

The Secularization of Religion and Television Commercials in the U.S: An Update

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Abstract

Findings from an updated project, a content analysis of 1499 television commercials, show that religious symbolism featured by television advertisers, while still slight, is on the rise. Fifty-one out of 1499 commercials viewed contained religious or spiritual content. As discussed in the paper, this continuing trend can be interpreted in various ways. Cross-cultural analysis is recommended for future studies.

Introduction

In 1998, content analysis of 797 commercials offered a partial answer to the question "Do television advertisers use religious symbolism to sell goods and services?" The conclusion then was that it was "very uncommon, only 16 out of 797 commercials sampled had religious or spiritualistic content" (Maguire & Weatherby, 1998: 177). This current study seeks to determine if the answer to that question has changed. Is it still uncommon for television advertisers to use religious symbolism to sell goods and services? If this trend has changed, how has it changed and why?

Secularization Theory Revisited

Secularization theory proposes that our society is becoming increasingly rational and scientific, hence it is distancing itself from a community based on religious beliefs and values. Stark and Iannaccone (1994), Stark and McCann (1993), and others maintain that secularization is falsely credited with the so-called downfall of religious influence. To the contrary, they argue that religion is enjoying an upturn in recent times. One way to test this assumption is to focus on one "slice" of everyday life. Television commercials afford that opportunity in a quantifiable medium. Similar to the original study (Maguire & Weatherby, 1998), the answers to two questions will be pursued: 1.) To what extent is religious symbolism used to sell products on television?; 2.) If religion is indeed used rarely, is it because advertisers avoid the possible offense of mixing the sacred with the profane, or do they simply feel that religion fails to sell products?

Literature Review

A review of the literature from 1986 to the present reveals that more attention is being paid to the subject of television commercials and religion. Four distinct themes emerge: the use of television commercials to advertise church services, careful use of religious symbolism by the secular press for the purpose of marketing products, advertising within the Muslim community, and an ongoing dialogue about religion and values.

While there is a tradition of disseminating religious doctrine using the airwaves, some congregations have begun to use television to advertise their specific church services, in the hopes of raising attendance. As reported by Laura Bird for the Wall Street Journal, the Episcopal church hired the advertising agency of D'Arcy Masius Benton & Bowles to create television advertisements designed "to woo back lapsed Episcopalians" (Bird, 1993). These advertisements were researched and specifically designed to appeal to women who might return to church and bring their families and were paid for by local congregations. In Edmonton, Alberta, two Victory Church congregations hired Impact Productions, a company that has

“worked with about 3,000 churches, 200 of them in Canada” to run ads for their church services. As Pastor Morris Watson noted, “It’s not wrong for a church to advertise on TV” (Yu, 1999).

The second theme centers around concerns the advertising industry has about alienating certain audiences. In an article in the San Francisco Chronicle, the major networks of ABC and NBC declined to run an advertisement promoting the United Church of Christ. The advertisement portrayed several ethnic minorities and announced that “no matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.” The two networks decided that the ad “violated their policy of airing commercials on hot button topics” (Winn, 2004). An article in the New York Times chronicled the struggle the Disney Company has had as they attempted to market their version of the film The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe. The struggle centered on an attempt to strike a balance “which includes aggressively courting Christian fans who can relate to the story’s biblical allegory while trying not to disaffect secular fans” (Leeds, 2005). And in a commentary in the New York Times, Frank Rich suggests that television advertisers and others are finding themselves in a position “to practice self-censorship...lest they arouse fundamentalist rancor” (Rich, 2005:2.1).

Two recent studies looked at the subject of religion and advertising as they relate to Muslim audiences. In the first study, 508 commercials shown on Egyptian television before and during Ramadan week were viewed and evaluated. This study concluded that there were “fewer ads during Ramadan, more emphasis on charity messages during Ramadan, and more conservatively dressed characters in ads during Ramadan” (Keenan & Yeni, 2003:109). In the second study, students from the University of Bahrain, ages 19-30, were surveyed and asked to respond to questions about their reactions to television commercials. This study concluded that their hypothesis “that TV commercials containing perceived contentious elements will achieve lower recall scores and generate less favorable attitudes than those regarded as inoffensive” was demonstrated (Michell & Al-Mossawi, 1999:427-428). A limited survey of American Muslims concurs with these findings (Weatherby, 2008).

A final theme considers the impact that television commercials have on religion and values. Peg Slinger identifies television “as the most important source of images available to humankind today” and further suggests that “analyzing commercials is one way to get at the values and beliefs of the society in which they are broadcast” (Slinger, 1986: 29-30). She looks at the powerful environmental influence commercials have on people and concludes with a warning to become “more conscious, reflective and critical” as a response to that influence. James Martin echoes this warning in his article, *Contemplation in Action*, by referring to Thomas Merton’s caution, as stated in Merton’s 1955 book, No Man is an Island, about television’s negative impact on the interior life. Martin notes that “spirituality is big business these days” and suggests that advertisers are using spiritual symbolism and doing “an exceptionally good job of making the important trivial” (Martin, 1995). One such example of advertising being used for specific moral purposes is the use of “hundreds of ads in dozens of newspapers and magazines, on the radio, and on TV” by the project Faith in America (www.faithinamerica.com) in an attempt to combat attitudes of intolerance against the gay community (Graham, 2006:38).

Within each of these themes emerging from the recent literature, it seems apparent that religion continues to sit on the highest possible plane. Those using it to promote even the most sterling ideals must proceed with caution, and use great care not to exploit the Mertonian vision of a higher life involving the value of faith. The great danger in its misuse is that consumers may be *less* likely to buy the products with which it is associated.

Data and Methods

The data highlighted in this study were gathered in July of 2005. A sample of television commercials was drawn with respect to four considerations: (1) day of the week; (2) network affiliation; (3) time of the day or evening; and (4) coupling of date and network. Brief elaboration of these points is required.

The sample consisted of eight days (and evenings), four during the week and four on the weekend. Sample dates began on July 6 (Wednesday) and included July 7 (Thursday), July 9 (Saturday), July 10 (Sunday), July 11 (Monday), July 12 (Tuesday), July 16 (Saturday) and concluded with July 17 (Sunday).

All Fridays were excluded from analysis because Friday evening is generally considered part of the weekend.

Commercials from 8 networks were sampled. This included ABC, CBS, FOX, and NBC, the four major networks, as well as a news network (CNN), a sports network (ESPN), a channel devoted to "family" entertainment (FAM), and a music video channel (MTV). The sample consisted of a range of both general programming and special focus networks.

From two to five hours were video taped for each sample day: 7:00-8:00 AM.; 2:00-3:00 P.M.; 4:00-5:00 P.M.; 7:00-8:00 P.M.; and 11:00-midnight (all times were Pacific Daylight Time). These hours of the day and evening were chosen to assure a wide variety of programming and audiences, and therefore commercials.

A random draw was used to determine the date of analysis for each network. The order was as follows:

| | | |
|------|---------|-------------|
| ABC | July 6 | (Wednesday) |
| FAM | July 7 | (Thursday) |
| FOX | July 9 | (Saturday) |
| MTV | July 10 | (Sunday) |
| ESPN | July 11 | (Monday) |
| CBS | July 12 | (Tuesday) |
| CNN | July 16 | (Saturday) |
| NBC | July 17 | (Sunday) |

Content analysis is a research method for "analyzing the symbolic content of any communication" (Singleton, *et al.*, 1988:347). In short, content analysis is a coding operation. The paper upon which this present study is built followed the same time schedule, although it focused on the winter months of 1997. 797 commercials were identified as carrying three principal content categories (religious symbolism, violence, and moral decay). Coding for the present project focused only on religious symbolism. This content category was again defined by the following recording units: depiction of a house of worship (for example, a church); depiction of a member of the clergy; and content featuring any of the following words or symbols: "spiritual," "religious," "God," "soul," or "angel."

Coding for this project replication was relatively straightforward. Furthermore, all of the coding was done by one person which generally maximizes reliability in coding. Of course, the great danger of having just one coder is the possibility of systematic bias. To ensure that this was not the case, a random check of the results was conducted by the coauthors. No discrepancies were noted.

Findings

The most important finding of this study is that television advertisers continue to use very little religious symbolism in their commercials. Out of 1499 commercials examined, 51 had religious or spiritual content (and some of those were minimal, at best, in true association). Table 1 illustrates the nature of the content in the examined commercials. As indicated, these 51 commercials actually consist of only 30 distinct commercials. Several of the 51 are repeats.

TABLE 1

Television Commercials Containing Religious or Spiritual Content

| Sponsor | Content |
|--|--|
| 1. Angel Soft | Angels descend from heaven to replace empty toilet roll (appears twice) |
| 2. "Angel of the Winds" | Ad for a casino with "angel" in the name (appears twice) |
| 3. Cancer Treatment Centers of America | Testimonials about services received being compared to heaven |
| 4. Hydrience | Woman who has just colored her hair feels heavenly |
| 5. "Hell's Kitchen" | Ad for show about being a chef/reference to "Hell" |
| 6. "Devil's Rejects" | Ad for movie; "be ready for hell on earth" (appears four times) |
| 7. "Survivor Lives" | Ad for show featuring people stranded on island; girl suggests forming alliance with "Joe" is like "forming an alliance with the devil" (appears twice) |
| 8. "My Name is Earl" | Ad for TV show; music in background "You've got to change your evil ways" |
| 9. "Living the Life" | Ad for show about living the good life with God |
| 10. Venus Razor | Women on beach, shaving, revealing "the Goddess within" |
| 11. Oragel | Bride offered oragel so she can walk down the aisle at her wedding |
| 12. Miller Lite | A couple discuss the taste of beer; man cries when confronting the truth that one beer tastes better than another; the couple leave the church they were just married in |
| 13. Juicy fruit gum | Woman and young man, together because neither will relinquish gum, attend church where woman sings in the choir |
| 14. KOMO 4 | Ad for local television station "KOMO 4 Investigates"; concerns investigation of someone who "gained... trust at church" (appears twice) |
| 15. Dr. Pepper | Girl approaches a car of boys in pursuit of the soda left on the car roof. The song "I believe in miracles" plays in the background |
| 16. "Ice Princess" | Ad for movie, with music in background; "miracles happen once in a while" (appears twice) |
| 17. Giaxo Smith Klein | Drug company states "Today's medicine finances tomorrow's miracles" (appears twice) |
| 18. Champion Windows | Ad calls its product "a miracle" |
| 19. "Brat Camp" | Ad for a teen camp where a girl finds she can "feel [the change] in her soul" |
| 20. Qwest | Families saving money; "That's the spirit of service, working for you" (company motto) (appears twice) |
| 21. CBN | Ad for CBN network, showing people assisting poor, praying |
| 22. Celebrity Fit Club 2 | Ad for show; contestant requests "can't you let me finish the prayer?" (appears twice) |
| 23. Sleep Country | Workers in Santa hats sing about "Christmas in July" (appears seven times) |
| 24. "Prisonbreak" | Ad for TV show depicting a priest with collar and crucifix |
| 25. King James Bible/DVD | Ad showing family watching DVD together (appears four times) |
| 26. Kiel Mortgage | Picture of dove seen when company name viewed |
| 27. Christian Children's Fund | Ad for this organization (appears twice) |
| 28. Children's Miracle Network | Ad for this organization; only reference is in the name |
| 29. "Reliant K" | Ad for this Christian band, no religious symbolism used |
| 30. 700 Club | Ad for religiously affiliated show |

The content of these 30 commercials fall into the following categories: Angels/Heaven (1-4); Devil/Hell/Evil (5-8); God/Goddess (9, 10); Church (11-14); Miracles (15-18); Soul/Spirit (19, 20); Miscellaneous religious symbols, i.e. Christmas, praying, Bible, Priest, Dove (21-26); no religious symbolism (27-30).

The first four commercials identified in Table 1 (1-4) use positive angelic or heavenly imagery to help sell products or services. The first commercial (Angel Soft bathroom tissue) depicts two angels descending from heaven in order to replace an empty toilet roll. After commenting that the tissue is "angel soft," they ascend to heaven. The second commercial (Angel of the Winds Casino) includes "angel" in the company name without any other spiritual or religious content. The third commercial (Cancer Treatment Centers of America) features testimonials from patients, one of whom refers to the services received as "how it will be in heaven." The fourth commercial (Hydrience Hair Color) shows a woman who, having just colored her hair, declares that "when you're done coloring your hair, it feels like heaven."

The next four commercials (5-8) advertise television shows and movies and utilize negative spiritual imagery. The first commercial in this set (Hell's Kitchen television show) uses the term "hell" in its title and shows clips of how tough and "hellish" it is to be a successful chef. The second commercial (the movie Devil's Rejects) shows clips of people ruthlessly and randomly killing people "just for the hell of it." The commercial also refers to "a place where evil hides" and suggests that "it's going to be hell on earth." The third commercial (Survivor Lives television show) quotes a participant as suggesting that "forming an alliance with Joe is like forming an alliance with the devil." The fourth commercial (My Name is Earl television show) uses as background music, the song "You've got to change your evil ways."

The next two commercials (9-10) use the terms "God" and Goddess" in general terms. In the first commercial (Living the Life television show), two women are promised the secret to unlocking the ways of living a good life with God. No other affiliation is noted. In the second commercial (Venus Razor), a group of women shave, run around a beach and reveal "the Goddess within."

The next set of four commercials (11-14) utilize a traditional religious symbol, that of the church. In the first commercial (Oragel), a bride, complaining of a toothache, is able to get relief and continue to walk down the aisle of the church she is being married in. The second commercial (Miller Lite) shows a recently married couple sitting in a limousine discussing the merits of different light beers. After discussion, the new husband tearfully agrees that Miller Lite tastes best and the couple drive away from the church where they were just married. The third commercial (Juicy Fruit chewing gum) shows a young man and a woman fighting over the last pack of gum in the grocery store. Because neither party will relinquish the gum, the young man follows the woman everywhere she goes, ending up in a church where the woman is singing in a black gospel choir. The final commercial in this set is an advertisement for a local television station (KOMO) involved in an investigative report. One of the people being investigated for fraud seems to have attended a church where he was able to gain the trust of his victims.

The next four commercials (15-18) use the classic spiritual symbol of miracles in their advertisements. In the first commercial (Dr. Pepper), several young men initially believe that an attractive woman is interested in them when she is actually interested in the can of soda left on the top of their car. The song "I believe in miracles" plays in the background. In the second commercial (the Disney movie Ice Princess) the song, "Miracles happen once in a while," is used as a back drop. In the third commercial, a drug company (Giaxo Smith Klein) advertisement states that "today's medicine finances tomorrow's miracles." The final commercial (Champion windows and glass) declares that their comfort window is a miracle.

The next two commercials (19-20) use the terms "soul" and "service" to advertise their products and services. A teen camp (Brat Camp) includes a testimonial from a teen participant who says that she can "feel the change in her soul." A local telephone company (Qwest) refers, in their advertisement, to "the spirit of service, working for you."

The next six commercials (21-26) use a variety of miscellaneous religious and spiritual symbolism to advertise their wares. A television station (CBN) shows people being assisted and praying in thanks. A

television show (Celebrity Fit Club 2) features a clip of a participant being interrupted and asking “can’t you let me finish my prayer?” A mattress company (Sleep Country) shows workers in Santa Claus hats singing about “Christmas in July.” A television show (Prison Break) depicts a priest with a cross and a collar speaking in a church office. An advertisement for a DVD version of the King James Bible shows a family together as they view and discuss what they are watching. A local mortgage company (Kiel Mortgage) identifies itself as a Christian company on the radio. When the television advertisement is run, this reference is not included and the image of a dove is added.

The final four commercials (27-30) are for organizations widely known to have Christian affiliations. No particular religious symbolism was used in the content of the commercials. Christian Children’s Fund and Children’s Miracle Network both appealed to audiences for financial support by showing the work in which they are involved. The 700 Club advertised the upcoming events scheduled to air on their network. The final commercial, for a Christian band called Reliant K, announced their upcoming performance, but did not include anything spiritual or religious in the content of their advertisement.

Discussion

Commercials are again being used as a “gauge for measuring the current influence of religion in society” (Maguire & Weatherby, 1998:175). Perhaps in line with Stark et al. (1993;1994), secularization theory is not continuing to bear out completely. Science remains crucial to our central system of beliefs and meaning but religion has not become “irrelevant,” in the face of this.

In 1999, Maguire and Weatherby considered television commercial content. Specifically they sought to discover which domain exerted the most influence on television commercials, religion, science, or professional expertise. They concluded that while advertisers tended to use scientific and/or professional content more than religious content, they generally avoided using content from either source (Maguire & Weatherby, 1999: 423). Maguire and Weatherby noted that according to a Gallop Poll, 59% of Americans stated that religion played an important part in their lives (1999:414). According to an updated Gallop Poll, this trend continues, with 52% of Americans stating that religion is important to them (Gallup, 2006: www.galluppoll.com). Also in 1999, Maguire and Weatherby suggested that another cause might be the issue of honesty and advertising. They noted that advertisers held “some of the most dishonest and unethical occupational positions” (1999:414). Once again, an updated Gallup Poll confirms that this attitude is still shared by the American public (Gallup, 2006: www.galluppoll.com).

An analysis of 1499 television commercials again revealed that very few advertisers use religious symbols to sell their products or services. In this current study, 51 out of 1499 commercials, or 3.4%, contained religious symbolism. This is, however, a 170% increase over the original 1998 study by Maguire and Weatherby, where 16 out of 797 commercials, or 2%, incorporated spiritual content.

There are many possible reasons why advertisers would still avoid any religious reflection in their products: 1.) Those who are devoutly religious may see this as trivializing “commoditization” of what they view as of exceptional importance in their lives (their faith). 2.) Those of other faiths may feel undervalued when one type of religion is selected/featured at the “expense” of others. 3.) Those who are nonreligious may become offended by the link between faith/spirituality and any consumer product. 4.) The separation of church and state plays itself out in the advertising world just like it does in everyday life (public schools are a prime example, though “taking God out of our schools” has been a continuing concern among the religious right). 5.) Religion is simply not “catchy” or “sexy” enough to hold the viewer’s attention, much less sell a product. 6.) Religion/spirituality does not lend itself well to the “high energy” appeal coupled with many products (from soda pop to sports cars, most commercials feature some sort of “get up and go” associated with the goods they wish to sell).

In sum, as Maguire and Weatherby stated in 1998, “apparently, producers believe that religion is a subject too difficult to portray in a way that is acceptable to all viewers” (1998:177).

Conclusion

This study sought to determine whether television advertisers are still reluctant to use religion to help sell their products. The answer is that it is still relatively uncommon, only 51 out of 1499 commercials sampled had religious or spiritual content. As before, this research project has also raised questions. Future research could usefully focus on advertisers directly, as well as on other types or areas of advertising, including radio, print, and on-line. It might also be helpful to consider more directly and in-depth, how other strongly religious cultures, such as the Muslim community, consider this question.

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