

THE SACRED IN CONTEMPORARY ADVERTISING

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Abstract: As part of the contemporary media culture, advertising constantly mediates the relationship between the institutional dimension of religion (namely the church) and the community, given the specific position of the Catholic religion: transparent, based on dialogue and the continuous questioning of the relationship between man and divinity. To manage their presence in public life, the church constantly approaches new media and specific forms of communication (posters, street banners and meshes, websites or interactive mobile structures).

Keywords: advertising, poster, media, church, sacred, culture, contemporary

The relation between the sacred and the advertising dimension of the contemporary visual culture calls into question the presence of church in the daily life of a society which is becoming more and more pragmatic, and also questions the relations of power between different contemporary institutions of the consumer society, on the territory of the media forms and the specific communication structures.

On the one hand, we have *commercial advertising* that uses sacred iconography, such as themes taken from Christian imagery, symbols and attitudes introduced in ads and resignified within the contemporary visual culture, often with a critical discourse, ironically, almost irreverent. On the other hand, there are consistent forms of *informational advertising* for the church as an institution, which is, in fact, a connection of the church to the realities of daily living, and to the real need of dealing with the contemporary media, while considering the institutional dependence/addiction to the community support or local administration, and the unprecedented development of media.

The commercial advertising consistently abuses of the appeal to religious iconography, without the insight due to the respect for profound spiritual Christian values. The Last Supper, the Crucifixion, the Descent from the Cross, and the Ascension are often - for advertising, only imaging resources for the convergence and success of a commercial message. That is also why, considering the lack of relevant benchmarks to satisfy the preliminary selection, we will avoid discussing about the vast majority of ads on the market. Yet, we will rather focus on several examples from the latest

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years on the international advertising scene, covering both the advertising forms where the religious icons are imported, and the advertising for the religious institutions themselves.

For example, the Pietà becomes a referential solution of a Czech advertisement, urging moderation in alcohol consumption, while actually advertising a brand of tequila (fig. 1). The resignification process works to the detriment of the tragism or dramatism of the referential theme, prompting - at most - the alcohol consumers' interest for latish Biblical readings. Unlike Oliviero Toscani's "Pieta", which is an appropriation of a newspaper image, retouched, resignified and used as an ad, the current approach features a staged photography (as most of the samples we are discussing in this article), where the composition, the chromatics or the visual treatment follow the advertiser's goal. The ad features in the bottom-right corner the message "Please drink responsibly this Easter", bringing together the key words of the ad: "drink" and "Easter," thus revealing itself as an alcoholic drink ad. Although the irreverence toward an iconic concept of Christianity is obvious, it also serves as key mechanism in attaining success as publicity campaign, converting the cultural capital in advertising value.



Fig. 1. "THE PIETA" ad for Olmeca Tequila, by Mark BBDO Prague, Czech, 2005

In a similar case, the Last Supper is just a pretext to the metaphor of the plot, the game and twists, in an advertisement for a website dedicated to online games in Ireland (fig. 2). The Irish advertising agency used Leonardo da Vinci's masterpiece of the Biblical "Last Supper", picturing Jesus gambling with the other apostles. After displaying the ad in public billboards

and buses around Ireland, due to the complaints to the Advertising Standards Authority (Ireland), the "Last Supper" ads were removed. As a result, PaddyPower replaced them with white posters with a red censorship square, including a reference to the web site¹.



Fig. 2. "The Last Supper", ad by Cawley Nea\TBWA, Ireland, 2005

In the works of the advertising campaign for "Kopenhagen Classic Egg. Easter more sacred." in 2012, produced by RAI Brazilian advertising agency of São Paulo, the very specific aspects of Christian religious practice (pious attitude, angelic gaze, gesture of blessing) are simply converted into commercial pathos, promoting a seasonal product, namely Easter chocolate eggs (fig. 3). The referentiality level is visually sustained through the Baroque pictorial treatment applied to images (chiaroscuro, specific chromatics), with the discreet placement of the logo and the related product packaging.



Fig. 3. "Kopenhagen Classic Egg. Easter more sacred." ads by RAI, Brazil, 2012

¹ Finfacts Team, "Paddy Power pulls "Last Supper" ad as it hits jackpot bonanza on its publicity bet", Oct 5, 2005, in Finfacts Ireland (accessed 3/7/2016) http://www.finfacts.ie/irelandbusinessnews/publish/article_10003528.shtml

A similar visual treatment example is found in works created for Church End Brewery suggestively named "Vicar Phil, Reverend Lee, and Father Gary", made in 2012 by the British advertising agency Rees Bradley Hepburn (fig. 4). The campaign consists of three posters for a British pub whose name includes the term "church" ("Church End..."). Relying on a playful and ironic approach, the advertisers illustrated in various dramatic poses the main bar clientele, metamorphosed in church-like figures, announcing the end of the world with dramatic eyes and with the message "World's end: It's time to wash away your sins." as an obvious urge for consuming the brewery's main product. The sinister figures with tattooed arms and aggressive facial expressions are portrayed frontally, with a confessional light and a visual treatment emphasizing the visual pictorial construction, holding a glass of beer whose foam symbolically substitutes the white collar representative for the Catholic Church. The suggestion is obvious, and the campaign approach is completed with the détournement of the apocalyptic & religious message, and its conversion into advertising suggestion.



Fig. 4. "Vicar Phil", "Reverend Lee", "Father Gary" ads for Church End Brewery, by Rees Bradley Hepburn, UK, 2012

The use of religious imagery as advertising mechanism is evident in the campaign created in Brazil by the advertising agency Yeah! Brazil in December 2009, called Lexical English School: John, Keith, Elvis, with the message "Rock is Religion. Speak the language of Gods" (fig. 5). The posters are dedicated to a centre for the study of English and are intended to be interpreted in a contemporary uninhibited, ironic and irreverent reading, relying on the imagery and pop culture attitude, which consistently appeals to semantic hijackings or referential iconic substitutions. In this case, under the appearance of religious paintings and the visual construction of stained glass, three rock stars are represented as biblical figures with proper aura, colours, gestures and attitudes.



Fig. 5. "Rock is Religion. Speak the language of Gods" ads for Lexical English School, by Yeah! Brazil, Brazil, 2009

The advertising irreverence is the result of the discrepancy between the sacredness of the theme and the specific representation, subject of the religious painters' rules and - comparatively - the trivial worldly prestige enjoyed by the media stars of the entertainment industry today. Showing the regretted John Lennon, Elvis Presley, or Keith Richard (pictured along with his ever-present cigarette), the three ads in the series point - with an ironic, relaxed, and uninhibited key - at the relationship in the modern society between a religious culture that constantly becomes more laic, while attempting to approach the public community, and the mediatic sacralization of the consumer figures in the entertainment industry.

The advertising mechanism equally works beyond the limits of irreverence, entering the territory of constant sabotage of the taboo subjects, emphasizing the discrepancies in contemporary society. Sexuality, temptation, fidelity, sin, recurring themes in religious narrations, are becoming prolific subjects in contemporary advertising constructions, projecting qualities of the concerned goods or denoting desirable attitudes and behavioural formulas of the public.

The two ads of 2010 advertising series for Antonio Federici ice cream are an eloquent example of the sensible game played by the advertising with the contemporary society's perceptions on the church's habits (fig. 6). Considering the acceptance of homosexual relationships by some of the Catholic churches, and the relaxation of public perception towards the needs of Christian morality upon the modern society, the three posters are illustrating church characters in scenes with an obvious erotic touch, a combination willing to provoke and outrage the public, from the very first view. If, in this case, the success of the advertising campaign is undeniable (the brand, doubled by packaging, showing currently in posters, accompanied by textual "sinful" impulse, acquired notoriety in the campaign), the constructive solutions show - on one hand - the unscrupulous position of the

contemporary commercial advertising against the traditional values of church, and on the other hand – points a critical/ironic finger at the false chastity and hypocrisy of church administrative structures and their lack of social transparency.



Fig. 6. "Ice Cream is our religion" ads for Antonio Federici ice cream, by Contrast Creative, UK, 2010

Built around the slogan "Ice Cream is our religion," the ads are twisting the sense of the main textual message - "We Believe In Salivation" and "Immaculately Conceived" - in order to borrow the cultural semantics of the Christian concepts and convert them into advertising capital. Thus, "salvation" becomes "salivation," changing the religious message of the image of two priests almost kissing, to follow the "sinful" attribute of the product that urges to temptation. Or, to emphasize the quality and purity of the product, it is associated with an ecstatic pregnant nun image, supporting the idea of "immaculate conception." The creative mechanism here appeals to both association and paradox, appropriating religious concepts, yet constantly interpreting them in a consumer key: the two priests are black and white to support the temptation/innocence idea, the nun is pregnant, yet immaculate.

The informational advertising is the advertising whose object is not the commercial product, but an idea, a concept, an attitude. In such a category we can find the specific advertising of institutions, events, and opinion trends.

The result of a social initiative of The United Church of Canada, WonderCafe is a Canadian public discussion community on moral, spiritual and social development topics², whose advertising campaign reaches, in this

² The community website was closed after several years of activity. <http://www.wondercafe.ca/>

case, the issue of integrating themes, motifs and religious elements in advertising media constructions. The posters campaign from 2012 (fig. 7) consists of a series of images associated with a textual message, images that raise a question at the very first view: the dispute over the interpretation of biblical texts (picturing a Bible bookmarked with appropriately coloured signs, coupled with recognizable sequence of checkable options of the Internet forms), the lack of precision of a Christian Christmas message (a Santa Claus - character created by the media of the last decades - substituted with the image of Christ, a strong reminder over the commercialization of the religious holidays) or irresponsibility associated to drugs consumption (the image of a cross made from two hand-crafted cigarettes, popular among marijuana smokers). These pictures are accompanied, in the related text boxes, by a message that challenges the reader's position and invites them to public debates for the correct knowledge of those themes.



Fig. 7. Ads for WonderCafe, by Smith Roberts Creative Communications, Canada, 2012

However, the commercials made for Norval United Church: "Convict", "Nudists", and "Russian" by the Canadian agency Smith Roberts Creative Communications in November 2009, with the message "We're just glad you could make it. Norval United Church. Our Doors Are Open." are an eloquent example of the church's appropriation of the contemporary communicative formulas, while understanding and accepting the media mechanism and its benefits (fig. 8). Designed to attract supporters in the church, the series of ads depicts people with a special social status, whose condition, interests, hobbies or attitude involve a presumptive exclusion among parishioners, considering their possible inconsistencies with the Christian moral values traditionally associated with the church.

The refreshing message is actually created in terms of tolerance and generosity, permissiveness and openness to people and community, with the church voicing its position of acceptance of individual freedoms, which are

specific to the contemporary society (ethnic or sexual), the diverted or erroneous behaviours (the handcuffed prisoner) or the niche sports pursuit (the hockey player).



Fig. 8. "Convict", "Nudists", "Russian" ads for Norval United Church, by Smith Roberts Creative Communications, Canada, 2009

The three posters of the campaign depict scenes from the church where, among the audience captivated by the Pastor's message, a couple of nudists appear - obviously naked - either a fugitive in specific convict clothes with handcuffs, or a player in specific hockey equipment. The discordance note between the decently dressed parishioners and the three characters of the series of ads is solved by the textual specification that reveals the position of the church, the openness and tolerance for those who may feel excluded from the Christian life because of their pursuit: "We're just glad you could make it. Norval United Church. Our Doors Are Open."

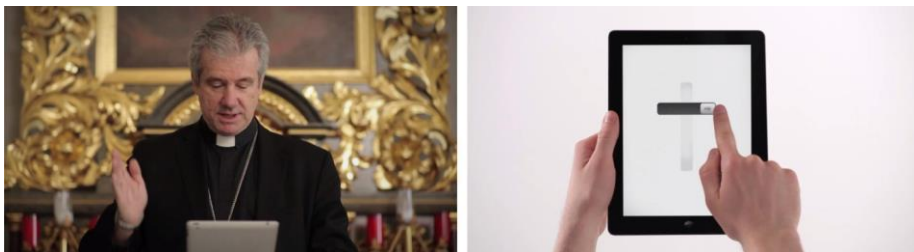


Fig. 9. "You have our blessing" commercial for Catholic Church of Montreal, by DentsuBos, Canada, 2013³

³ Catholic Church of Montreal, " A blessing from God on the Internet", published in April 18, 2013 in DioceseMontreal.org, (accessed 3/7/2016) <http://diocesemontreal.org/en/news/latest-news---en/reader/items/a-blessing-from-god-on-the-internet.html>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MZOLi7KqCD0>

Perhaps there is nothing more conclusive about church contemporary media quest than the advertisement of an application for iPads, meant to draw attention to an event of the Catholic Church in Montreal (fig. 9). Starting from the gestures associated with the informatics behaviour dedicated to computer screens sensitive to touch, especially from the left-right unlock movements so popular among Apple platform users, the agency DentsuBos created a digital surrogate of the Christian blessing: the advertisement depicts a representative of the church who uses the iPad application during the church service. The digital substitution of the church-like gesture, if only on advertising basis, no longer has the critical or ironic dimension of the campaigns in commercial advertising, but reverentially subscribes to the values of the Canadian Catholic Church who sees it as a way of approaching the technologized contemporary society and exploiting new communication media.

As a conclusion, in the contemporary society, the sacred is secularized, as reflected in advertising: ironic, critical and often disrespectful to church, the advertising creates new social identities and cultural behaviours as regards contemporary media and forms of communication, based on interactivity, user-generated content, or the critical or participative attitudes. In terms of redefining or even reinventing the church's position in the context of profound cultural changes, the advertising mediates the relationship between the church, as the institutional dimension of religion, and the community, considering the cultural relaxation, and the proliferation of the freedom of expression that allow a constructive and unconditioned dialogue between religion and the contemporary society.

We are also witnessing to the Christian iconography's contribution to settling a contemporary visual cultural heritage. The discursive advertising function associated with these iconic images does nothing but enrich the meanings and amplify the referential semantics range specific to culture media forms. Reinterpreted, resignified, or repositioned, the daily sacred valences thus becoming a part of contemporary media culture.

List and sources of illustration:

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