, and creating larger production ranges, insofar as the purpose of consumption varies greatly: *halal* food may be purchased for reasons of animal protection, or to preserve health, or for other reasons. Religious consumption is also gendered, just like other secular sectors of consumption. It can be observed that more religious goods are bought by females, which fits in with their conservative household role as purchasers. A significant nonconsumption of religious goods might correlate with religiously motivated anti-

consumerism. Another strand of research is on intertemporal choice and risk evaluation. A consumer good is called an investment good if it can be consumed several times, or if it provides a greater benefit when saved up for future consumption. People often discount utility over time. The preference rate here indicates the size of the retarded pay-off that is expected by renouncing consumption in the present. This is illustrated by apocalyptic movements (Alles 2004). The *eschaton* as an investment good may explain the value and decrease in value of definite and indefinite end-time pay-offs better than the concept of inferior or substitutive goods from neo-classical economics.

Critics and counter-discourses

The commercialization of religion has also prompted harsh critique and counter-discourses. Counter-discourses to commercialization can be seen in the organizations and debates connected with fair trade, ethical consumption, corporate social responsibility, ecofeminism, salvation theology, and the anti-globalization movement, some of them in the tradition of Frankfurt School theories of culture industry versus resistance theories of the left. Critique of commercialization is regularly expressed by religious experts, conservative culture theorists, or democratic politicians, depending on whether this religious marketization takes place in elitist or popular, rural or urban religious milieus. Scholars sometimes consider the difference between doctrinal religious texts and commodified religious symbols as deviance. Commercialization processes in Wicca, for example, are criticized because of the underlying individualistic consumerist ideology, which is said to be incompatible with Wicca's "Romanticist counter-modernity" (Waldron 2005). Others criticize the fact that neo-liberal corporationalism and consumerism smooth out any resistance to capitalist ideologies by using the popular notion of spirituality. This "silent takeover" of religion is said to happen in the dimension of a cultural shift (Carrette and King 2005). They aim to reconquer 'spirituality' to mean social engagement and ethical responsibility. Thus, types of religion are characterized by their attitude towards capitalism: anti-capitalistic spiritual groups (engaged Buddhism, social gospel movement); business ethics or reform-spirituality which look for profit but in an ethically constrained market; individual and consumerist spirituality aimed at prosperity (televangelism). Some refer to the immediatization of wish-fulfillment that comes with the habit of consuming religion in the form of commodities. They say that short-term desires prevail over religious traditions and facilitate their misuse by political forces. A good example of the possibility of de-contextualization of commodities is the way Gregorian Chant became popular through the secular music of a pop group at the beginning of the 1990s. Thus, such things happen all the time. Religious systems assimilate symbols from other domains and vice versa. Intensified commodification and mass-mediatised goods create a hybrid and rapid dynamic in the overlapping religious and cultural markets.

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