

Jean-Claude Usunier and Jörg Stolz, eds., *Religions as Brands: New Perspectives on the Marketization of Religion and Spirituality*

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This book is, as explained in the preface, an attempt to address a communication gap (xvii). While I am not an expert on marketing and branding, particularly with regard to religion, it was with this hope of learning more in relation to the strategies used by religious groups to promote themselves that I embarked on this review. The clear and precise explication of these phenomena across several religions is certainly the strength of this book.

Once the book arrived and I looked through the contents, I felt a little dismayed by the titles of the various chapters. This was mostly to do with the fact that there were no specific chapters focused on the branding, or business of yoga, Hinduism, or New Age spirituality, particularly in Asia, which is the focus of my research. Instead, most of the chapters relate to various branches of Christianity and Islam located in Europe. Of course, my dismay and ambivalence were quickly met with multiple fascinating insights, which while not directly relatable to my own area, enabled me nonetheless to approach my own work with a new appreciation. This is because each chapter opened up new ways of understanding and analyzing different and complex phenomena.

It is difficult to say what someone's experience of reading this book might be if these topics and areas were their field of expertise. Yet, as a newcomer to the fields

of marketing and branding, I found most of the chapters to be quite accessible, not to mention very interesting and insightful. Typically, the chapters I anticipated being the least relevant, or interesting, were quite often the ones I gained the most from reading. This book is certainly of benefit to scholars of religion who are looking for a wide spectrum of diverse examples to understand complex issues in reasonably sized chapters, which also are not too short to disallow for rigorous analysis and thoughtful discussions. Overall, it is fair to say that this book provides a very strong and diverse look at a wide variety of topics related to the marketization of religion and spirituality. If anything, it has served to spark my interest in these topics, while also serving as a solid platform to embark on further reading and research of my own.

Over four parts, the book consists of thirteen chapters. Part 1, “Introduction,” consists of two chapters by the editors. Chapter 1 looks at the antecedent causes for the formation of religious consumer society. For anyone who is unfamiliar with this field, this introduction is a quite good diachronic appraisal, which also discusses the second large-scale cause as being how religious groups evolved from institutions to non-profit organizations. This was followed by the generalized religious-secular competition, changing attitudes toward religious institutions, an increase in individualized religious shopping, and finally shopping and consuming becoming a religion in and of itself. While chapter 1 is a general introduction, chapter 2 explores the commoditization of religions within the World Trade Organization’s Central Product Classification, which is the basis for multilateral trade negotiations. While I found this chapter dense, it really opened up some previously unknown concepts and relations connected to the processes involved in commoditizing religious services through grouping them. The chapter also defines commoditization and discusses the legitimacy of subsuming the academic study of “religion as a business” through examining the applicability of imposing marketing tools and concepts, and whether this fit is appropriate. And, ultimately, it argues that branding is important to meaning-based activities, and obviously applies to religion, even though there is a symbolic rivalry that might be dangerous for spiritual meaning.

Part 2, “Marketing and Branding Religion and Spirituality,” consists of five chapters. Chapter 3 explores religious event management within the International Christian Fellowship (ICF) in Switzerland. One of the key findings of this chapter is that the author asserts that the plane of competition for the ICF extends beyond the religious, trespassing into entertainment. The blend of rich ethnographic insights combined with theoretical considerations really brought to life the motivations of people “to escape the meaningless and up rootedness, and reconnect with their own history” (56). Chapter 4 also looks at branding, music, and religion within the highly successful evangelical Hillsong Church. This curious study focuses on the glocalization of Hillsong’s “sound” and the tension between keeping the brand recognizable through consistent delivery of its product, which “the Australian megachurch whose brand is inextricable from its self-produced, internationally influential pop/rock worship music” (60) does in the opposite way that McDonalds does by catering to the local tastes in each country; instead, we learn that Hillsong “focuses on consistency of its product, and achieves it by standardizing production and delivery” (60). Chapter 5 focuses on the marketing of spiritual services and the role of the religious entrepreneur within the context of market relationships. This chapter is the most relevant to the reader interested in understanding the New Age spiritual service markets that focus

on self-transformation. Of special interest is the way suppliers and consumers work to generate trust among each other. This is particularly relevant when considering the arbitrary claims made by many suppliers within this market, which in turn enables the reader to better understand the various categories of goods made available, and the differences between “inspection goods,” “experience goods,” and “credence goods” (76). How does a supplier of non-verifiable credence goods maintain trust and not trigger an “adverse selection” (77)? One strategy relies on the “communication of a religious narrative, which essentially relates to the biographical self-portrayal of the supplier. Credibility is signaled by the fact that suppliers present themselves as a guarantee of their product on the basis of their own ‘religious biography’, their personal career history” (83).

Chapters 6 and 7 contribute perspectives on religious branding within Islam. Chapter 7 discussed the intriguing world of Salafists and the healing rite of *roqya* in France and Belgium and provided fascinating ethnographic insights into the choices and strategies that people make, not just the individuals seeking anonymity in an attempt to reduce the chance of shame and stigma by choosing to patronize a healer outside their immediate community but also how, say, a male healer negotiates the typically gendered space that includes the majority of his clients being female, and how he involves his wife in the ritual process. Also, I did not expect chapter 6 to be among the standout chapters. I say it was “unexpected” because I was not anticipating a chapter discussing “Justly Balanced Islam” in France to pique my attention like some of the other chapters might. Yet, the lucidity with which the history and contemporary complications of this topic are discussed—not only France, but other European countries with Muslim minorities—has, in a similar way to chapter 7, enabled me to gain insights into the complexities of Muslim integration, the realpolitik of the state, and the lived experiences of those mentioned.

Regarding the themed parts, it is part 3, “Religious and Spiritual Consuming,” that was the most interesting, yet, possibly, also the most theoretically dense section as well. Chapter 8 explores the ways social action is commodified to add imaginative value. It focuses on empirically testing the impact of economic growth on religious change from a supply-side perspective. The title of chapter 9 asks, “Is there such a thing as religious brand loyalty?” To answer this question, the chapter begins by clarifying the differences between brand equity and brand loyalty. One of the key points of this chapter is an explication of how religious commitment within a collectivist religion could affect buying behavior. We are told that religious consumer markets do not just include such things as Halal certification but also include, for example, a multi-trillion-dollar Muslim financial products industry. Chapter 10 follows this theme seeking to determine how religious affiliation grouping influences sustainable consumer findings. As a newcomer to this literature, this chapter was difficult to digest, yet rewarding nonetheless, particularly because it explores “religion’s influence on consumer sustainability behaviors and attitudes” (157). One of the more interesting things to come out of the discussion is that the “simple religious grouping system is always the least effective; which is interesting considering that the simple religious grouping system is found most often in the consumer behavior literature” (172).

Part 4, “Economic Analysis of Religious Phenomena,” consists of the final three chapters. Chapter 11 is certainly the most thought-provoking chapter in the book. This is because it looks at the sources of religious pluralism and revisits the relationship

between pluralism and participation. The conversation around suppliers of goods and services related to niches shows the upper limits of religious diversity. This includes what organizational ecologists refer to as the challenge for groups to increase heterogeneity, when the lack of social homophily coerces groups to become filled with individuals similar to each other. This is a particular problem in the global yoga industry, particularly in relation to the ways in which yoga studios are often segregated along ethnic lines. While many social justice advocates are working to diversify “yogaland,” many are also working toward what social scientists suggests is quite normal; that is, heterogenous groups tend to splinter down ethnic lines. Chapter 12 explores authority and freedom in relation to economics and secularization. “It rejects the economic version of rational choice theory based on several components. One criticism is based on the inability of social scientists, skeptics, and believers themselves to be in a position to value and compare, through conducting some sort of cost-benefit analysis, which religion is objectively better. To say that one religion is comparable to another, like two cars, is not considering that for many members of a religion, all others are simply not viable alternatives” (196). Chapter 13 explores the unique business model of the Temple of Jerusalem. It locates the unique selling proposition of Jewish monotheism in a short but rather punchy final chapter, which also rounds out the book in a polished way. Two points of interest relate to the asymmetry of information as consisting of *maximal* and *bilateral*. Maximal relates to the fact that the religious rewards are quite often unverifiable and unfalsifiable. And bilateral relates to the inability of quality verification of the product, from both the consumer’s and producer’s perspectives, which leads to “a vain race for evidence of a genuine faith that can never be produced” (207). Another critical component relates to “enclosability,” which reflects the idea that rules and prohibitions increase the “access cost” of consuming a religious good (209).

Having looked over this book again to write the review, I am reminded just how full of interesting and relevant information it is. Obviously, this book would not interest everyone, however, it provides several well-researched and clear expositions on what makes religious branding a fascinating topic. While it might be more interesting for a scholar, the register is not beyond the reach of someone outside this discipline. Furthermore, it would certainly be of possible interest to anyone who is a member of these religious groups or just someone who has a curiosity about the sociology of religion, particularly related to the marketing and business and, of course, the branding sides of the equation.

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