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Ethical Applications in Advertising: Reinterpretations of the Philosophy of the Sacred

PhD THESIS SUMMARY

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The study of the sacred as gnosis or knowledge within contemporary postmodernism—particularly its metamorphoses, instrumentalization, and its relationship with pop culture, which is rooted in the magical, ritualistic, symbolic, and mythological—did not conclude with the defense of my dissertation in philosophy. On the contrary, my interest in the interpretation, or rather the reinterpretation, of the philosophy of the sacred has persisted and even intensified. I have come to understand that my previous research does not represent a final endpoint but rather a starting point or a modest foundation for a new (and deeper) investigation. In particular, I have been drawn to the multitude and relevance of aspects related to the reflection of the sacred in advertising endeavors. If we examine the complex and controversial relationship between the sacred and advertising, we observe that many of the advertisements that overwhelm or even exasperate us today, invading our space with force and persuasion, have a clear or subtle religious subtext. Consequently, as compelling as the topic of my current dissertation may seem, it is equally challenging. Certainly, the study, exposition, and interpretation of this subject cannot be approached unilaterally but rather through a multi- or interdisciplinary lens, employing rigorous and illuminating methods. Over time, I have discovered that the theme of the sacred in advertising has been the focus of an extensive body of literature, attracting the attention not only of contemporary philosophers and theologians but also of sociologists, psychologists, and artists. Notably, alongside substantial works on the subject written in Romanian, there is a wealth of studies and research conducted in the West, published in internationally circulated modern languages, particularly English and German. The abundance and diversity of these studies not only confirm but also demonstrate the significance of the topic, highlighting the fact that the reflection of religious elements in advertisements is a subject of considerable interest, with strong reverberations not only in mass media but also in everyday social life. Although I was initially tempted to approach the subject from a theological perspective (or one predominantly shaped by theological reflection), I soon realized that the approach needed to be interdisciplinary and open to new perspectives. Identifying and interpreting elements belonging to the religious or sacred sphere in contemporary advertising endeavors is particularly important, serving as a crucial

premise for understanding how the sacred interacts with the profane and for discerning the sacred elements embedded in advertisements within an increasingly secularized society.

The research methodology for this topic is extensive, as the subject itself is complex, and religious elements related to the sacred are often subtly embedded in advertising through the use of symbols or brief biblical references, blending historically or scripturally attested elements with those derived from the realm of imagination. Based on the bibliography, as well as the study and interpretation of case studies, we observe that no clear demarcation exists between religion and mythology, nor between reality and imagination. Similarly, there is no strict separation between Christian (i.e., Judeo-Christian) religious elements and those belonging to other religious traditions such as Islam, Hinduism, or Buddhism. Furthermore, it becomes evident that advertisers do not make significant distinctions between Christian denominations; they frequently borrow, manipulate, or even blaspheme doctrines from Roman Catholicism, Protestantism/Reformed traditions, and Eastern Orthodox Christianity. Most scholarly studies on this subject originate from Catholic and Protestant theologians and non-theologians alike, as reflected in their approaches to and interpretations of advertising with religious undertones.

Consequently, my research and exposition strategy involves employing multiple methods and outlining several successive stages. Firstly, I identified the bibliographic foundation of the topic, striving to overcome theological and denominational biases and interpreting the sources as objectively and interdisciplinarily as possible. Particularly significant are the research hypotheses, the perspective from which we analyze, interpret, and decode the sacred and its metamorphoses within advertising endeavors. If we assess the introduction, instrumentalization, and meanings of the sacred in advertising from a utilitarian perspective, we immediately notice a paradoxical and intriguing aspect: advertising creators employ spiritual or sanctified elements, desacralizing them and repurposing them to achieve material objectives—namely, profit, record sales, and brand establishment within the context of fierce competition. In a paradoxical, fascinating, and deliberately strategic manner, spiritual elements are instrumentalized to generate material (pecuniary) gain, while celestial symbols are utilized to bring financial profit to both the producer and the intermediary (the advertising agency). For theologians, including sociologists within Protestant circles, the biblical foundation of religious elements embedded in advertisements is of paramount importance. However, for an agnostic or an advertising creator indifferent to religious

or denominational considerations, the origins or chronology of religious elements in advertising are of little significance and may even be entirely negligible. Based on my research (the analysis of bibliographic sources and case studies), I argue that to understand why religious elements have been incorporated into advertising, one must grasp their full range of semiotic nuances.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I have highlighted that, from a philosophical standpoint, the examination of advertising ethics can be conducted through the application of several major ethical theories, each providing a distinct perspective on the relationship between advertising and morality. Among these, the most relevant are deontology, utilitarianism, and virtue ethics. Philosophical theories and regulatory standards offer an essential framework for analyzing ethics in advertising. By employing this philosophical analysis alongside regulatory standards, one can establish a crucial foundation for the ethical assessment of advertising. Although each theory has its own advantages and limitations, collectively, they contribute to the development of a more morally responsible industry. The sacred elements used in advertising are not arbitrary. Advertisements frequently rely on fundamental symbols from major religions such as Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism, leveraging the public's familiarity with these images and meanings. According to Jérôme Cottin, the success of such campaigns is amplified by two main factors: the widespread recognition of these symbols by a large number of believers and the ability of these elements to create a profound emotional connection. Postmodern advertising thus exploits an archetypal dimension of visual communication, reflecting a continuous search for meaning within an increasingly secularized world. The relationship between theology and the advertising domain, particularly concerning the emergence and significance of sacred religious elements in advertising, is widely criticized by most analysts. This is because religious aspects often appear in advertisements in a fragmented, excessively simplified, or even caricatured manner. In the majority of advertising endeavors, religious elements are reduced in scope, stripped of their grandeur, and instrumentalized to promote and sell a particular product or service, ultimately serving commercial profit. At times, religious symbols are distorted in advertisements, even to the extent of reversing their original meaning or significance. Religious symbols in advertising do not merely serve a decorative function; rather, they often convey messages with profound cultural and psychological implications.

In the second chapter of this thesis, I analyzed theological controversies and interdenominational conflicts by selecting images and themes that are broadly accepted. For instance, in predominantly Protestant regions, advertisements are more likely to feature biblical characters rather than saints, reflecting the religious sensitivities of the target audience. Another essential aspect of religiously themed advertisements is the connection between image, text, and sound. In modern advertising, particularly in digital media, religious music or music inspired by sacred traditions is used to create a symbolic atmosphere, reinforcing both the visual and textual messages. This complex integration of different forms of expression reflects not only an effective marketing strategy but also the need to recontextualize religious symbols in a manner that is accessible and appealing to a broad audience. Unfortunately, not all these initiatives succeed in preserving the authenticity of the religious message, often leading to trivialization or even blasphemy. Advertisements with religious content highlight a paradoxical relationship between the sacred and the commercial. On the one hand, they manage to capture attention and create a profound emotional connection by evoking archetypal symbols from the world's major religions. The success of these messages also depends on the advertisers' ability to adapt symbols to the cultural and denominational particularities of their target audience while avoiding theological conflicts and religious sensitivities. In this way, advertising demonstrates its adaptability and capacity to integrate cultural diversity, which in turn grants it a certain social authority. On the other hand, this integration is not without controversy. The use of religious symbols for commercial purposes risks trivializing them and distorting their original meanings. A relevant example is Saint Valentine, whose image as a Christian martyr has been transformed into a symbol of excessive consumption in the context of the Western "Valentine's Day" celebration. Thus, religiously inspired advertisements risk fostering a superficial perception of faith, turning sacred moments into mere commercial opportunities. The symbol of angels, deeply rooted in religious traditions, has been appropriated and reinterpreted by contemporary advertising, frequently appearing in various commercial messages. Angels, perceived as messengers of divine will, are primarily depicted in advertisements for their protective and inspirational aspects. This adaptation of angelic imagery to modern marketing demands is not coincidental. According to theologian Gerd Buschmann, the appeal of these figures stems from their scriptural role as heralds of God's plans and spiritual protectors of humanity. However, in advertisements, their role is often altered, with angels becoming commercial instruments designed to attract attention and inspire trust in the

promoted product or service. Contemporary advertising frequently integrates religiously inspired elements to generate a strong emotional impact on the audience. By employing these symbols—angels, hierophanic scenes, or even eschatological themes—advertising campaigns do more than merely capture consumer attention; they create an atmosphere of trust and familiarity. However, this commercial strategy raises ethical questions concerning the integrity of religious symbols. The philosopher Mircea Eliade, along with Codoban, emphasized that hierophanies, as manifestations of the sacred, become distorted through processes of popularization and commercialization, transforming into kratophanies, in which symbolic power is exploited for utilitarian purposes. Codoban further highlights the distinction between two key concepts in the Philosophy of Religion—hierophany and kratophany—both of which are rich in meaning and highly relevant in contemporary discourse. While both hierophany and kratophany represent manifestations of the sacred and the Absolute, hierophany specifically emphasizes the sanctity of the Divine, whereas kratophany underscores its power. Hierophany is closely linked to religious symbolism, while kratophany is more profoundly connected to magical thinking. The significance of magical thinking has gradually diminished, as many have relegated it to the realm of the unconscious, even though the mental operations and reasoning associated with magical thought clearly take place at the level of consciousness. Blaga and Levi-Strauss reinforce this perspective in their research, frequently asserting the "primacy of hierophany over kratophany and of religious symbolism over magical thought"—or rather, over magical practices, which they regard as a degenerated form of religiosity, a pseudomorphosis of the religious phenomenon. Ontophany—a concept introduced into the philosophy of religion by Mircea Eliade—refers to the manifestation of the sacred as reality, the revelation or unveiling of the Absolute Being, the Divinity, as that which truly exists. The term originates from the Greek words *ontos* (being) and *phania* (appearance, revelation, visible manifestation), meaning "the emergence of that which is, the establishment of the real." Codoban argues that religious ontophanies led to the emergence of philosophical ontology as early as ancient Greece. Thus, religious and philosophical ontology is intrinsically connected to ancient Greek philosophical thought and should not be viewed as a late development of the Enlightenment or Western positivism. We observe that the contemporary world is not fundamentally different from the world of the ancients, in which the sacred and the profane were not sharply delineated. The difference lies in how we now conceptualize and define them. Throughout history, the sacred has exhibited diverse morphologies, at times surprising, paradoxical, or even antinomic in today's

context. Since it is an experiential phenomenon, the sacred takes on dynamic meanings and forms, and our experience of it is shaped by our level of socialization. In advertising, mythic thought and narrative structures manifest through symbolic frameworks, whether as a succession of signs or embedded within traditional content. Advertising retains a narrative structure even in the postmodern era while simultaneously engaging in the pursuit of the real within the imaginary. It encourages both orientation and inner exploration, driven by the presence of the sacred in the form of symbolic elements. As expressed in the literature, "the structures of imagination facilitate our path toward the universal experience of the sacred."

In the third chapter, the analysis of the relationship between advertising and ethics highlights numerous tensions and contradictions arising from the commercial objectives of advertisements and the adherence to moral norms. Manipulative advertising practices, such as omissions, distorted information, or visual shocks, often undermine the social responsibility of advertising. Controversial cases, such as the *United Colors of Benetton* campaign, demonstrate how public sensitivity can be exploited through images depicting real suffering—not with a genuine intention of raising social awareness but rather to increase financial profit. Thus, provocative advertising not only violates standards of decency but also fundamental principles of social ethics. Despite frequent criticism, advertising cannot be reduced exclusively to a negative phenomenon. While some campaigns employ shocking strategies to capture attention, there are also examples of responsible advertising that respect moral values and contribute to public education. The creative use of cultural, religious, or symbolic elements can enhance aesthetic and communicative value, provided that ethical boundaries are observed. However, the issue arises when sacred symbols are desacralized or parodied, triggering negative reactions from socially sensitive groups.

Ethical norms in advertising are becoming increasingly relevant in a globalized society, where commercial messages are disseminated instantly and on a worldwide scale. Although legislation in many countries regulates misleading or discriminatory advertisements, violations of these norms remain frequent. Particularly in advertisements targeting children, women, or other vulnerable groups, advertisers must uphold heightened ethical responsibility. Provocative advertising practices that use taboo themes or religious symbols necessitate a reconsideration of the boundaries of freedom of expression in this field to protect human dignity and cultural diversity. Given that

contemporary society is overwhelmed by the sheer volume and diversity of advertising messages, capturing and maintaining the attention of the general public or target groups has become a significant challenge. Storytelling has emerged as a crucial method for engaging audiences, allowing advertisers to capture and retain attention while persuading consumers to purchase the promoted product or service. Some experts consider storytelling to be a genuine art—the art of crafting and narrating stories to captivate audiences and convey a clear and compelling message related to a product, brand, or service. In storytelling, the narrative does not stand out through elaborate stylistic devices, sophisticated literary techniques, or profound philosophical reflection, as in literature. Instead, its effectiveness lies in its simplicity and ability to achieve its intended objectives—whether explicitly stated or implicit—by creating an emotional connection with the audience, eliciting emotions, and fostering engagement. Through storytelling, the promoted product, service, or idea is highlighted, brought to the forefront, and endowed with distinctive qualities, allowing it to stand out among similar (and competing) products and services. In marketing and advertising, storytelling strengthens and intensifies emotional connections, enhances credibility, increases engagement, and fosters customer loyalty. Emotionally attached to a particular product or brand and convinced of its qualities, the recipient of the advertisement—whether an individual or a group—does not remain merely a consumer or beneficiary but becomes a loyal customer and even an ambassador or promoter of the respective product, service, or brand. For storytelling to achieve the desired impact, the accompanying narrative must be captivating, compelling, and persuasive—not merely designed to evoke emotions within the target audience but to influence and drive purchasing decisions while fostering brand allegiance. Consequently, the creation and implementation of such narratives are typically entrusted to communication experts and advertising professionals. It is worth noting that, in storytelling, the communication expert plays a crucial role in crafting or selecting the story, directly influencing the success of the advertising campaign. Red Bull's advertising campaigns, for instance, are built around the central idea that the energy drink provides both physical and mental vitality, metaphorically suggesting that it elevates consumers beyond their daily limitations. While the primary message remains commercial, the strategy employed involves reinterpreting religious themes, particularly the symbol of the angel, which, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, is associated with divinity, purity, and protection. This case study examines the perception of these campaigns, analyzing public reactions, ethical implications, and the boundaries of freedom of expression in advertising.

In conclusion, throughout my research, guided by both academic mentors and specialized literature, I have discovered that the strategies used to introduce and instrumentalize religious elements in advertising are diverse, ingenious, and, in most cases, highly effective. Whether through storytelling, *church advertising*, or *shock advertising*, such campaigns captivate audiences, enchant them, and attract them in the positive sense of the term. Despite the fact that we, as theologians, may feel disheartened by advertisers' failure to draw clear distinctions between biblical narratives and ancient myths, or between historically attested events and those derived from human imagination, we must acknowledge that through storytelling—by merging biblical and mythological narratives, both real and fictional—advertising achieves its ultimate goal: capturing attention, delivering a compelling message, and issuing a strong call to action. As I have previously observed, contemporary advertising characters often "borrow" or appropriate elements of the brilliance, authority, and purity of biblical figures, as well as the attributes of deities or the heroic qualities of great figures from Greco-Roman and Eastern mythology. Alongside these findings, I would like to add that my research has its limitations: identifying all the inner motivations behind these advertising initiatives proves to be challenging, at times even impossible. Paradoxically, spiritual and celestial elements are instrumentalized to advertise, promote, support, and impose certain material products, services, and ideas in the market. The subject—which I believe I have touched upon tangentially, utilizing the guidance of my advisors and the aforementioned bibliographic sources—retains its mysteries and consequently demands and necessitates new, profound, and continuously updated research. While simplicity is one of the secrets of advertising success, defining advertising—and, to use another common term, commercial messaging—and describing the advertising process proves to be particularly difficult. Certainly, advertising represents a form of communication, yet it has its own peculiarities, genres, methods, means, and structure; therefore, it must be researched and interpreted from a multidisciplinary perspective. Religious philosophers speak of "a fall of the sacred into history," meaning that what was once sacred, related to Creation and the Cosmos, becomes something else within the historical context. However, the sacredness of history is permanently eroded by banalization and by the seemingly compressed experience of time. It is not the informative function of advertising that is condemnable; rather, it is the manipulative function. The informative function of advertising endeavors is natural (as noted in Umberto Eco's interpretation of the tumult in the agora of ancient Greece), while the manipulative function must be critically analyzed and

perceived (yet objectively). Researchers examining the interaction between religious and advertising elements observe that many consider manipulation to be an advertising strategy that guarantees or enhances the success of an initiative or promotional material.

In conclusion, contemporary advertising cannot be separated from the cultural and spiritual context in which it operates. The use of religious symbols in commercial messages is a practice that involves significant ethical responsibilities. This study has demonstrated that an ethical and culturally sensitive approach is essential for the long-term success of advertising campaigns. The proposed recommendations—transparency, consultation with specialists, and consumer education—constitute key elements for creating responsible and respectful commercial messages. In a globalized and diverse world, advertising has the opportunity to contribute to a better intercultural understanding as well as to promote positive social values.