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Religions as brands? Religion and spirituality in consumer society

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ABSTRACT

This article gives an interdisciplinary account of the societal causes as well as individual and organizational effects of religious consumer society. It integrates and systematizes contributions from economics of religion, marketing, and sociology of religion. The article presents the causes of religious consumer society and the most frequent individual adaptations (quality expectations, religious shopping, syncretism) and organizational responses (marketing and branding strategies). Findings are that (1) in the religious consumer society, individuals are free not to be religious or spiritual, putting religious associations in competition with secular organizations, and possibly leading to secularization, (2) it is exaggerated to speak of shopping and consuming as the “new religions” of Western societies, and (3) religious marketing and branding face important limitations, some internal and some external to religious and spiritual organizations, due to the dilemma between marketing practices and transcendental claims. We suggest ways and means to solve this dilemma.

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Introduction

Many authors have noted that religions and spiritualities adapt to the emergence of consumer society (Carrette and King 2005; Einstein 2011; Gauthier and Martikainen 2013; Nardella 2014). Individuals behave increasingly like consumers, religious groups act as if they were selling and marketing products, and religions and spiritualities do indeed sometimes take on the form of products and brands. Some of the most notorious Christian examples are the emergence of televangelists (e.g., Oral Roberts, Jim Bakker), mega-churches, branded religious sites (e.g., Lourdes) religious best-sellers (e.g., *the Left Behind* series) and blockbusters (e.g., *The Passion of the Christ*). Some of the most well-known non-Christian examples include the marketing of Kabbalah centers, veiled Barbie dolls, Mecca cola, the Buddha as a decorative item, or the branding of the Dalai Lama. On the other hand, it has been suggested that shopping and consuming may actually become the new religions of our time, making the link between religion and branding an even more natural one (Shachar et al. 2011).

The literature on these phenomena, however, is compartmentalized in different disciplines, especially economics of religion, marketing science, and sociology of religion, often without taking notice of each other's insights. This mutual insulation of the disciplines is unfortunate, preventing cross-fertilization and triangulation of insights. In what follows, we therefore aim to integrate and systematize these bodies of scholarship, thus giving an interdisciplinary account of the societal causes and individual and organizational effects of religious consumer society. Specifically, we focus on the following four research questions: What are the most important societal causes that have led to religious consumer society? How do individuals adapt their religious and spiritual beliefs and practices in such a society? How do religious and spiritual organizations adapt their organizational behavior? What are the limits to marketing and branding religious and spiritual goods and practices?

The contribution of our paper is to give an interdisciplinary account of the the societal causes and individual and organizational effects of religious consumer society. Our goal is not to test any theory, nor to apply the scheme to any particular phenomenon. Rather, we show that very different ideas and examples about, for example, secularization, branding of religion, the 4 P's, quasi-religions, religious-secular competition, etc. can be usefully integrated in one conceptual scheme. This both permits a better understanding of the meaning and importance of the various bodies of literature and it may spark theoretical and empirical cross-fertilization. Of course, empirical applications that wanted to start out with our scheme would have to very clearly delimit the exact phenomenon to be studied and the relevant geographical, cultural, and temporal context of their case (Johns 2006).

Note that our discussion in this paper concerns almost exclusively post-industrial countries or the "Western world". As we will explain below, religious consumer society is dependent on a set of societal attributes especially often – but not exclusively – found in Western countries. It is important to remember that the way consumer society affects religion and spirituality depends on many contextual factors such as regulation of religion, ethnic and cultural background, income inequality, etc. We will, therefore, try to contextualize the results and examples we give, following Johns (2006).

It is useful to clarify our definitions of the most important terms in these central questions. Note that our definitional strategy differs from other variants in that it distinguishes a cultural, a social, and an individual level as has been proposed already by Parsons and Shils (1962); it sees "spirituality" as a sub-form of "religion" that points to individual-level experiences and practices; we define religious groups and individual-level religiosity/spirituality with respect to the cultural-level religion and spirituality; and finally, we distinguish full-scale religions/spiritualities from "hybrid" and "secular" religions/spiritualities.

A *Religion* is a cultural symbols-system that responds to problems of meaning and contingency by alluding to a transcendent (i.e., superempirical) reality, which influences everyday life but cannot be directly controlled. Religious symbol-systems incorporate mythical, ethical, and ritual elements as well "salvation goods" (See for similar cultural definitions Geertz 1993; Pollack 1995; Riesebrodt 2010).¹ According to this definition, a cooking recipe, a map, the German language, or Marxism are not religions. While they are symbol systems, and while some of them respond to problems of meaning and contingency, they lack the link to a transcendent reality. Islam, Christianity, Judaism, or Raelianism, on the other hand, are clearly religions according to this definition. As we will show below, differences between religion and non-religion may be seen on a continuum, making it possible to point to hybrid religions and secular religions.

A *Spirituality* is a religious symbol system that specifically expresses individual-level experiences, beliefs, and practices (for an overview of different definitions of “spirituality”, see Giordan 2007; Streib and Hood 2013). Examples are Wiccan, Celtic, Catholic, or Sufi spirituality. In analogy to the case of religions, one can distinguish (transcendence-based) spiritualities from hybrid spiritualities and secular spiritualities (see below). Religions and spiritualities are often not easy to differentiate. Suffice it to say that in our terminology, religion is the more encompassing term. Religions normally include spiritualities.

Religious and spiritual organizations are collective actors whose central activities concern the, organization, production, and distribution of religious or spiritual symbol-systems, collective practices, and private goods (Chaves 2004; Harris 1995). Examples are churches, religious centers, temple communities and prayer groups.

Religiosity and *individual spirituality* are individual experiences, beliefs, or actions, insofar as they relate to one or more cultural-level religions or spiritualities (for a discussion of the dimensions of religiosity, see Huber and Huber 2012). Religiosity and spirituality have different dimensions (action, experience, knowledge, belief, etc.). Attending a religious service or a meditation course, praying, going on a pilgrimage, and believing in angels are all examples of an individual religiosity or spirituality as defined here.²

We define *consumer society* with Rassuli and Hollander (1986) as a society in which people consume at a level substantially above that of crude, survival-level subsistence and obtain goods and services for consumption through exchange rather than self-production. In a *consumer society*, consumption is considered an acceptable and appropriate activity, and people tend to judge others and perhaps themselves in terms of their consuming lifestyles.

The organization of this article follows the central questions. Part 2 looks at causes of religious consumer society. Part 3 and 4 analyze individual and organizational adaptations to religious consumer societies. Part 5 considers limitations of religious marketing and branding and suggests possible solutions. Part 6 concludes.

Historical causes of the religious consumer society

A substantial part of the literature describes historical causes that are said to have led to a “religious consumer society”.³ While the specific theoretical preferences and terms vary, most authors seem to agree that some sort of “*modernization process*” is responsible for the emergence of the current religious consumer society in western societies (Dawson 2011; Gauthier, Martikainen, and Woodhead 2011; Norris and Inglehart 2004; Rinallo, Scott, and Maclaran 2013; Wallis and Bruce 1995). This process is thought to have influenced both the situation of individuals and religious organizations and their secular competitors.

Modernization and its influences on individuals

A religious consumer society is made possible because modernization leads, on an individual level, to the following important consequences. First, it leads to a *breakdown of religious norms*. Before the 1960s, there was general pressure on individuals to be members of a religion, and to have the same religion as their parents. Depending on various context variables, there could also be pressure to believe and practise. In many western countries, the 1960s were a time when a “cultural revolution” took place, sweeping away – among other things – important religious norms (McLeod 2007). Second, modernization

leads to *an increased individual freedom to choose*, emphasizing the freedom and duty of individuals to decide for themselves in all matters important to them – including religious identity, practice, and belief. A third consequence of modernization is *a change in values*. Traditional values linked to authority and duty are replaced by self-realization and individualistic values (see Rinallo, Maclaran, and Stevens, 2016). In the religious field this can be seen as a replacement of the semantic of “religiosity” by “spirituality”. Fourth, modernization also leads to growing *disposable income*. This gives individuals a wider range of options, especially concerning secular leisure, which may compete with religious options. A fifth consequence is rising *individual security*. The invention of welfare schemes, various types of insurance, improved biomedical services, etc. give individuals a level of security unprecedented in history. This in turn competes with the reassuring function of religious beliefs and practices. Sixth, we find an *increased exposure to mass media and social media* (TV, radio, internet, Facebook, YouTube, twitter, WhatsApp, etc.). Individuals spend more and more time exposing themselves to and interacting with mass media and social media. This increases the possibility of getting information about all kinds of religions, but equally about all kinds of secular matters. Finally, modernization leads to *growing individual mobility*. Individuals travel increasingly long distances and start to think of their world (and possibly their religious and spiritual involvement) in terms of options that have a price, that may be consumed and have to be chosen according to individual preferences.

Drawing these points together, we see that modernization creates *rules* according to which individuals have the right to choose, gives them the *resources* to actually be able to make choices, and provides *representations and values* that legitimate religious consumer behavior.

Modernization and its influences on organizations

Modernization not only changes the demand, but also the supply-side. Two points are noteworthy. First, religious organizations have evolved from powerful societal institutions to voluntary associations in which individual membership is optional. Historically, this has happened at different pace and in very different ways in different places – but the result seems rather similar in western countries. In most European countries, for example, in the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century, some Christian churches were established institutions to which individuals often belonged by tradition and which were linked multi-functionally to many other societal institutions (the power structure, schools, hospitals, media etc.). While the nineteenth century saw the guarantee of freedom of religion for individuals, the twentieth century and twenty-first century led to an ever increasing loosening of the relationship between formerly established churches and the state, with a simultaneous emergence of religious diversity (McLeod 2000). In the US, with its separation of church and state very early in its democratic development, denominations took the form of voluntary associations earlier than in Europe. Nevertheless, in the US also, there were some (protestant) denominations that strongly controlled society and again we find an increasing loosening of these ties in the nineteenth century and twentieth century (Smith 2003).

In effect, both in the US and Europe, this led to a situation in which all religious groups are increasingly seen as some kind of voluntary associations among others – comparable to sports clubs or philanthropic societies. Like all other voluntary associations, religious

organizations now have to compete for memberships and for their members’ time, donations, and energy. And like all other voluntary associations, they are therefore forced to engage in some form of marketing and branding.

Second, modernization not only turns religious organizations into voluntary associations, but also puts them into the situation of a *generalized religious-secular competition*. This process is well established in the marketing literature (Einstein 2011; Mottner 2008), but has not yet been given the attention it deserves in the sociology of religion and economics of religion (Gill and Lundsgaarde 2004; Gruber and Hungerman 2008; Stolz 2009a; Stolz and Tanner 2017). In fact, religious suppliers compete with secular suppliers concerning specific human needs (Table 1). Religious organizations typically fulfill a whole range of human needs – and for every need, they may find themselves competing with emerging secular organizations and institutions. Thus, a religious organization may offer salvation promises like spiritual healing or security – but secular biomedicine, the welfare state or insurances offer competing goods. A religious organization may offer a religious ideology that explains much about the world – but education, science, and secular ideologies may do likewise. Individuals with depression can demand the religious good “pastoral care” – but they can also choose the secular competitor “psychotherapy”. The need for social contacts can be satisfied by the religious good “active membership in a religious community” – but there exist secular competitors, such as sports clubs, neighborhood networks etc.

Summing up, we can say that modernizing processes and their influence both on the demand and supply side have led both to extended *religious markets* and to *less religiosity*. On the one hand, there have indeed been an increasing number of individuals choosing religious “products” that were specifically marketed by religious entrepreneurs. Alternative spirituality, a form of “consumer religion”, has shown important growth. On the other hand, there has been a clear tendency towards *less religiosity* for many individuals. Since religion was not prescribed anymore and since individuals were now “free to choose”, they were also free to choose no religion, no belief, no practice. This led to a rise in “fuzzy religiosity” (Storm 2009; Voas 2009) and to a rise in the number of secular individuals. Due to this increased freedom, religion also lost its former importance in the choice of a spouse, leading to a marked rise in the number of religiously mixed couples as well as in couples with only one partner having a religion (Voas 2003). Summing up, we thus observe a *simultaneous* process of marketization, individualization, and secularization. Much of the literature sees these processes as mutually exclusive, which is misleading (for an overview see McAlexander et al. 2014; Pollack and Pickel 2007). Rather, they are part of one single social process.

Individual-level effects: religious and spiritual shopping and consuming

The societal changes mentioned have had various *effects on individuals* that are characteristic of “religious consumer society”. There are three such effects: changing expectations towards

Table 1. Religious organizations and their secular competitors.

Religious organization and its...	Secular competitor
... salvation promises	Biomedicine, welfare state, insurance
... religious ideology	(Higher) education, science, secular ideologies
... pastoral care by its leaders	Psychotherapists, life coaches
... collective activities, social capital	Secular leisure time activities, social capital
... life-cycle rituals	Work-holiday cycle, secular rituals

religious organizations, an increase in individualized religion and religious shopping, and the possibility that consumption (of all kinds of products) may itself become a form of religion in modernity.

Changing expectations of individuals towards religious organizations

In consumer society, individuals learn that products and services should be attuned to their needs. It is, therefore, no wonder that they also expect such behavior from religious organizations and their products and services. A substantial number of publications show that individuals increasingly have the following expectations. First, they feel that religious services should be of “*high quality*” (Santos and Mathews 2001). Several studies show that members of Christian churches increasingly expect sophisticated religious services, excellent and entertaining music, good speakers and convenient access to places of worship. Second, individuals also hope to be *entertained*. In religious services, writes Mara Einstein (2008, 8) “consumers have a heightened expectation of being entertained, which is usually met with music and dramatic presentations.” Religious organizations will increasingly copy successful entertainment formats from the secular sphere or invent new forms, in order to let individuals “have a good time” during their rituals and religious services. Third, individuals expect to be *free to choose*. They are increasingly concerned that religious organizations will not restrict their choices and will respect their absolute freedom to believe and practice according to their individual preferences (Stolz and Ballif 2010). Just as in the world of shopping and consuming, they want to be able to choose what they like instead of being told what to do.

An increase in individualized religion and religious shopping

In the religious consumer society, individuals increasingly *choose* what to believe, how to practice, and what norms to obey (if any). Different disciplinary approaches – individualization theorists, consumer society theorists, economists of religion, marketing theorists and even secularization theorists – agree on this point (De Graaf 2013; Iannaccone 1992; Roof 1999). The agreement stops, however, when it comes to the question of what this increasing choice does to individual religiosity.

One position, often found in religious economics or the rational choice approach to religion, is that increasing religious freedom leads to increased religious shopping and a generalized religious market (Iannaccone 1998; Stark and Finke 2000). This approach is often called the “supply-side approach,” because it argues that demand of religion across all societies is essentially stable and that differences in aggregated religiosity must therefore be explained by variation in the supply of religion. These authors normally see any kind of society as a potential religious market that is more or less regulated. Individuals are seen as “naturally religious” and will behave as religious and spiritual shoppers, if only they are allowed to do so. People choose religious beliefs and practices according to their preferences – much as they choose cars or toothpaste. For example, Stark and Iannaccone (1994) argued that it was wrong to believe that Europe in the second half of the twentieth century underwent a process of “secularization” and, on the contrary, that increasing individual freedom would eventually lead to a religious revival.⁴

A second position sees the effect of growing religious freedom not so much in increases in “shopping” and “consuming,” but rather in the fact that individuals believe and practice

in an increasingly syncretistic and individualized way. Various terms have been created and used in order to highlight this phenomenon: *bricolage*, à la carte religion, do-it-yourself religion, recomposition, Sheilaism, or patchwork-religion (Bailey 1990; Hervieu-Léger 2001; Luckmann 1967). The overall message of this literature is that more religious freedom does not lead to less religiosity, but to a change in the *form of religiosity*. Since individuals are no longer controlled by institutions, they become religious in ways that often do not look religious to the unsuspecting observer (hence the talk of “invisible” or “implicit” religion) or that are increasingly “spiritual” (Heelas and Woodhead 2004). Since each individual becomes a “special case”, qualitative research in particular seems to be a good method to investigate these new forms of religiosity and spirituality.

A third position also acknowledges increasing individual religious freedom, but sees various possible individual reactions, including non-religious options, to such freedom (Gruber and Hungerman 2008; Stolz 2009b). Individuals may, according to this position, become religious shoppers, but they may also choose *not* to be religious or entertain a kind of “fuzzy fidelity.” It depends on the context just what kind of reaction should be expected of a given individual or social organization. In contexts with strong norms that the individual should be religious in some way, with few secular alternatives, where there is freedom as to the kind of religious products that may be chosen and where individuals have a certain income, they are very likely to become “religious shoppers.” Good examples are the Halal markets, the markets for Islamic fashion (Sandikci and Ger 2010), or the market for Christian music in the evangelical milieu. Conversely, in contexts where there are few norms sanctioning religious behavior and where there are many secular alternatives, we should expect more fuzzy fidelity and secularity.⁵

Shopping and consuming as a new religion

The last individual-level consequence of religious consumer society is that individuals can experience sacredness in *shopping* and *consuming* (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989). Baggini (2005), writing about the opening of a new branch of Ikea, suggests that “shopping is the new religion and Mammon our new God.” This is because “The kind of ‘must have’ mania that infects some shoppers as they close in on a good deal is more akin to the imperatives of religious devotion than those of personal finance.” Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry (1989) show various ways, in which individuals may “sacralise” the experience of consuming. Other authors describe how individuals may engage in various forms of “brand fandom”: they venerate the product, feel an emotional bond to other brand users, fantasize about enemies of the brand and begin to engage in “evangelistic” behavior. In extreme cases, “cult brands” may be so strongly venerated that fans create “brand communities” (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001). This has happened, *inter alia*, with Macintosh, the Apple Newton, Harley Davidson, Star Trek, Jeep, or Saab (Muniz and Hope 2005).⁶

While it may be tempting to see shopping as the new religion of consumer society and shopping malls as the temples of our society, we should be wary of accepting these theories too quickly. For the research started off by the landmark article by Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry (1989) may be seen as one example of a much larger research tradition concerned with seeing the sacred in all kinds of domains of modern life.⁷ The phenomenon has been given various names: invisible religion, surrogate religion, quasi-religion, implicit religion, or secular religion (Bailey 1990; Greil and Rudy 1990; Luckmann 1967).

While the specifics differ, the argument is always that elements and/or functions that once characterized religion can now be found in seemingly secular domains of life. Formerly it was religion that gave meaning, integrated the social group, legitimated the social structure, allowed individuals to accept misfortune and distress, and let them experience times of frenzy and enthusiasm. Today, these attributes and functions may be found in other social situations. Frenzy and enthusiasm, for example, can be found in the collective excitement at a pop concert or a football game. The problem with this line of research, evidently, is that the definition of “religion” (or implicit, or quasi-religion etc.) used is so broad that it is difficult to conceive of phenomena that could not – at least in principle – also become “implicitly religious”.⁸ In order to make a convincing case for a growing “implicit religion”, it does not suffice just to enumerate “religious” or “sacred” traits and functions in various social phenomena. Rather, it is important to give a clear definition allowing for the measurement of religious change.⁹

Our own view is that one may indeed find some “religious” or “spiritual” elements in the world of consumption, but that most authors in marketing and sociology seriously overstate their case. In order to get a balanced view, the typology in Table 2 uses two dimensions: degree of importance of transcendence (as defined above in our definition of religion) in the symbol system of the social phenomenon and degree of formal organization as defined by Brinkerhoff and Jacob (1999). We have entered the examples of institutions, practices, and symbol systems most often given in the literature when the definition and the boundaries of religion/spirituality is discussed, calling the resulting cells non-religious/spiritual, secular religious/spiritual, hybrid religious/spiritual, and religious/spiritual. The purpose of this exercise is to see just where the examples of shopping, consuming, and brand fandom fall in such a typology – in comparison with other phenomena that are also often likened to religion and spirituality.

Phenomena are called *religious* if they are practices (rituals), beliefs, institutions or symbol-systems that conform with the definition of religion given above. This means, among other aspects, that they have an important link to transcendence and a high degree of formal organization. Examples are Islam, Christianity, or Raelianism. *Spiritualities* are beliefs and practices that also have an important link to transcendence, but a lower degree of formal organization. Examples are New Age, Esotericism, or Theosophy.

Hybrid religions and spiritualities are phenomena that clearly include transcendent elements like gods, angels, spirits, and the like. They, therefore, seem to be religions/spiritualities – but at the same time they also seem to be something else: para-sciences, therapies, musical cultures, fan-cultures, businesses, etc. As Greil and Rudy (1990) explain, often these phenomena actively seek an ambiguous status concerning their “religious” or “spiritual” nature. A religious/spiritual label gives certain advantages (e.g., respectability, tax exemption, non-falsifiability), but also disadvantages (e.g., being seen as “not serious” or “not scientific”). Good examples of such hybrid phenomena are Scientology, Transcendental Meditation, Alcoholics Anonymous, or Synanon on the formally organized side, as well as sacred sex or mindfulness on the less organized side. Extreme brand fandom such as the brand communities that have formed around Mac, Saab, Harley Davidson, or Elvis, have indeed produced transcendent elements built into millenarian ideas, myths, rituals, and ethics and qualify for the label hybrid spiritualities (Belk and Tumbat 2005; Lam 2001; Muniz and Hope 2005).¹⁰

Secular religious and secular spiritual phenomena do not include a reference to transcendence, that is, superempirical phenomena. However, they have a secular or natural functional

Table 2. A typology of religious and spiritual phenomena.

		Importance of transcendence	
		Low	High
Formal organization	High	Non-religious <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Police • School • Soccer club 	Hybrid religious <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scientology • Transcendent Meditation • Alcoholics Anonymous • Synanon
	Low	Non-spiritual <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shopping • Consuming • Watching TV • Going for a walk 	Religious <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Islam • Christianity • Buddhism • Judaism • Christian Science • Raelianism
		Secular religious <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nazism • Marxism • Psychotherapy 	Hybrid spiritual <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extreme-brand fandom • Sacred sex • Mindfulness • Alien research groups • Star Wars religion
		Secular spiritual <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brand fandom • Strong identity shopping/consuming • Pop fandom • Soccer fandom • Conspiracy theories • Positive thinking 	Spiritual <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New Age • Esotericism • Theosophy

alternative that makes them appear “like” a religion or spirituality, at least in some respects. We can define a “secular religion” as a cultural symbol-system that responds to problems of meaning and contingency by alluding to an *empirical* reality. Secular religions may incorporate mythical, ethical, and ritual elements as well “salvation goods.” Thus, Nazism, Marxism, or psychotherapy qualify for the label quasi religions. Marxism, for example, sees its general dialectical historical processes as governed by immanent causes and effects, however not by some super-empirical principle (Kolakowski 2008). A secular spirituality is then a secular religious symbol system that specifically expresses *individual-level experiences, beliefs, and practices*. In secular religions and spiritualities we may find rituals, commitment, veneration, and emotions of awe, but these elements are not linked to some sort of god, supernatural entity or transcendent principle. It is the political leader, the founder of the ideology, the inventor of the brand, the pop star who is venerated. Individuals reflect on the meaning of life and their own existence – but they then find the answer to this question in friendship, family, life itself, etc. It seems sensible to include brand fandom and shopping products that serve to strongly define individual identity (clothing, accessories, cars, etc.) under the heading of secular spiritualities.¹¹

Finally, we call *non-religious* and *non-spiritual* practices and institutions that include no reference to transcendence. Phenomena found in this category are, for example, school, police, or a soccer club (high formal organization), or watching television and going for a walk (low formal organization). Shopping and consuming in most cases would clearly fall under the heading of zero-spirituality.

Many questions could be posed and the correct placing of every example could be contested and discussed. Is Alcoholics Anonymous really well described as a hybrid religion? Is soccer fandom a secular spirituality? We do not have space to discuss these interesting questions here. For our present purposes it is sufficient to have shown that while shopping, consumption, and fandom phenomena may include religious and spiritual elements, it is clearly exaggerated to say that they are the “new religions/spiritualities” of our times.

Organizational effects: marketing and branding religion and spirituality

We now turn to the organizational side of the “religious consumer society.” The historical antecedents mentioned above (modernization, change from institution to voluntary association, religious-secular competition) have put religious organizations and entrepreneurs in a completely new situation, leading to an increased need to market and brand their products and services.

Changing acceptance and use of religious marketing and branding by organizations

Researchers in general seem to agree that both acceptance and use of religious marketing and branding have increased in western countries since the 1950s for “suppliers” of various religions (Einstein 2008; McDaniel 1986; Twitchell 2005). According to these authors, religious organizations increasingly investigate consumer needs, design forms of worship and product lines, engage in advertising, image campaigns, and branding. Such claims are made especially concerning Christian churches, be they mainline, evangelical or fundamentalist (Chen 2012; Einstein 2011), but also for non-Christian religions. Prominent examples

in Islam are the transformation of the veil from a “stigmatized practice to a fashionable object” (Sandikci and Ger 2010), or the booming Halal Industry (Fischer 2009).¹² A good example of marketing by a religious organization rooted in Jewish mysticism can be seen in the Kabbalah Center established by Philip S. Berg (Einstein 2008). A Buddhist example is the huge success of Buddhist books even in mainstream bookstores (Jones 2007); a Hindu example is the successful marketing of Yoga in the domain of “wellness” (Deshpande, Herman, and Lobb 2011). New religious movements like Scientology, the Moonies, or the Raelians have also been known to engage in important efforts of marketing (Einstein 2011; Palmer 2004). In all traditions, we see a growing importance of religious tourism (Finney, Orwig, and Spake 2012). While almost everybody seems to agree that both the acceptance and the use of religious marketing by organizations have grown – and the claim seems plausible overall – there is a clear lack of quantitative longitudinal data to prove the point.¹³ An important parameter influencing public acceptance and the use of religious marketing and branding is the overall legal framework (Usunier 2014).

Marketing has a strong normative stance and uses a combination of action strategies. We discuss below publics/markets and strategies (marketing mix) of religious organizations.

Publics and marketing strategies

Religious organizations face different publics. If they want to survive in a society where individuals have choices, they are well advised to distinguish these different publics or various types of markets (market segmentation) in order to engage in a positive exchange with each of them (Schwarz 1986). Mottner (2008) distinguishes input publics, internal publics, partner or intermediary publics, and consuming publics. Input publics provide resources and constraints to the organization, including donors and various stakeholders; internal publics consist of staff and volunteers; partner or intermediary publics are marketing agencies, consultants or other entities that help the organization to fulfill its objectives; consuming publics are its members, prospective members, people who are served in a general way, or even the general public. Webb et al. (1998) advise distinguishing prospective members, present members and former members in order to plan a church’s strategy. The central idea in public or market segmentation is that different publics/markets have different needs that can only be met separately. Most religions have an actual (unofficial) age segmentation with the younger and the older being favored in minister dedication. In some cases, a gender-based segmentation may be actually practiced with men being offered a slightly different marketing mix as compared to women. Segmentation and targeting of demand segments is not claimed to be an activity but is common practice (Vokurka, McDaniel, and Cooper 2002). For instance Kuzma, Kuzma, and Kuzma (2009) compared the target markets of mainstream versus Megachurches in the United States showing that the latter attempt to reach different cultural and generational segments. A special marketing policy can be implemented for every public. For example, the Alpha Course was created in order to meet the needs of a population with a certain interest in spirituality or “life questions”, but who would not normally enter a church (Hunt 2003; Sengers 2009). Both the Christian music industry and the Islamic fashion, toys and halal industry are targeting devout middle-class populations in the respective religious traditions.

Religious organizations may use strategies that can be analyzed with the 4 Ps of marketing (Product, Price, Promotion, Place) (Usunier 2014). The specific choices in these domains

form what marketers call the “marketing mix”. In what follows we give various examples, highlighting specifics for religious and spiritual organizations and products.

Products/services

Religious product policy is complex in the sense that the vast range of religious products comprises both tangibles (e.g., books and religious objects, see Paquier 2015) and intangible items, some of them being near to religious services, others being related to the promise of a reward in the future that cannot be verified, that is, goods of pure belief. Religious organizations and entrepreneurs offer a wide variety of products and services that often claim to have some sort of transcendent utility. Max Weber ([1920] 1978) called them “salvation goods.” A number of publications treat the question of how religious and spiritual entrepreneurs change their products or services in order to compete successfully with other religious or secular providers. Among the strategies employed, we find using *market research* in order to better understand the religious and spiritual or other needs of a given population; *gearing the product to a special kind of public or audience*. Segmenting their consumer base, religious organizations create special religious services for different age groups, social milieus, groups with various interests, etc.; making the product more *entertaining*. Religious organizations increasingly include music and humor in their services (Einstein 2008); using *economies of scale* in order to guarantee high *product quality*. By becoming a *megachurch*, the organization can offer first class entertainment, music, facilities and the diversity of small groups to customers (Chaves 2006); *adapting the product quickly to changing needs of the population*. Alternative healers in particular adapt very quickly to the perceived needs of customers, by changing the number and types of healing techniques offered (Mayer 2007) and *reducing the demands on the customer in terms of lifestyle, commitment, or belief*, in order to reach a greater number of possible customers.

Price

Some products on religious and spiritual markets do have a *monetary price* that can be adjusted. These goods may be called religious or spiritual consumer goods (Stolz 2006). Examples are the prices of religious books, religious films, spiritual healing sessions, meditation courses, entrance fees for spiritual concerts and the like.

Many religious and spiritual goods, however, do not have direct prices but *shadow prices* (Stolz 2009a). This often means that the individual pays a church tax or membership fee, or makes a donation and can then enjoy the benefits of products produced by the organization either freely or at a much reduced price. A question for religious organizations is then how to set their church tax rate, membership fees and/or how strongly they should insist on donations. The fact that, in religion, we often have an organization in which members contribute to produce religious goods together leads to the interesting fact that religious organizations will often give out religious consumer goods and services *for free or clearly under the market price even to non-members*. Jehovah’s Witnesses give away their brochures for free (although the individual members have to pay for them); Christian religious services are normally open to all. The theological reason might often be that the gift is seen either as “good works” or as a means of evangelization.

One cost of the religious product is the *time* used when taking part in the ritual, since time has a shadow price (Becker 2013; Iannaccone 1990). Market adaptation may lie in reducing the length of religious services in order to make them more attractive since they become less time-consuming. Another strategy is to organize large religious events. With these, the individual only has to show up once and is sure to have an extraordinary experience, but does not have to commit to a recurring and fixed ritual. A third strategy is used by megachurches: when going to a religious service, individuals may also be able to fulfill other needs (i.e., going to the gym, eating out), thus saving time. A fourth strategy is to use modern media (internet, television, radio) in order to allow individuals to take part while not being physically present.

Another cost possibly linked to the religious product may be seen in that individuals may hold a negative view of the fact that they have to *hold implausible beliefs or act in ways that seem unnatural to them*. One way to lower these costs is to devise special formats for individuals who are not yet believers or who are “doubting.” Recent decades have seen various examples, such as the Alpha course, seeker services, the Thomas mass and others (Hunt 2003; Sengers 2009).

An important literature following Kelley (1986) and Iannaccone (1994) argues that various religious organizations use an explicit or implicit strategy not to lower but to *raise* the cost of membership in order to screen out free riders and thus increase the quality of the group atmosphere and level of belief. This in turn is thought to increase the attractiveness of the organization, making it grow in the medium and long term. It is true that in western countries and among Christian churches, conservative churches have fared better than liberal ones. There is no consensus, however, on whether this finding can satisfactorily be explained by the free-rider mechanism (Bruce 1999; Olson 2001, 2005).

Promotion

Religious organizations may use the *whole range of promotional tools* available to secular organizations. These range from commercials on television or radio, ads in newspapers, billboard advertising, and Internet sites to door-to-door evangelization. Einstein (2011) analyses TV ads by Scientology and the Methodists; Chen (2012) looks at a very successful use of search engine optimization by the Latter Day Saints.

There does *not seem to be one main promotional tool* for religious organizations that is sure to be most successful. Rather, religious organizations normally use a whole range of promotional tools, while unsuccessful organizations often do not use any or only at a very low level (Vokurka, McDaniel, and Cooper 2002). When it comes to organizational growth, one of the most important tools seems nevertheless to be communication through friendship networks and word of mouth (Carrick Coleman 2008).

Since religious organizations normally do “*good works*,” these activities are especially useful in order to create a positive image. If they can be publicized, the religious organization has a powerful tool at hand. Since religions are often ritual based (and ritual being, in essence, repetitive), they may find problems in “creating news” that could be used for publicity. One way around this problem is to organize special “*religious events*” that are newsworthy. Examples are yearly religious festivals, Catholic world youth days, evangelization rallies, and the like. Such events may become especially newsworthy if they seem to have

a wider, not only religious importance. The Saddleback Church Forum, for example, was able to host a meeting between Barack Obama and John McCain when they were running for president in 2008.

Although rather rare, some religious organizations may use *scandal* and *humor* in order to get publicity. For example when the Raelians claimed that they had cloned a human being (Palmer 2004), the payoff was very inexpensive, worldwide media coverage and a boost to organizational growth. Bhagwan Shree Rashneesh was also known to use unusual, confusing and sometimes humorous statements and actions in order to attract attention and media coverage (Gordon 1987). Even mainline churches in Europe can obtain a lot of publicity when they defy the state and offer “church asylum” to asylum seekers who are supposed to leave the country in question (Just and Sträter 2003).

When promoting themselves and their “religious and spiritual products”, religious organizations may use branding. There can be no doubt that branding as a concept is applicable to religious phenomena (see Rinallo et al. 2013). Religions may be considered to have brand names: Christianity, Islam, Judaism, or Christian Science. They normally have signs that may well be interpreted as easily recognizable brand logos: the cross or fish for Christianity, the Yin-Yang sign for Taoism, the star and crescent for Islam, the Lotus flower for Buddhism, the star of David for Judaism. They have “brand stories” (myths) that are embodied in rituals, objects, works of art, buildings and clothing. Their places of worship are often built in a branded, i.e., recognizable, way representing churches, mosques or temples. Registering the name of world religions, however, is generally impossible, because the label is considered a generic name, not acceptable for registration. As a consequence, generic religious names and symbols may be seen as “half-brands”, with a full capacity to support a wide range of religious marketing, advertising, and sales objectives (Einstein 2011), but with legal limitations as regards brand name protection.¹⁴

In contrast, new religions or religious organizations included in larger religious traditions may find it easier to register their trademark. Thus, Scientology has been able to protect its names, logos, and products by trademark rights.¹⁵ Likewise, the Alpha Course, Transcendental Meditation, and “Purpose Driven” products are registered trademarks.

As in branding in general, religious or spiritual brands may be used in order to market and possibly sell a whole line of products. A good example is the “Purpose Driven” brand by Rick Warren. Here, the brand is used to symbolize the “purpose-driven” man, pastor and author Rick Warren, his bestselling books, and the CDs and videos presenting the “Purpose Driven” concept. We find similar lines of products for the Nicky Gumbel Alpha Course (Hunt 2003).

An extremely useful promotional tool is the “brand personality” and “celebrity endorser”. When religious organizations have a “religious star” available to them, this individual’s life, opinions, successes, failures, etc. become newsworthy and can get the religious organization into the media. Examples for brand personalities are the Pope, the Dalai Lama, Sister Emmanuelle, or Mother Theresa. Widely known examples of celebrity endorsers are Tom Cruise (Scientology) and Madonna (Kabbalah). As is the case for brand personalities or celebrity endorsers in general, religious organizations are extremely vulnerable if the individuals that stand for the organization are seen to fall short of public expectations.

Place

Some authors discuss questions of the “place” for the optimal distribution of the products of religious organizations in religious consumer society. The “Place” dimension of marketing strategy is related to delivering products to final consumers through distribution channels and therefore making them available to potential shoppers and buyers. The use of short versus long, independent versus integrated (company-owned) channels, traditional (brick-and-mortar) versus virtual (online, Internet-based) distribution applies to religion, rather concretely and far beyond the simple metaphor. Churches and congregations have their own religious premises (e.g., churches, mosques, temples, and religious buildings of any sort) as well as monasteries, abbeys, bookshops, spiritual souvenirs shops, etc. which may be considered as distribution channels. In countries with established churches, these churches have often used the *parish system*, trying to offer a comprehensive supply with a church in the center of every village. With growing mobility, increasing secularization and growing religious diversity, such a system often cannot be sustained in religious consumer society. The small churches are not sufficiently attractive to compete with all the other secular possibilities for spending one’s time. The parish system therefore seems to break down, giving way to a system in which larger churches try to attract individuals from larger areas (Stolz and Ballif 2010).

Historical Christian churches in inner cities may capitalize on their location by transforming themselves into “*city churches*,” that is, churches that are not the home of a congregation, but that are geared to the needs of larger audiences (Stolz and Ballif 2010). Such city churches try to attract passers-by, offer religious concerts, theater, meditation and meeting spaces. In contrast, *megachurches* often seek out places in the suburbs, easily accessible by car, where land is relatively cheap, and where enough parking is readily available.

New kinds of places are emerging that give more flexibility to a variety of religious and spiritual providers: *Spiritual meeting centers* and *esoteric fairs* have the advantage of not being centered on just one or two types of supply, and of acting as an open space in which many different suppliers may engage with various publics. An increasingly important location for religious and spiritual supply is *bookstores*. Here, the competition between various religious and spiritual goods and between secular and religious/spiritual products becomes completely obvious. An interesting phenomenon is the continuing success of “*house churches*”, where individuals try to create the “religious supply” themselves, renouncing the services of an institutionalized church. Overall, in an increasingly globalized world, we note the growing importance of religious and spiritual *place-brands*. Lourdes, Santiago de Compostela, Jerusalem, Mecca, Bethlehem, and Stonehenge are sites that can be successfully branded and then become very attractive both for religious and secular tourists (Finney, Orwig, and Spake 2012), especially because they “materialize the spiritual” (Kedzior 2013; Morgan 2010).

It is clear that some religious organizations have been effective at marketing and branding and that this has helped them to *grow* considerably – good examples are megachurches (Twitchell 2005). It is not the case, however, that marketing always leads to growth. In fact, most churches in the western world – despite applying certain types of marketing – have *difficulty keeping their members*. The reason is precisely the fierce secular competition these religious organizations face.

Limitations and solutions of religious marketing and branding

Many observers have noted that the increasing use of marketing and branding in the religious sphere has led to a considerable blurring of genres and to the fact that it may become increasingly difficult to distinguish the religious from the secular. As clearly phrased by Rinallo, Scott, et al. (2013, 29) “Is nothing sacred? Is everything sacred? Is there no in-between?” When religious organizations try to market and brand their products, they may meet important limitations. In what follows, we identify these limitations as well as possible solutions that have been suggested in the literature.

Lack of acceptability by the organization’s members themselves

A great many religious organizations face internal opposition to marketing and branding. Members and staff of churches may see marketing as the exact opposite of their beliefs and religious practice. Marketing may be thought to go against the central religious message, or to soften or alter it (Barth 1930; McDaniel 1989; Wrenn 1994). Specifically in the case of Christianity it has been argued that by catering to the needs of modern individuals seen as customers, the central Christian message is lost. One possible solution for proponents of religious marketing is to argue that marketing does not have to change the central message and goal of a religion. Many non-religious non-profit organizations – e.g., United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) or Greenpeace – find themselves in a similar situation. They have to hold on to their central mission and core – while at the same time marketing their services by adapting to members’ and donators’ needs (Famos and Kunz 2006).

Lack of acceptability by the general public

Another obstacle is related to limited acceptance of marketing of religion and spirituality by the general public due to a number of converging reasons. First, religious organizations are considered non-profit organizations relying chiefly on donations; the public may therefore adopt a critical view if the donated funds are used to promote the “public image” of the organization (Kotler 1975). Second, religious goods, especially salvation goods, may be perceived as non-sellable; promoting them can therefore be seen as a form of desacralisation, of breaking a taboo, or of creating “lightweight” spirituality (Einstein 2008; McGraw, Schwartz, and Tetlock 2012). Third, the public is increasingly critical when organizations are seen to be trying to “manipulate” people. Any type of evangelizing strategy is therefore easily seen as going against the principle of religious freedom (Wrenn 1994). On a completely different note, some religious organizations reject brands and branding as symbols of a negatively perceived capitalist society, this being especially true for Muslims (Izberk-Bilgin 2012). On the other hand, religious organizations may also be perceived negatively if they do not engage *enough* in marketing. Individuals living in modern societies may become accustomed to organizations that cater to their every need and may criticize religious organizations that do not engage in similar behavior (Stolz et al. 2016). In general, we can say that the acceptability of marketing and branding is strongly dependent on the cultural context, making it mandatory for international organizations to adapt their marketing efforts to the respective societies and local cultures (Usunier and Lee 2013).

Difficulties in controlling product stability and quality

A third challenging issue is related to the difficulties in controlling product stability and quality. Since religious organizations are mostly voluntary associations, it is often very difficult to control the stability and quality of the “product.” The way a religious service in the reformed church is performed in one village may differ greatly from the way it is performed in another. Denominational names may be stable, but the “product” underneath may drastically differ. While it may be possible to promote the denomination with ads or internet sites, such marketing is inefficient if the claims cannot be followed up when people actually see the product (Einstein 2008). This problem can be tackled with standardization and centralization procedures. However, such changes touch the very core of the organizational structure and are often hard to make (Harris 1995).

Lack of marketing skills

A further limit to religious marketing and branding lies in the fact that religious organizations may lack the necessary skills to do the marketing. Marketing is normally not taught in theological seminaries or in other religious organization’s schools and universities (Kuzma, Kuzma and Kuzma 2009). In Christian theology, marketing skills would have to be treated in the domain of “practical theology”, but modern marketing and non-profit organizational techniques are not often used (Famos and Kunz 2006). One avenue for religious organizations might be to import non-profit marketing skills into the domain of practical theology.

The blurring of genres

Another difficulty lies in the fact that increasing use of marketing and branding in the religious sphere may lead to a *blurring* of genres and to the fact that it may become increasingly difficult to distinguish the religious from the secular. Often, religious organizations will seek to copy successful secular products in order to become more attractive both to religious and secular audiences. The religious service becomes a pop-music “celebration”; the sermon is turned into an entertaining “message” full of humor, movement, and theater. Many televangelists have copied the “amiable style” of secular talk show hosts like Johnny Carson or Jay Leno (Moore 1995). Many successful megachurches, like ICF (International Christian Fellowship), Vineyard, or Hillsong use high-quality pop bands and choirs (Favre 2014). Some forms of yoga have been completely incorporated into the wellness programs of fitness clubs. In another dimension, many esoteric producers copy elements of science by making their organizations “institutes” conducting “seminars” and “conferences” (Greil and Rudy 1990; Hero 2010). When the copying is successful, we may witness cross-over phenomena, that is, religious products may enjoy success in the secular market (e.g., the “Left Behind” series, holidays in the cloister) or secular products may do so in the religious sphere (e.g., rap music in Black Churches (Barnes 2008). Such a blurring of boundaries may lead in the long run to a difficulty in identifying the product. The remedy to a blurring of genres because of marketing is, of course, a more careful use of marketing and branding techniques that clearly repositions the brand as religious and/or spiritual.

The vulnerability of transcendent claims

Religious and spiritual products are linked to transcendent claims. Explicitly or implicitly, they promise some sort of “salvation good” that rests on beliefs (in marketing terminology, “customer expectations”). From a marketing point of view, strong transcendental claims are attractive, creating a clearly identifiable product. The problem is that when transcendent claims become so specific that they may be empirically falsified, they become open to criticism from various secular specialists that become stronger in modern societies (McLeod 2007). Thus, Jehovah’s Witnesses have been criticized for their erroneous predictions of the end of the world, Scientology and various spiritual techniques have been under attack concerning the effectiveness of their therapies, and young world creationists are ridiculed for their beliefs that go against everything we know about the history of the earth. This point can be formulated as the transcendence-marketing dilemma of religions: either religious groups keep to themselves, within strong boundaries, thus guaranteeing strong transcendental beliefs for their members; then they forego marketing to the outside society and cannot easily grow. Or they go out to market their product – but then they have to water down their transcendent claims so as not to be vulnerable to outside secular criticism. In this case, their transcendent claims and product do not seem very attractive – again, growth seems difficult. The solution to this problem seems to lie in adopting an “optimal” level of transcendental claims, not too strong, but not too weak either. Another possibility is to try to have different options for different kinds of members – some with stronger transcendent claims than others. For example, in some charismatic churches, speaking in tongues is normally not allowed in the main religious service for fear of alienating some members and a more general public; it is however, very much encouraged in smaller meetings of the same churches. Table 3 presents possible solutions to the limitations described above.

Research avenues emerge from Table 3, such as research on how the acceptability by the public may be increased and which sort of marketing techniques and promotional tools are perceived as undesirable for religious organizations. Ethnographic research, possibly based on comparative case studies, could investigate what can be optimal TC levels, and how particular religious organizations have managed the dilemma between marketing actions and TCs. In this respect, studies on the segmentation of religious consumers in terms of

Table 3. A typology of possible solutions to the limitations of religious marketing.

Limitation of religious marketing	Possible solutions
Lack of acceptability of religious marketing by the organization’s members themselves	Distinguish the organizational mission from marketing actions; clarify that higher level organizational goals are free from the day-to-day adaptation to the needs of religious customers
Lack of acceptability by the general public	Pay special attention to societal and cultural context and refrain from actions (e.g., <i>hard sell</i> marketing) that might be resented as overly market oriented and, therefore, undesirable for religious organizations
Difficulties in controlling product stability and quality	Standardization and centralization of organizational procedures to avoid unwished and/or unmanaged heterogeneity in service attributes
Lack of marketing skills	Introduce non-profit marketing and management knowledge and skills into the curricula of clergymen and religious staff
Blurring of religious-secular genres	Repositioning of brand by more clearly delineating what the necessary religious entertainment to create a spiritualized atmosphere brings in support of deep-seated transcendental claims
Vulnerability of strong transcendent claims (TC)	Finding an optimal TC level; segmenting religious consumers by degree of attachment to TCs; diversifying product-services with different TC levels to adjust marketing strategy to TC segments

their TC level would be quite useful contributions. Again, comparative case studies could help understand how religious organizations can best control product stability and quality. This may entail research in a services marketing perspective on how the perceived quality of religious products and services forms in the minds of church members and prospects. Finally, it seems worthwhile to research the gap between actual and desirable marketing skills of religious service providers (i.e., taking into account the marketing-TC dilemma) and identify possible areas for improving marketing skills as well as the critical understanding of how best marketing can really serve religion rather than try to help and finish in a disservice.

Conclusion

In this paper, we set out to give an interdisciplinary account of the societal causes and individual and organizational effects of religious consumer society, as well as some limits to religious marketing and branding. We have argued that various *historical causes* have led to what may be called a “religious consumer society” in western countries. Among the most important causes we find, on the individual level a breakdown of religious norms, a change towards individualist values, and a rising disposable income. All of these factors free individuals from former restrictions and give them the right and the resources to choose. On the organizational level, we noted that modernization frees not only individuals, but also institutions, turning many of them into voluntary associations who have to compete for individual interest, time, and money.

The rise of religious consumer society has important effects on an *individual level*. Individuals increasingly show consumer-like expectations with regard to religious organizations (quality, entertainment, adaptation of product); they behave increasingly like consumers in that they “shop” and combine what interests them. While some have argued that shopping and consuming itself becomes “religious” or “spiritual” in consumer society, this is a largely exaggerated view. There are, however, *specific* consuming and shopping phenomena (i.e., soccer fandom, pop fandom) that may be called secular spiritual or even hybrid spiritual. While there is a debate as to what effect religious consumer society has on the overall level of religiosity in western societies, it seems increasingly clear that it leads not to a strengthening of religiosity/spirituality, but rather to secularization. One of the reasons for this is the fierce competition from secular alternatives that religion and spirituality have to grapple with.

Religious consumer society also changes the way *religious and spiritual organizations* behave. Many increasingly use marketing techniques, distinguishing different types of stakeholders and publics. We have discussed various ways in which religious organizations try to adapt product, price (or shadow-price), promotion, and place of their religious and spiritual supply.

Finally, we have pointed to important *limitations and obstacles* for religious marketing and branding. In fact, religious marketing and branding may not be accepted by the organizations’ members and/or by the general public. Religious organizations being increasingly voluntary associations, it may be difficult to control the product stability and quality. Finally, marketing and branding may stumble upon the difficulty that transcendent claims are increasingly difficult to sustain in modern societies. These limitations may be met by different organizational strategies, among them the clear distinction of organizational mission

and adaptation to consumer needs, paying close attention to societal context, and finding an “optimal level of transcendence claims”.

Karl Barth famously said that “The church cannot engage in marketing. The church cannot put itself on a pedestal, create itself, praise itself ... One cannot serve God while at the same time covering oneself by serving the devil and the world.”¹⁶ If Barth’s statement is to be taken normatively, he may be right – this is outside of our competence. If the statement is, however, taken empirically, it is – as we have shown in this article – quite simply false. Religious organizations of all kinds of traditions can and do engage in marketing and branding. In fact, it seems that consumer society actually *forces* them to do so, resulting in powerful effects both on the form and content of religion and spirituality in our times.

Notes

1. A transcendent reality is a superempirical (or “higher” or “ultimately real”) plane which cannot be directly controlled by humans but which is thought to be influencing the lives of men in some way or other. The transcendent reality may be seen as anthropomorphic (including spirits, gods) or not (superempirical laws or states of beings). Symbols are objects, actions or elements of communication that refer to something other than themselves. They consist of a “*signifiant*” and a “*signifié*”. Problems of meaning and contingencies are situations individuals or groups find themselves in, in which things are not how they should be or how they are normally (success, disappointment, catastrophe, positive or negative surprises, malady, death of a near one), thus leading to (a) the question of “why” things have happened in this way and (b) the motivation of influencing such situations with out-of-the-ordinary means. Salvation goods are both the ends that individuals seek with their religious practices and the means to reach them. These ends and means may themselves be transcendent or immanent (e.g., eternal life, illumination as transcendent ends; richness, social status as immanent ends). From the perspective of suppliers, the “salvation goods” that organizations actually offer are only very rarely *physical objects*, but mostly *services* (a pastoral counseling session) and collective activities (a ritual).
2. Note how our definitions are linked: the definitions of cultural-level spirituality, religiosity, individual spirituality, and religious organization all refer to our general definition of religion.
3. While most authors would probably agree with some kind of story of a modernization process leading to the religious consumer society, there is a debate as to *when* it happened. Some scholars (us included) think that the major turning point was the 1960s (Brown 2001; McLeod 2007), while other scholars believe that the important change came about only in the 1980s (Gauthier, Martikainen, and Woodhead 2011). Compare our description also to postmodernist views on consumer culture (Firat and Venkatesh 1995).
4. See for a general overview and assessments: Warner (1993), De Graaf (2013). See for a critical view Bruce (1999). The mainstream version of the rational choice approach to religion has been strongly challenged on empirical grounds. See: Chaves and Gorski (2001) and Voas, Olson, and Crockett (2002).
5. In this way, some of the differences between the USA and most European states can be (partly) explained. In the US, with its strong legal separation of church and state, there has nevertheless been a strong societal expectation that individuals should be “religious” and a generally held belief that religion is a “good thing” even after the 1960s (Lipset 1991). In such a situation, religious freedom will lead to a religious market. In many European countries, after the 1960s, individuals were not expected to be religious anymore. The result was, therefore, more fuzzy fidelity and secularism. Other variables that strongly influence the reactions of individuals to religious freedom are gender, age, religious socialization, religious tradition and the level of development of their country of residence (Norris and Inglehart 2004; Ruiters and De Graaf 2006).

6. Shachar et al. (2011) provide one of the few articles that use experimental evidence in order to argue that “religiosity and brand reliance are negatively related, at least in part, because both allow individuals to express aspects of themselves to others.”
7. Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry (1989) already acknowledge this in their article.
8. Here are some phenomena that have in fact been written about as “implicit religion” or “quasi religion”: sports, pop music, television, sex, one’s own home, art, psychotherapy, mindfulness, self-help groups, medicine, vegetarianism, science (Brinkerhoff and Jacob 1999; Lam 2001).
9. In the (few) cases where this has been done, several hypotheses of the proponents of this line of argument have been falsified. Thus, there does not seem to be a trend towards “believing without belonging” or “vicarious religion” (Bruce and Voas 2010; Voas and Crockett 2005). Nor can we speak of a “spiritual revolution” in western societies (Flanagan and Jupp 2007).
10. In Mac devotees’ communities, (Belk and Tumbat 2005, 205) find “a creation myth, a messianic myth, a satanic myth, and a resurrection myth.” Such brand communities may therefore be seen as hybrid spiritualities. It has to be noted, though, that these cases of extreme brand fandom are rather rare and that the studies investigating them have concentrated on the extreme cases.
11. Interestingly, even economics has been called a “religion”. Nelson (2001, i) writes: “Economists think of themselves as scientists, but as I will be arguing in this book, they are more like theologians”. In our terminology, we are faced with a “secular religion”.
12. A great number of Muslim consumer products and brands that have emerged, for example: Muslim drinks (Muslim-Up, Arab-Cola, Zam-Zam Cola, etc.), Muslim dolls (Muslim Barbies Razanne and Full), Muslim fast food (Halal Fried Chicken, Burger King), or “green leisure”.
13. Cutler and Winans (1999) for example, point to the career of George Barna who has specialized in teaching church marketing to churches; they also show that publications about church marketing have clearly increased in recent decades. Webb et al. (1998) locate the first attempts at formal church marketing back in the late 1950s, when James Culliton proposed that churches should use the 4 P’s of product, price, place, and promotion.
14. If we think of religious brand names (e.g., names of holy books, names of holy places, sacraments and rituals, pilgrimages, etc.) as pre-industrial property rights, they are non-economic and non-institutionalized exclusion rights, which include the moral, but not the commercial aspects of property rights. By institutionalization, we mean the legal framework of property rights which has been elevated to a global scale by the adoption in 1995 of the TRIPS (Trade Related Industrial Property Rights) agreement by member states of the World Trade Organization.
15. See for example : <http://www.rtc.org/guarant/pg006.html>.
16. The translation is ours. The original text is: “*Die Kirche kann nicht Propaganda treiben. Die Kirche kann sich nicht selber wollen, bauen, rühmen wie alle anderen ... Man kann nicht Gott dienen und mit dem Teufel und der Welt solche Rückversicherungen eingehen.*”

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