IULIA GRAD

RELIGION, ADVERTISING AND PRODUCTION OF MEANING

Iulia Grad
Babes-Bolyai University, Department of Communication, Public Relations, and Advertising, Cluj, Romania.
Email: iuliagrad@gmail.com

Abstract: An important part of the world we live in is represented by symbols, and mediated images and mass media are the main sources of the symbolic material used in the process of shaping the postmodern self. The cultural industry and the communication technology are growing rapidly and they capture important areas located until recently under the tutelage of traditional social institutions such as the family or the church. If we think of the contemporary society in terms of the weak theology proposed by John D. Caputo as a de-secularized space where the individual's need for the sacred is strongly revealed, the crucial role played by the media in the construction of the contemporary world becomes obvious. Certainly, within this vast territory represented by the media culture, advertising is one of the most relevant areas for analysis of the manner in which symbolic structures are reintegrated in contemporary society. Therefore, our paper focuses on advertising as an important force that creates symbolic meanings in the contemporary culture. Along with the symbolic content of advertising, a significant part in augmenting its cultural force is attributed to the way it succeeds to contain religious dimensions in its mechanisms.

Religion and Media Culture

Regardless of the judgmental or apocalyptic tone that accompanies the analysis undertaken by specialists of the media phenomenon, what transpires is the idea that we live in a world of symbols and mediated images, and that mass media is one of the relevant tools in shaping the postmodern self. The rapid development of the cultural industry and communication technologies is taking over important areas which used to belong to traditional social institutions such as the family or the church. Mass media understood as "a cultural system that creates reality through specific elements of symbolic rationality" uses functions held in traditional societies by institutionalized forms of religion, myth and ritual.[1]

Mihai Coman, proposing an anthropological approach, conceives mass media as being "a central component in the process of the social construction of reality, as an institution that generates discourse and a particular logic" regarding not an argumentative rationality, but a symbolic one.[2]

A similar anthropological perspective is offered by Timothy deWall Malefyt and Brian Moeran in their analysis of advertising. Highlighting the similarity between the two fields, they consider that "if anthropology is understood as "writing" culture, what advertising 'writes' ends up producing culture."[3] By referencing numerous case studies they establish the conversion of anthropology into a methodology relevant for marketing research, while advertising becomes the avant-garde of ethnographic research.[4]

Despite the belief that there is a fundamental gap between religion and media, they should be understood as a whole because "media and religion have come together in fundamental ways. They occupy the same spaces, serve many of the same purposes, and invigorate the same practices in late modernity."[5]

The media-religion relation is open to numerous interpretations. In order to understand this relation, one should understand media's ability "to be both *shapers* of culture and *products* of the same culture"[6], a definition which can be also used in the case of religion. This double articulation makes it harder for us to establish the impact of both religion and media and to offer an analysis of their relation.

At the same time, with the idea that media takes the role and some of the functions traditionally belonging to religion, S. Hoover proposes another perspective according to which media symbolizes a cultural forum, an essential part of culture which cannot be ignored by the religious views and practices. Religious leaders, institutions, practitioners,

symbols, values, practices, and ideas would all find themselves involved in this ongoing discourse, rather than separate from it."[7]

Hoover's premise, which is also relevant for our research is that "the media exist and are ubiquitous, that they traffic in symbolic and cultural material that is significant to what we once thought of as "religion", and that religious institutions and those responsible for religious culture are concerned about this situation."[8]

Perceiving media more in terms of practice, not as an institution, Hoover tries to show the way in which religion and media, analyzed separately, but also in connection with each other, symbolize for the research subjects resources in the creation of "meaningful, coherent narratives of themselves as active participants in their social and cultural surrounds." [9]

Although he dismisses the assumption that media symbolizes monolithic processes responsible for the ideological manipulation of masses,[10] Hoover believes that it is not accurate to assume that the process of production, representation and media consumption operates freely. He examines how the proliferation of media sources affects its relationship with religion, stressing that audience fragmentation involves a less monolithic approach towards the media program. Together with changing trends in the sphere of religion, recent developments in the media led to more alert religious media markets. In this context we can discuss about an industry of consciousness where religion plays an essential part.

In his analysis of media culture, Douglas Kellner shares a similar point of view, but from a more critical perspective. He understands media culture as a disputed territory by rival social groups which want to use it to promote their programs and ideologies."[11] Douglas Kellner analyses the mechanisms involved in this conflict by resorting to what he calls "cultural materialism." The emphasis on the political economy of culture and the material effects of media culture are inevitable to this perspective. Kellner perceives media culture in the context of critical social theory, highlighting its importance for a better understanding of social conditions and processes.

The premise in Kellner's analysis is that media culture besets the individual; it shapes his/her perspective and social behavior and provides the basic traits that will end up defining his/her own identity. But on the other hand, media culture can generate "power sources" for the individual confronting society[12], provided that the individual understand its mechanisms, and acknowledge that the texts of popular media culture impose a set of ideas and present them as facts, and poses the necessary instruments to criticize the dominant culture, instruments which only theory and social studies can provide.[13] Based on Kellner's point of view we can notice that if we replace the term "media culture" with "religion"

in his text we obtain a description which some would consider relevant for the relationship between individual and religion. This resemblance between the roles that media and religion play in relation to the individual is worth mentioning.

From this point of view of cultural materialism, Kellner examines a series of products of media culture in the American context of the triumphant era of political conservatism. For example the evolution of Marlboro and Virginia Slims commercials which is connected with a Barthesian mythology[14], an analysis which will be relevant for the next part of this paper. Kellner observes the change in advertisements in parallel with dominant ideologies of those times and exemplifies the way in which these shape the postmodern identities. The main idea of Kellner's analysis is that advertising sells products, but at the same time it sells a specific view on the world through its images and taglines. In the context of postmodern society, "market segmentation in advertising campaigns recreates and identifies the fragmentation and subverts the identity which the new products and identification try to re-establish."[15]

Weak transcendence, weak theology and mass media

The most appropriate framework for discussing the religious and symbolic dimension of media and the context in which it becomes the most potent cultural force in contemporary society is suggested by Aurel Codoban who discusses the way in which religiousness is perceived in the relation between secularization and the camouflage of the sacred in the profane. Based on Eliade's conception, Codoban emphasizes that the sacred is deeply affected by the axiological mutations of modernity, and its territory "ends up contaminated by other values or other goods are wanted with a desire belonging to the sacred."[16] In this context, the manifestation of an "uncertain transcendence"[17] reveals a paradoxical return of polytheism, an extremely relevant aspect of our further discussion. Sandu Frunză also discusses the way in which the sacred is reclaimed in the communicational society.[18] Frunză contrasts two visions of the religious presence in the life of modern man. On the one hand, the lack of interest towards institutionalized religion, and on the other hand, the constant interest regarding the alternative forms of religiousness and spirituality.

Relying on Clifford Geertz definitions of religion and culture[19], Frunză explores the idea of a "symbolic conscience of the world" which constitutes "a kind of transcendence inherent in the majority of symbolic constructions achieved by the human being. They seem to belong to the very human condition. They constitute a kind of continuity of the individual with those preceding him/her and with those we can imagine as being part of what we conventionally call 'future.' It is about a weak

transcendence that leaves room for every individual to participate in the symbolic construction."[20]

Sandu Frunză asserts that the notions used to define the postmodern approach to this weak transcendence in the media, whether it refers to religion, myth, ritual, or spirituality should be interpreted in a flexible way. If religion is perceived as a cultural phenomenon, as an essential part of any culture, myth and mythology represent "analogical structures, mythical sequences, functions similar to those of certain mythical structures, or even a logic resembling the logic of mythical thinking."[21] Frunză asserts that in the context of a sacred that escapes theologies, the anthropological analysis can highlight new ways in which the sacred is reclaimed in the on-going search for authenticity. This search, the author notices, is similar to the search for transcendence in a traditional way, and is associated with the need for meaning which can be found only in relation to something thought of as ultimate reality. And one of the areas where this weak transcendence manifests itself is the mass culture.[22]

The same perspective on media culture seen as a manifestation of sacredness can be discovered in the view of one of the most important contemporary religion philosophers, John D. Caputo. He offers a very interesting perspective towards the major part played by the communicational revolution in shaping the religious sphere of the postmodern world, or rather the post-industrial world. He analyzes the way in which what he understands as religious sensibility, "that movement of living on the limit of the possible, in hope for and expectation of the impossible, a reality beyond the real"[23] has survived the secularizing and reductionist critiques that targeted religion in the last two centuries. Even more so, religion finds a favorable environment for growth in the high-tech communicational systems. "We live and hope and pray and weep in a world of high-tech advanced telecommunication systems, a dizzying, digitalized world that is changing everything. Yet far from falling prey to the prophets of the death of God, far from dying a digitalized death, the divinity simply takes on new digitalized high-tech life. Religion shows every sign of adapting with Darwinian dexterity (to use an analogy that would give the fundamentalists no comfort), of flourishing in a new high-tech form, and of entering into an amazing symbiosis with the "virtual culture"."[24]

Caputo strongly rejects the idea of conflict between religion and new media, moreover, he argues that what the new communication systems offer us is actually what every religion desires, that the sense of "virtual reality" which gives us the power to visit distant sites in cyberspace with the click of a mouse is laced with religious implications. "We have begun to temper with our sense of what is real. But is that not what every religious figure from the Jewish prophet to the televangelist has dreamed of doing?"[25] he asks.

Caputo explains the paradox of the flourishing religious beliefs in the context of a rapid growth in scientific research by revealing that the romantic perspective which opposes technology and religion applies in the case of "smokestack technologies", but not in the "post-industrial high tech world".[26] Another cause is the development of the means of communication and the Internet, a development which implies the eluding of the matter/spirit disjunction. "Matter is on the way out and materialism is for technophobes who are afraid to buy a computer. We jog and exercise not only for our health but in order to re-establish contact with our embodiment, to reassure ourselves that we still have a body."[27] The direct implication of this situation is a weakening in the distinction between the virtual and the material world. Thus, an important part of the answer is that the advanced communication technologies actually undermine old-fashioned materialism and deprive the material world of its rigid fixity and dense and heavy substantiality. The impossible (the element that defines Caputo's religious perception) has its techno-scientific analogue in the total transformability and permeability of physical things, like in the movie Matrix.[28]

The second part of the answer has to do with the de-secularization process, more precisely with "the suspicion we have acquired of Enlightenment suspicion". In spite of the old *new* science, the new technologies have offered a new kind of religious imagination. In this respect Caputo uses Star Wars – The Phantom Menace as an example. He believes that this movie reproduces elementary mythical structures and transfers classic religious figures in a high-tech world. It is through such products of media culture that today's youth encounter religion.

"The Force be with you" is a hi-tech expression of an ancient aspiration, an ancient faith, a soaring hope, an abiding love. May the Force be with you, for with the Force nothing is impossible. The Force trades on the ancient name of God, with whom nothing is impossible. In the case of Star Wars, science, instead of extinguishing the passion for the impossible as so much mumbo-jumbo, is run together with mystical passion in such a way that it is hard to sort out what is science and what is myth, what is scientific imagination and what is religious imagination. The religious sense of life is not extinguished in Star Wars, but re-imagined and re-mythologized."[29]

However Caputo does not imply that traditional religions have become irrelevant and we should seek religion only in popular culture. The traditional confessions are of great importance because they establish a structured and institutional construction which keeps our religious memories alive, which carries on a rigorous and scientific study of those memories and shelters our hopes for the future. Although, in the context described above, we can notice an explicit tendency today to remove religions from the religious phenomenon, to reproduce the structure of religion outside religious beliefs and outside the classic oppositions of

religion-science, soul-body, and this world-the next world.[30]

The Religious Dimension of Advertising

Within the vast realm of media culture, it is obvious that advertising represents one of the most relevant, if not the most relevant, field for the analysis of the way in which symbolic structures are being reintegrated in contemporary culture. Thus, advertising is perceived as a cultural system that provides a way of describing and understanding the world, "a system of symbols synthesized from the entire range of culturally determined ways of knowing that is accessible through ritual and oriented toward both secular and sacred dimensions of transcendental experience in hyper industrial society."[31]

Conceiving consumption as an "institutional field" offers a better understanding of the mutual impact between the economic and social spheres. In the case of this "global discourse of consumer culture", advertising plays an important part because it stimulates the desire to purchase products that provide "good life", establishing the terms that define it; but at the same time "the symbolic consumption of advertising is a form of anticipatory socialization to consumer society, educating people in different ways."[32] This aspect is very well illustrated through the content analysis of advertisements from the former socialist countries, where one can notice a transition from the representation of goods as part of a desirable Western lifestyle, to goods as symbols of modernization and development of society.[33]

Whether we talk about the critics of advertising, or its apologists, there is no doubt that advertising represents a major force that generates symbolic meanings in contemporary culture. An interview with two media specialists, representatives of these points of view, confirms our observation. These two scholars are Sut Jhally and James Twitchell and they both agree that advertising can be seen as a form of religion, as a cultural force which nowadays substitutes religion seen as a key institution in a society. But while Jhally suggests a critical Marxist perspective of advertising, asserting that "20th century advertising is the most powerful and sustained system of propaganda in human history," Twitchell considers "advertising and consumerism as being the articulated will of consumers rather than the air pumped out by commercial interests."[34]

The association of advertising with religion is open to numerous approaches which may vary from the perspective of using advertising to promote religious beliefs, a perspective which does not interest us in the present paper, to the perspective of using religious symbols to promote non-religious products. A possible implication of using religious

symbolism in advertising campaigns is that advertising, through the religious elements which it uses, assumes some of its functions, by providing patterns of behavior and thought, thus becoming a form of religion in the industrialized society. This idea is sustained by the didacticism and the similar rhetoric, as well as the fact that advertising is less interested in offering information about products, and more focused on rendering moral lessons about everyday life, offering a kind of quotidian salvation.[35]

So, the premise of this perspective is that people's perspective on life and their sense of value are inevitably influenced by the cumulative impact of the advertisements to which they are exposed. Even more so, advertising invests products with symbolic properties to give them meaning, an action that traditionally belongs to religion, by furnishing faith and adding magic or a new meaning to the sacredness of a secular environment.[36] Antony Kelso analyses some of the statements of famous advertising people who believe that advertising is capable of satisfying an almost sacred need. For example, Sal Randazzo says that "fitting that advertising should come to play a role in creating and reinforcing the mythologies that shape our lives. The Greeks had their pantheon of gods; Americans have brands."[37]

Hence, advertising represents a "base for a mythic language" which, if we appeal to the Barthesian approach to advertising text, we can read through different semiotic analysis, which regards the myth as "a discourse defined by its intention, rather than its letter", a language interpellating us.[38] Understanding myth as a way of signification which can make any object pass "from a closed, silent existence to an oral state, open to appropriation by society"[39] allows an interpretation of advertisements similar to that of Barthes' article *Soap – powders and Detergents*, in which the mythical language is highlighted in the analysis of the relation between the cure and the evil, in different categories of the worthy detergent, the hero, in the "profoundness" or the "spirituality" of the foam.

In her book, *Mit şi Publicitate*, Mădălina Moraru proposes a mythical perspective to the advertising spectacle. Based on Mircea Eliade's theory of the camouflage of the sacred in the profane, according to which myths are "the expression of a certain way of existing in the world"[40] which does not disappear but rediscovers itself in different forms in any society, the author suggests a detailed analysis of the Romanian advertising discourse, understood as the "melting pot where mythical structures are revived."[41] Moraru analyzes the mechanisms used to rewrite mythical narratives through particular advertising instruments, proving that "the mythical portraiture of a product and a brand transforms it into a cultural product, rethinking its place in the consumer's mind."[42] The myths analyzed by the author are the myth of return to origins, the erotic myth and the hero myth. "The archetypes are the brand's heart beats"[43] is Mădălina Moraru's

conclusion to her analysis of advertising understood as the contemporary host of myth.

We encounter a similar view with Vasile Dâncu who notices that "the tendency of advertising is to represent a transgression of space, participation to the cosmic, to the Great whole which exists inside us and around us. Thus advertising tries to refine this perspective by reviewing the finiteness of the object through the celestial infinity, and the pragmatic banality through the cosmic mystery."[44] This can be achieved through the so called "advertising messianism" and through the most important advertising archetypes (air, water, fire, earth) which the author analyses.[45]

Therefore, beyond the commercial purpose of advertising, we discover its ability to appropriate the roles traditionally played by religion and art, namely to generate meaning. Judith Williamson uses semiology to analyze the mechanisms that generate the exchange of meaning in advertising, through which a product that lacks meaning is offered one by a person or an object that holds one. Gradually, the product goes from being a signifier to signified, thus acquiring meaning. The next stage is that of the "product as generator" which implies the transition from the representation of an abstract asset to the personification, or the procreation of that asset, the product becoming the referent of that sign. The role of the sign and referent changes at this stage. The last stage is that of "product as currency" where the product is interchangeable with the feeling it invokes at the beginning of the process. Thus, as a result of this transfer of signification, products end up buying things that cannot be bought.[46]

Based on the premise that any system of values represents an ideology that perpetuates values through the constant interpretation and decoding of signs[47], Williamson defines advertising as the "supreme arena" in which this process is displayed, the "meta-structure in which meaning is decoded not only into a structure, but is constantly transferred in order to generate a new one."[48]

Thus a vicious circle is perpetuated where the consumer is an "active receiver" who assigns meaning to advertisements, receiving at the same time their meaning. He is caught in the illusion of choosing through the ability of advertising to generate this "*alreadyness* of facts about ourselves as individuals." It is here that the author identifies the ideological dimension of advertising which operates "through us", relying on false assumptions that we do not question because we perceive them as *already* being true.[49]

The instruments offered by advertising, that we use to create ourselves according to the way in which advertising has already created us,[50] fulfill the individual's need to create his own identity and to preserve it in a changing environment, defined by fragmentation and uncertainty. This creation of self is "partly achieved through developing coherent

narratives of the self, and partly through finding opportunity for the investment of trust in institutions other than traditional ones such as the church."[51]

Elliot and Wattanaswan, based on the idea of the self-understood as "symbolic project" show that advertising is one of these alternative institutions, an important source of symbolic meanings available in the construction of postmodern identities. Within the available symbolic material, any voluntary consumption brings with it symbolic meanings, the consumed products being perceived as an important part of the "extended self."[52] Naturally, a product may have various symbolic meanings, perceived differently by different individuals, but this does not diminish its symbolic load. Thus, especially when it comes to young people, advertisements become "token in young people system of social exchange, (...) a form of cultural capital for teenagers to be invested carefully to gain dividends in term of social status and self-esteem."[53] Furthermore, the authors believe that it creates a relationship of trust with the brand, thus acquiring deep meanings for the consumer, providing a feeling of safety.

Baudrillard's analysis concerning the relation between consumer and objects, where objects are "a chain of signifiers, in so far as all of these signify one another reciprocally as part of a more complex super-object, drawing the consumer into a series of more complex motivations"[54] is revalued, describing in Elliot's and Wattanaswan's analysis the personal "brandspace" where the consumer manages to "counter some of the threats to the self-posed by postmodernism, such as fragmentation, loss of meaning and loss of individuality."[55]

For example, sportswear advertising, in Fabien Ohl's opinion represents a symbolic system in which "commodities refer to sacred heroes with valorized identities and buying and owning these goods is, more often for young consumers, a means to accede to a recognized culture."[56] The author analyses various advertisements for sporting goods to demonstrate that their success is closely related to their ability to "provide identity through authenticity" and concludes that a purely economic approach which ignores the symbolic dimension of consumption fails to reveal its true meaning.[57]

This function of social guidance associated to advertising in contemporary society in the disadvantage of traditional institutions is used as an argument by the critics who blame advertising for the fact that, despite this important function, it does not assume any actual social responsibility or purpose, its only purpose being to sell. Thus, due to its major impact on society, advertising is considered to have three negative social consequences: a) the elevation of consumption over other social values, (b) the use of goods to satisfy social needs such as the needs for self-identity and relationships with others, and (c) general dissatisfaction.[58] Barbara J. Phillips defends advertising against these

accusations claiming that advertising is just capitalism's spokesman. Even more so, as a possible answer to these negative consequences, Phillips thinks that along with raising awareness towards the mechanisms of capitalism, which can be best achieved through consumer education, another way of dealing with these negative consequences is to create advertisements based on an alternative value system. "More nonconsumption based advertising is needed to present a balanced picture of the alternative ways consumers can satisfy their needs."[59]

The major role played by advertising in the construction of self in media society can be interpreted through Tricia Sheffield's perspective that, by analyzing advertising through "totemic lenses", identifies three essential elements which prove that rather than being perceived as a religion, advertising is endowed with religious dimensions that make it a strong cultural force. These three dimensions are: divine mediator, sacramentality, and ultimate concern.

What Sheffield proves is that the fetishism of goods represents one of the basic ways in which advertising functions as divine mediator between individual and the capitalist culture of consumption. Also, by changing an object into a product, and thus into a symbol of consumption and of engagement in a group, advertising can surprisingly be compared to sacrament. The transformation of an object into a product which identifies the individual as being part of a group whose ultimate concern is the consumerist ideology is a powerful illustration of the use of sacramental imaginary in advertising.[60]

Based on the religious image of the mediator, Sheffield affirms that "advertising is the mediator through which the culture of consumer capitalism and humanity receive revelation and reconciliation." Advertising mediates the message sent by consumerism to humanity, thus becoming revelation. By the union between subject and object through the act of the consumption of advertising and buying, consumerism and the individual are reconciled until the object loses its power and the process is renewed with another commercial, or another product.[61]

The mediation relation is maintained through the sacramentality of advertising. Objects become symbols of desire through the gift of advertising, through some sort of divine grace which brings the community together for recognition. Advertising as sacrament offers grace to the individual and, by converting an object into a product and therefore a symbol, the divine is present and thus reaches the individual.[62]

The third religious dimension of advertising is the ultimate concern. In this regard, "advertising is the divine mediator of sacramental symbols that joins individuals with consumption clans who worship totems as reflections of ultimate concern."[63]

The theologians mentioned by the author (Cobb, McFague, Meeks, Taylor and Tillich) argue that this culture of consumer capitalism has become the ultimate concern of the current perspective on the world. The

current economic perspective on the world evokes the ultimate concern as it is mediated by advertising which generates collective consumption rituals through totems – sacramental goods. The infinite and the finite are brought together through revelatory practices and consumption rituals.[64]

The author does not seek a theological interpretation of advertising, but a more nuanced approach on the use of certain Christian symbols in advertising. Advertising has very strong religious dimensions which mediate a relation in which the individual gains an identity inside a group through the sacrament of symbols which bear a sense of the ultimate concern. These religious dimensions allow advertising to exist as a cultural institution that reflects the social production of desire.[65]

If we go even further with the exploration of the religious dimension of advertising, we could reference John D. Caputo's "weak theology" which we mentioned at the beginning of the current paper. As we have already observed, for Caputo the post-industrial world constitutes a favorable environment for religious imagination.

Caputo's view on religion, as a religion which escapes from the "limits of religions", defined by the experience of the impossible understood as a fundamental human experience, as well as the analysis made by the author to such movies as Star Wars and The Apostle, convinces us to perceive advertising as a domain where one can rediscover what Caputo calls "the religious perception of the impossible". Religion without religion which transcends the traditional institutional patterns is defined by the "absolute future", a distinct religious category, "the stuff of which religion is made."[66] If the "future present" is the future to which the present is tending, the "absolute future" is the future that pushes us to the limits of the possible. It is the sphere of religious passion for the impossible. But, here as well, we are facing the weak transcendence discussed by Sandu Frunză, "if the impossible is the condition of any real experience, of experience itself, and if the impossible is a defining religious category, then it follows that experience itself, all experience, has a religious character."[67]

Once the essence of the religiousness is found in the passion for the impossible, the religious dimension of advertising becomes much more obvious. It is evident that the whole media culture values the feeling of the impossible as Caputo imagines it, an essential religious category. But advertising instruments this passion in the most efficient manner. Life on the edge of the possible, defined by the "absolute future" is the background of the advertising spectacle where "the impossible is made possible" (Honda), to use a slogan, one of many that could have been mentioned here.

The religious dimension of advertising becomes even more obvious when we analyze the consumption of luxury goods. James J. Twitchell considers that the best way to understand the materialist culture of the 21st century is to grasp the overwhelming significance of the consumption

of "totally unnecessary yet remarkably well-made" products. The most interesting category of this type of products is "a socially constructed and ever-shifting class called luxury. Consuming those objects, objects as rich in meaning as they are low in utility, causes lots of happiness and distress. As well they should."[68] Twitchell examines the evolution of luxury industry, highlighting the conversion of more and more products into "luxury goods" which target an increasingly wider range of social groups. Perhaps more than in the case of other types of products, it is in the case of luxury goods that the religious dimension of advertising is being explored. "For many shoppers consumption mimics epiphany, and luxury shopping becomes an almost transcendental experience."[69]

Therefore, the standard distinction between materialism and spirituality no longer works, and Twitchell, in order to endorse this idea, resorts to the research conducted by Russell W. Belk, Melanie Wallendorf and John Sherry which demonstrates that the act of investing religious value to certain objects represents the core of materialism. In this respect, by using religious components, they formulate the proprieties of luxury consumption thus emphasizing their religious dimension. The redefinition of fundamental concepts pertaining to the study of religion in terms characteristics of consumption is fundamental to our research. For example, hierophany represents "the attribution of aura around certain objects in the luxury class, logo as halo; (...) *kratophany:* the fascination and fear of certain objects, some too luxurious to consume, are made taboo by the community, *opposition to the profane:* certain goods have their value in not mixing with others; *Ritual:* Rules of conduct, don't touch, how to handle, how to display, *Myth:* Stories surrounding who else uses the object, celebrity value, affiliation of others; *Ecstasy and flow:* Possession of object is to enter a liminal state of shifted consciousness."[70]

There are various ways in which objects can become sacred, but expressed through the use of specific terminology of religious studies: travel to a particular place to consume corresponds to external sanction; consuming something "top of line" beyond which nothing else is suggests the symbol of the Holy Grail etc. But the common denominator of these ways is the fact that the product helps the consumer to cross the boundaries because it „is performing as advertised." What advertisements deliver is precisely the message: "I've got it. I'm there."[71]

Conclusions

If we picture contemporary society in terms of John D. Caputo's weak theology, as a de-secularized space which reveals the individual's ardent need for sacredness understood as a week transcendence, a space where "old religious narratives are published in a new edition, translated into the secular vernacular in an affordable paperback"[72] the main purpose of mass-media becomes clear "both with respect to mythical creation and its

function, which in archaic societies was fulfilled by mythical communication instances."[73]

Advertising is one of the most important generators of symbolic signification in contemporary culture. The spiritualization of objects is an integral part of their transformation into consumer products, and what we described throughout our paper as being the religious dimension of advertising is the main generator in the process of this transformation.

Beyond the symbolic content of the advertising spectacle, a significant part in aggrandizing the cultural force of advertising is attributed to the way in which it succeeds to contain religious dimensions in its mechanisms, such as sacramentality, divine mediator, ultimate concern, and the passion for the impossible. Having the ability to generate signification and due also to its instrumenting the religious dimensions mentioned before, advertising does not become a religion in itself, but it can be perceived as an area in which a weak transcendence is manifested, and it is positively a powerful force in the process of shaping the self, understood as a symbolic project.

Notes

[1] Sandu Frunză, "Media Communication and the Politics of the Symbolic Construction of Reality", *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, Vol. 10, Issue 29 (2011): 189. See also Mihaela Frunză, Sandu Frunză, Cătălin Vasile Bobb, Ovidiu Grad, "Altruistic living unrelated organ donation at the crossroads of ethics and religion. A case study", *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, vol. 9 issue 27 (Winter 2010): 3-24.

[2] Mihai Coman, *Mass media, mit și ritual. O perspectivă antropologică*, (Iași: Polirom, 2003), 34.

[3] Timothy de Waal Malefyt, Biran Moeran, *Advertising cultures*, (New York: Berg, 2003), 37.

[4] Timothy de Waal Malefyt, Biran Moeran, *Advertising cultures*, xii.

[5] S. Hoover, *Religion in the Media Age,* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 9.

[6] S. Hoover, *Religion in the Media Age,* 8.

[7] S.Hoover, *Religion in the Media Age,* 10.

[8] S. Hoover, *Religion in the Media Age,* 14.

[9] S. Hoover, *Religion in the Media Age,* 20.

[10] S. Hoover, *Religion in the Media Age,* 47.

[11] Douglas Kellner, *Cultura media,* (București: Institutul European, 2001), 32.

[12] Douglas Kellner, *Cultura media,* 15.

[13] Douglas Kellner, *Cultura media,* 77.

[14] Douglas Kellner, *Cultura media,* 293-302.

[15] Douglas Kellner, *Cultura media,* 304.

[16] Aurel Codoban, *Sacru și ontofanie,* (Iași: Polirom, 1998), 174.

[17] Aurel Codoban, *Sacru și ontofanie*, 178

[18]Sandu Frunză, "Political Communication and the Median Space of Religious Experience", *Revista de cercetare şi intervenţie socială*, vol. 39 (2012): 176-186.

[19] For Geertz, the culture concept "denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life. (...) A religion is: (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic." Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 89-90.

[20] Sandu Frunză, "Media Communication and the Politics of the Symbolic Construction of Reality", 186.

[21] Sandu Frunză, "Media Communication and the Politics of the Symbolic Construction of Reality", 192.

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