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The Ritual Character of the Brand: the Challenge of the New Spaces between Consumerism and Religion

In recent years, more and more attention has been given to the analogy between the most recent trends in branding and the practices associated with religion. It is a matter not only of the development of forms of interaction (such as multiple meanings, integrity of action, liminal character²), but also of developments in the role of the brand. A brand is no longer merely the label of a product, but has become a factor in personal stimulation and the establishment of interpersonal relations. This is why the brand is more and more often seen within a religious context.³ As a matter of fact, branding has begun to have a sort of transcendental dimension, entering “willy-nilly” into the sphere of philosophy and the-

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² This idea, which is quite important for our reflection, has been discussed recently in *La liminalità del rito*, a cura di G. Bonaccorso, Padova 2014.

³ For example: B. Ballardini, *Gesù lava più bianco ovvero come la Chiesa inventò il marketing*, Roma 2014; M. Lindstrom, *Brand Sense: Build Powerful Brands through Touch, Taste, Smell, Sight and Sound*, New York 2005; L. B. Jones, *Jesus, CEO: Using Ancient Wisdom for Visionary Leaders*, New York 2005.

ology. The concepts used to describe it show more and more evidently that at its core, the brand has a ritual character. This paper, after a short examination of what is meant by the term “rite”, will try to indicate some fields of possible affinity between brand and rite, so that a mutual and positive synergy between consumerism and religion may be outlined, since these two realms are in the service of the human being.

1. The understanding of rite

As François Isambert puts it, the concept of “rite” has many meanings. For psychology, “rite” (or “ritual”) is a repetitive, compulsive act without an obvious goal. For semiology, “rite” is first of all a sign, which requires repetitive standardisation because of its function as “almost a language”. For sociology, “rite” is defined by its object (mostly religious), with reference to a compulsive character, connected with obligation and taboo. Finally, the symbolic character of “rite” emerges from its function of communication with beings which are beyond.⁴ Its connection with mythology is very obvious. As Jean Cazeneuve writes, the ritual spectacle “represents” a mythological episode.⁵ Following Lauriston Sharp, Cazeneuve singles out three types of rite: of control (to influence natural phenomena); of commemoration; and, of mourning.⁶ From the sociological perspective, rites came into being out of a desire to preserve the ideal of a life stable and secure from any exterior attack or anxiety.⁷ A rite can: a) abandon power by being closed within a human condition based on itself; b) look for power, giving up a secure stability; c) sublimate the above-mentioned dilemma by founding the human condition on a transcendent reality.⁸ Within rite, the unclean and magic forces become the antithetical aspects of the numinous forces, incompatible with the human condition as defined by the rules. The taboos and the purification

⁴ F. Isambert, *Rite et efficacité symbolique*, Paris 1979, p. 18.

⁵ J. Cazeneuve, *La sociologia del rito*, trad. S. Veca, Milano 1971, p. 34.

⁶ J. Cazeneuve, *La sociologia del rito*, op. cit., p. 34-35.

⁷ J. Cazeneuve, *La sociologia del rito*, op. cit., 40.

⁸ J. Cazeneuve, *La sociologia del rito*, op. cit., p. 43, 371.

protect the established order. The magic is a form of refusal by which the human condition tries to manage the forces which are in opposition to it. The sacred is a special synthesis between the numinous force and the human condition, or, rather an aspect of the numinous, through which the human condition appears as a transcendent archetype.⁹ So, through rite the human being remains a human being, without being closed within a purely human domain. Rite helps the individual to find his/her stability and security within a universal system and within the rules that organise the group.¹⁰ Rite is always a symbolic action which requires an exegesis.¹¹

According to Louis Bouyer, this security guaranteed by rite has a very personal character. A rite is a human action by which human beings understand themselves as religious beings – both in this action and in the word leading towards it.¹² The rite, as action in itself, is an immediate, primordial reaction of religious humanity, in which it accomplishes its effective rapport with the divinity.¹³

Here, rite can be connected with the idea of redemption. Through rite, a human being is saved from hostile external forces. As Antoine de Saint-Exupéry suggestively puts it in his novel *La citadelle*, “rites place in time what is at home in space”. They transfer into a better reality; they make safe. Rites could be called “the traditional acts of an efficiency *sui generis*”.¹⁴

Various theories of rite are discussed by Catherine Bell.¹⁵ She emphasises that they may be regarded “as an action in opposition to thought and theory.”¹⁶ The opposition, or rather – as Bell puts it – “an initial bifurcation of thought and action” is the most particular feature of ritual,¹⁷ which emerges here as a sort of synthesis.¹⁸

⁹ J. Cazeneuve, *La sociologia del rito*, op. cit., p. 380.

¹⁰ J. Cazeneuve, *La sociologia del rito*, op. cit., p. 261. Here Cazeneuve refers to Durkheim.

¹¹ J. Cazeneuve, *La sociologia del rito*, op. cit., p. 369.

¹² L. Bouyer, *Le rite et l'homme*, Paris 1962, p. 84.

¹³ L. Bouyer, *Le rite et l'homme*, op. cit., p. 97.

¹⁴ According to Hubert and Mauss, quoted by Isambert, *Rite et efficacité symbolique*, op. cit., p. 20.

¹⁵ C. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, Oxford 2009, p. 13–17.

¹⁶ C. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, op. cit., p. XV.

¹⁷ C. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, op. cit., p. 6.

¹⁸ C. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, op. cit., p. 23.

Rite always refers to origins. It tries to explain, or rather to make us aware, of where we and the world come from. It is always a way towards the sacred origins of the world, where the encounter with God follows the external forms in which the words and the things maintain their physical thickness, even remaining readjusted to the demands of the ritual rules.¹⁹ So, rite is at the base of the sacred.²⁰ It is a very ancient behaviour which precedes religion and, which, successively, would be finally decisive.²¹ It constitutes an irreplaceable modality of human experience for the specific relation which is realised among its components.²² Rite helps to explain reality through religion. Thanks to rite, religion is at the same time a concept and a reality.²³

As we can see, rite situates itself between religion and everyday life. Following the intention of this text, let us look now at how the concept of ritual is adopted and understood in modern marketing. As Lester Kurtz puts it, rituals preserve the existing social order and maintain old habits. They also play a key role in innovation and the process of cultural change.²⁴ Interestingly, even if the religious context is not so evident here, the “liminal” role of rite is certain. Its modern, “secular” structure seems to be analogous to the traditional “religious” one. Again, according to Kurtz, rituals 1) provide the prescriptions which make it possible to solve problems; 2) are rooted in experience; 3) are connected with the determination of borders and the identification of evil; 4) increase or “reificate” the social processes.²⁵ Rituals: a) regulate our everyday life, b) normalise the changes in the cycles of life; c) harmonise the relationships between the individual, society and nature.²⁶

Such an understanding of ritual evidently includes the moment of liberation (redemption) as well as the function of mediation, a closeness to

¹⁹ AA.VV., *Mística e ritualità: mondi inconciliabili?*, Padova 1999, p. 7.

²⁰ After Burkert – according to G. Bonaccorso, *Rito*, Padova 2015, p. 8.

²¹ G. Bonaccorso, *Rito*, op. cit., p. 29.

²² G. Bonaccorso, *Rito*, op. cit., p. 48.

²³ G. Bonaccorso, *Rito*, op. cit., p. 66.

²⁴ L. Kurtz, *Wierzenia, rytuały, instytucje*, in: *Socjologia codzienności*, red. P. Sztompka, M. Boguni-Borowska, Kraków 2008, p. 791 (the Polish translation from English).

²⁵ L. Kurtz, *Wierzenia, rytuały, instytucje*, op. cit., p. 792.

²⁶ L. Kurtz, *Wierzenia, rytuały, instytucje*, op. cit., p. 799.

everyday life and the issue of values finally expressed in the opposition between good and evil. Aldo Terrin renders this more precisely in the following way: the “religious” and “ritual” sense is rooted in the base of “words”, “gestures”, “actions”, “conditions”, and “preconditions” which are “symbolic”, “metaphorical”, “improvised”, “excessive”, “protruding”, “abnormal” and “a-normal” in relation to regarding the “normality” of life.²⁷ The structure of rite is becoming more important. It allows us to see better the role of rite independently of its religious context. Even for anthropology and sociology of religion, some features of rite are obvious.

According to Giuseppe Mazza, rite may be understood as a violation, as a passage and as a proximity.²⁸ Such a vision seems to fit well with the ambience of branding which mediates a proximity but may also be a passage or a ...violation. As Lindstrom writes, ritual – next to symbol, sound, behaviour, service, tradition, rules of navigation, image, colour, shape, name and language – is one of the elements into which a brand can be “broken”.²⁹ Lindstrom, who defines ritual as “a set of formalised and usually repetitive actions of a ceremonial character”, also writes about “the commercial rituals” which are becoming an increasingly common element of social life.³⁰ In addition, he mentions what is needed to construct a ritual: coherence, consequence, profit, community of experiences, universality.³¹ Within this enumeration one can see the echo of the classical understanding of rite – taken out of its religious context, however.

The sphere of affinity (or of analogy) with ritual is the reality of commerce: selling, publicity, consumption, etc. Shopping is more and more extending outside the shop. It tries to define the spaces of our life and to involve us personally as much as possible, creating a network of various interactions. Among the features of this phenomenon one can dis-

²⁷ A. N.Terrin, *Il valore della liminalità nel contesto di una prospettiva rituale plurisemantica*, in: *La liminalità del rito*, a cura di G. Bonaccorso, Padova 2014, p. 17–52, 52.

²⁸ G.Mazza, *Liminalità ritual e pensiero teologico*, in: *La liminalità...*, op.cit., p. 209–218.

²⁹ M. Lindstrom, *Brand Sense...*, op.cit., p. 58n; the quotation after the Polish translation by B. Sałbut (*Brand Sense. Marka pięciu zmysłów*, Gliwice 2009).

³⁰ M. Lindstrom, *Brand Sense...*, op.cit., p. 147.

³¹ M. Lindstrom, *Brand Sense...*, op.cit., p. 233–234.

tinguish mediation, opening, expression, performance, substitution, the importance of body, sacrifice, play, incarnation and universe.

These aspects constitute rite and make it present in the modern world – especially in social and individual contexts. Everything circulates around the elementary relationships that individuals have: with the world and with society – and, of course, with themselves (body, health, well-being, prosperity, future). Thus the rite is something more than simply a vision of the world. It is a participation, a real and concrete existential and social experience. If this is the case, the philosophical and theological understanding of rite refers to the same anthropological and sociological categories as do some descriptions of the mechanisms of branding: community, honesty, identity, encounter, coherence, consistency – but also empathy, discretion, respect, courage, narration and wisdom. Branding turns out to stimulate and to open relationships. It has important and far-reaching ethical implications. It also operates within the categories of responsibility and justice.

2. Relations

The main channel of the relational character of rite is the word. Rite uses words, enlarging their influence and power. As Bouyer expresses it, in ritual the action should be spiritualised by the word³². As was mentioned above, rite constitutes the linkage between action and word. This is exactly the essence of the universality of ritual. According to Bell, “ritual is seen as a definitive component of various processes that are deemed to constitute religion, or society, or culture. [...] Ritual is a type of critical juncture, wherein some pair of opposing social and cultural forces come together.”³³ Later, Bell enumerates such examples of ritual integration as “belief and behaviour, tradition and change, order and chaos, the individual and the group, subjectivity and objectivity, nature and culture,

³² L. Bouyer, *Le rite et l'homme*, op. cit., p. 91.

³³ C. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, op. cit. p. 16.

the real and the imaginative ideal.”³⁴ Everything refers to the dynamics of body “defined within a symbolically structured environment”. It is “a mute form of activity.”³⁵ Thanks to ritualization, the world may be reinterpreted “in such a way as to afford perceptions and experiences of a redemptive hegemonic order”. Ritualisation is related to empowerment or disempowerment, ensuring “the ultimate coherence of a cosmos in which one takes a particular place.”³⁶ Somewhere here is the source of all ritual actions and their influence upon us:

„It is in ritual – as practices that act upon the actions of others, as the mute interplay of complex strategies within a field structured by engagements of power, as the arena for prescribed sequences of repetitive movements of the body that simultaneously constitute the body, the person, and the macro and micro-networks of power – that we can see a fundamental strategy of power. In ritualisation, power is not external to its workings: it exists only insofar as it is constituted with and through the lived body, which is both the body of society and the social body. Ritualisation is a strategic play of power, of domination and resistance, within the arena of the social body.”³⁷

This importance of relations is also of key importance for branding. According to Gianfranco Marrone, brand is a discursive process which, while creating relationships with things and values, generates them as independent entities. First comes the relationship, and then the elements which constitute it. If, on the one hand, there is a material of economy and, on the other hand, an immaterial of the symbolic, it is so because they were both generated by a discourse constructing a semiotic rapport.³⁸

This is a relationship whose role is to bring together and reconcile opposites. Within this ambience, brand quite often takes the role of rite. So, it does not refer necessarily to an evidently transcendental dimension; instead, it connects bodies and objects.³⁹ Brand is also a mediation of the

³⁴ C. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, op. cit. p. 16.

³⁵ C. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, op. cit. p. 93.

³⁶ C. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, op. cit. p. 141.

³⁷ C. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, op. cit. p. 204.

³⁸ G. Marrone, *Il discorso di marca. Modelli semiotici per il branding*, Roma–Bari 2007, p. 4.

³⁹ G. Marrone, *Il discorso di marca. Modelli semiotici per il branding*, op. cit., p. 8.

body.⁴⁰ These relations create a sort of universe. Like myths, brands speak with one another. They construct and mutually transform their identity.⁴¹ They create a substitute transcendence which is closer and more accessible. The means for this are very natural and obvious and, again, the same as in the epoch of myths: narration, affect and passion.⁴²

Bauman sees brands as a bond. It is a matter of harnessing all of the homeless and freely drifting needs in support of the work of “the great brands”. Human bonds are to be replaced by an attachment to brands.⁴³ According to Lindstrom, the new branding is a social binder which will connect and unify whole generations of people.⁴⁴ The more a brand refers to rituals, the stronger its bond is with the consumer.⁴⁵ A bond develops in time. The rapport between time and bond is constituted by loyalty, tradition, ritual, religion.⁴⁶ It is the emotional bonds between brand and consumer that count.⁴⁷ Here the senses enter the game. Just as from time immemorial they have been involved in religious rites, today they accompany the operations of brands. Lindstrom is convinced that religion is one of the aspects of branding of the new generation. All the senses should be involved. The brand should be sensual.⁴⁸ It is exactly here that rituals are a base for the creation of bonds.⁴⁹ The sensual branding must be real, relevant, ritual repetition.⁵⁰

As we recall, rites determine borders. They constitute and define communities. Brands do the same. To create social bonds, they offer a sense of belonging.⁵¹ What counts here are loyalty and faithfulness, other cat-

⁴⁰ G. Marrone, *Il discorso di marca. Modelli semiotici per il branding*, op. cit., p. 293–298.

⁴¹ G. Marrone, *Il discorso di marca. Modelli semiotici per il branding*, op. cit., p. 14.

⁴² G. Marrone, *Il discorso di marca. Modelli semiotici per il branding*, op. cit., p. 116–124, 131–141.

⁴³ Z. Bauman, *Liquid life; the reference is made to the Polish translation by T. Kunz, Płynne życie*, Kraków 2007, p. 181.

⁴⁴ M. Lindstrom, *Brand Sense...*, op. cit., p. 13.

⁴⁵ M. Lindstrom, *Brand Sense...*, op. cit., p. 148.

⁴⁶ M. Lindstrom, *Brand Sense...*, op. cit., p. 210.

⁴⁷ M. Lindstrom, *Brand Sense...*, op. cit., p. 211.

⁴⁸ M. Lindstrom, *Brand Sense...*, op. cit., p. 13.

⁴⁹ M. Lindstrom, *Brand Sense...*, op. cit., p. 85.

⁵⁰ M. Lindstrom, *Brand Sense...*, op. cit., p. 145.

⁵¹ M. Lindstrom, *Brand Sense...*, op. cit., p. 218–219.

egories known from religion. They guarantee our safety, providing us with a sense of predictability.⁵²

In our “liquid times”, characterised, as Bauman rightly observes, by a lack of borders, this role of rite is particularly important – but also undermined, or at least deformed.⁵³ Brands want to create something which essentially seems impossible within the modern society. The necessity of continuous change of products is a rule of the market. It coincides with the fluidity of social bonds and points of reference. The bonds in branding seem to go against this trend, but not without problems or even paradoxes. Loyalty is transformed into an eruption of new desires.⁵⁴ Brands play with this natural need of bonds and its cultural and social destruction.

Thus relationships create a space where brands are the most successful. Brands are catalysts of relationships between countries, cultures and societies. They bring the promise of an alignment of underdevelopment. As a result they open an essential dimension of both rite and branding: community.

3. Community

The sense and reality of community is one of essential dimensions and challenges of social life. Ritualisation creates conditions for community and constitutes it. As we recall, rites determine the borders. They constitute and define communities. Brands do the same. To create social bonds, they offer a sense of belonging.⁵⁵ Here, loyalty and faithfulness count – another category known from religion. They guarantee our safety, providing us with a sense of predictability.⁵⁶

Thanks to ritualisation, as Bell poetically puts it, “through an orchestration in time of loosely and effectively homologised oppositions, in which some gradually come to dominate others, the social body repro-

⁵² M. Lindstrom, *Brand Sense...*, op. cit., p. 208.

⁵³ Z. Bauman, *Liquid life...*, op. cit., p. 104.

⁵⁴ Z. Bauman, *Liquid modernity*, Cambridge 2000, p. 56.

⁵⁵ M. Lindstrom, *Brand Sense...*, op. cit., p. 218–219.

⁵⁶ M. Lindstrom, *Brand Sense...*, op. cit., p. 208.

duces itself in the image of the symbolically schematised environment that has been simultaneously established.”⁵⁷ Ritualisation does not simply act “to bring the social body, the community, the largest image of reality, into some reassuring configuration of coherent continuity”. It also maintains and appropriates the coherence of community “in terms of the interests of persons or groups”. For people empowered by the schemes of ritual, this coherence “is rendered and experienced as redemptive.”⁵⁸ Ritualisation constructs power relations. In this way order in the community may be achieved. Some authors call it “social solidarity.”⁵⁹ Without any explicit reference to politics, rituals are politics. They are power. They act and actuate.⁶⁰ As Marrone puts it, the brand belongs to a “communicative pact.”⁶¹ The most popular religions were generally efficient and creative campaigns of mass communication. They took up complex problems and made of them a convincing message, using the power of language, strikingly beautiful iconography and a powerful symbolism.⁶²

The community and the brand need to be animated by somebody. It is around a person that the bonds will appear; it is a person who authenticates the brand. Such persons, called celebrities, are the priests and prophets of a brand (even if, in contrast to priests, they promote themselves!). They bind together the dispersed society of our days. They are known because of being known. Through their career and behaviour they create communities – even if these communities are only imaginary, loose, fragile, transitory and ephemeral.⁶³ Celebrities are the objects of cult, but their cults are not exclusive.⁶⁴ However, they may also become victims, sacrificed on the altar of community, attempting to integrate its bonds. This is exactly what René Girard described as the mechanism of the scapegoat, which defines rigid and impassable borders between a community and its

⁵⁷ C. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, op. cit., p. 110.

⁵⁸ C. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, op. cit., p. 115.

⁵⁹ C. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, op. cit., p. 171.

⁶⁰ C. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, op. cit., p. 195.

⁶¹ G. Marrone, *Il discorso di marca. Modelli semiotici per il branding*, op. cit., p. 9.

⁶² S. Anholt, *Brand New Justice. How branding places and products can help the developing world*, Oxford 2003 (2005), p. 228.

⁶³ Z. Bauman, *Liquid life*, op. cit., p. 80.

⁶⁴ Z. Bauman, *Liquid life*, op. cit., p. 81.

surroundings. It is a rite, “a creative event”. Paradoxically, this murder creates community. The murdered enemy must remain ready to revive.⁶⁵

Thus community may also be created around an event. Paradoxically, the need of community is stronger than interest in brands. Brands may seem a good modern pretext for creating community, but events have an advantage over brands because they do not demand loyalty. Events fit better into the short memory of crowds and the murderous rivalry of different attractions, fighting for the attention of customers. An “event” becomes a way of creating a “brand”.⁶⁶ Events (sport games or concerts, especially of popular music – but not only!) give an impression of community. They create some free links, offering a space of at least partial oblivion and liberation. Their practices, observed in these cases, seem to have a ritual character: the people involved in them experience something more than just consumption. They enter a new, better, involving and transforming world. They participate in something which goes far beyond their everyday reality but is neither too far, nor too difficult.

“The cloakroom communities”, as Bauman calls them, arise around singular, spectacular and transitive events. When the event ends, they disappear until they are constituted within another configuration by a successive event.⁶⁷ But, in fact, the real community in our time is more and more problematic. The more fragile it is, the more important the role of rite seems to be. According to Bauman, the vision of community is a vision of a cosy home seclusion in the midst of a raging storm.⁶⁸ Body and community are the last bulwarks on the emptying battleground where, day after day, without respite, there is a war for certainty, durability and safety.⁶⁹ Community is perceived through the prism of the individual person: it should protect the individual. Ultimately, everything is being reduced to the body, which has become the last bastion and shrine of continuity and duration.⁷⁰ No wonder that rite in branding revolves around body.

⁶⁵ Z. Bauman, *Liquid modernity*, op.cit., p. 302–304.

⁶⁶ Z. Bauman, *Liquid life*, op.cit., p. 97–98.

⁶⁷ Z. Bauman, *Liquid modernity*, op.cit., p. 308–312.

⁶⁸ Z. Bauman, *Liquid modernity*, op.cit., p. 283.

⁶⁹ Z. Bauman, *Liquid modernity*, op.cit., p. 285.

⁷⁰ Z. Bauman, *Liquid modernity*, op.cit., p. 284.

Here the dilemma *freedom or safety* is at stake and, consequently, *quietness or boredom*.⁷¹ In the first case, brands seem to promise a reconciliation; in the second, to offer an attractive quietness. Nothing concerns individuals so much as “the masses”. In the epoch of fragility and fatigue, brands offer simple and available solutions, sometimes operating with “kitsch”, to defeat easily the darkness of uncertainty and to generate faith.⁷²

4. Towards religious perspectives

As relations create the community, both community and relations are created and generated by narration. Narration, being a very important drive of religions and rites, is a natural vehicle of influence of branding. Anholt emphasises its importance.⁷³ Even if narration assumes new, and increasingly multi-sensual forms, its religious and ritual origins are evident. It carries a message addressed to the consumer, intended to boost confidence. In this sense, narration creates personal, intimate bonds between brand and consumer. Being a sort of game, it invites us into collaboration⁷⁴. As Anholt provocatively notices, brand is not what we want: brand is to convince us.⁷⁵ People, he adds, need hope. They like to be seduced and bewitched.⁷⁶ However, this rapport (or rather relationship) between brand and client is not manipulation. It is a contract based on some values. Good reputation, good name, credibility are the basis of trust.⁷⁷ A good brand may be constructed only through coherence and consistency consequence,⁷⁸ which is a solid, ethical requirement. In this way, brands may oppose the logic of the consumer where culture and values become subordinated to the rules of the market, with bestsell-

⁷¹ Z. Bauman, *Liquid life*, op. cit., p. 60, 121.

⁷² B. Ballardini, *Gesù lava più bianco...*, op. cit., p. 140.

⁷³ S. Anholt, *Brand New Justice...*, p. 213.

⁷⁴ G. Marrone, *Il discorso di marca. Modelli semiotici per il branding*, op. cit., p. 163–168.

⁷⁵ S. Anholt, *Brand New Justice...*, op. cit., p. 131–132, 135.

⁷⁶ S. Anholt, *Brand New Justice...*, op. cit., p. 229.

⁷⁷ S. Anholt, *Brand New Justice...*, op. cit., p. 34.

⁷⁸ S. Anholt, *Brand New Justice...*, op. cit., p. 125.

ing as the only criterion.⁷⁹ This subordination, however, implies another one: referring to the internal coherence of brands. The brand becomes a sphere of values. Are its internal order and harmony not a redemptive substitute for the lost social order? Or, at least, an attempt at therapy? Brands help us to reconstruct the identities of individuals and of communities as well as their experience of freedom. They are a social exercise and an occasion (rightly or mistakenly) for growth.

So, unexpectedly, the brand has led us directly into a sphere which transcends everyday life. Rites as behaviours are interwoven into everyday life, linking it with the mythical world.⁸⁰ In this situation religion and magic should be distinguished very clearly.⁸¹ At the same time, the human being appears as a mystery, as someone divided between a desire to define his condition of security and the temptation to bypass overpass every rule. All this may cause anxiety but it is also a chance of opening to transcendence.⁸² If this is so, religious rite can reveal to us how humanity could unite the contradictory tendencies into one more or less coherent system.⁸³ But according to Bell, the final goal of ritualisation is the quality of the new person. "Ritualisation sees the evocation of consensus on values, symbols, and behaviour that is the end of ritualisation."⁸⁴ And, as Elmar Salmann writes, in rite, the drama of existence, the adventures of body and the intrigues between spirit and body are transformed into a gesture of memory, abandonment and generosity, in a detachment the poles of which give and receive one another. Rite recreates and performs the difference between dimensions and makes possible their interweaving. Rite is a transition between the endured destiny and life welcomed and given in freedom and grace. In rite body discovers itself to be full and a pledge of spirit and truth which give themselves one to another only in a literal praxis, in a sacrifice of the immediate. In rite, the word and

⁷⁹ Z. Bauman, *Liquid life*, op. cit., p. 94–96.

⁸⁰ J. Cazeneuve, *La sociología del rito*, op. cit., p. 35.

⁸¹ J. Cazeneuve, *La sociología del rito*, op. cit., p. 36.

⁸² J. Cazeneuve, *La sociología del rito*, op. cit., p. 43.

⁸³ J. Cazeneuve, *La sociología del rito*, op. cit., p. 272.

⁸⁴ C. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, op. cit., p. 110.

the spirit become continuously flesh, an object – until they fall silently to disappear. The flesh reveals itself as a presence of the word.⁸⁵

This action is reflected in the action of brands. According to Marrone, brands have a formative impact. They may make something sensible and empathetic; they can also moralise.⁸⁶ They are forms of life.⁸⁷ They constitute a style⁸⁸ which, according to some theologians, is perhaps one of the most real ways of perceiving and experiencing Christianity.⁸⁹

Thus one can say that the human and social impact of brands is similar to that of religion. Sociologists and economists admit unanimously that today, for many motives – all of an eminently semiotic nature – brands stand in place of God. They propose values which tend to articulate and develop one's proper subjective identity. A narrative course is more important than the values in which subjects and objects enter into a complex and variable relationship.⁹⁰

The religious discourse is closer to brands than the political or advertising one. The brand seems an actual form of divinity – not transcendent and remote, but unifying. The brand is a mediating relation between different entities. It also constitutes communities of the faithful. Commercial centres are the cathedrals of consumption. They send a message to society, but without any imposition or manipulation. This message always remains fragile and susceptible to rejection. "It inoculates the desires, opens the universes of sense and guarantees forms of existence". It controls and absorbs everything. Finally, it arises as a divine entity because it vindicates and implements its founding capacity over human and social bodies. It marks and prints skin and bodies. It "arises as a creator, a per-

⁸⁵ Salmann, E., *Passi e passaggi nel cristianesimo. Piccola mistagogia verso il mondo della fede*, Assisi 2009, p. 241–242.

⁸⁶ G. Marrone, *Il discorso di marca. Modelli semiotici per il branding*, op. cit., p. 125.

⁸⁷ G. Marrone, *Il discorso di marca. Modelli semiotici per il branding*, op. cit., p. 142–151.

⁸⁸ G. Marrone, *Il discorso di marca. Modelli semiotici per il branding*, op. cit., p. 206–217.

⁸⁹ See, for example, E. Salmann, *I ritmi dell'esperienza simbolico-liminale: verso una teoria dello stile di vita Cristiana*, in: E. Salmann, *Passi e passaggi...*, op. cit., p. 248–264; E. Salmann, *La forza del forse. Il cristianesimo come evento e fermento di uno stile possibile*, in: E. Salmann *Presenza di spirito. Il cristianesimo come gesto e pensiero*, Padova 2000, p. 7–20; Ch. Theobald, *Christianite comme style*, 1, 2, Paris 2007.

⁹⁰ G. Marrone, *Il discorso di marca. Modelli semiotici per il branding*, op. cit., p. 333.

fect replacement of God, creator of heaven and earth, of the material and immaterial things.”⁹¹

Arnholt notices that the brand is omnipresent, remaining, however, one big monologue.⁹² The brand seems to be an excellent tool to integrate economy and sociology, anthropology and culture. Thanks to branding, religion, destroyed and neglected, may be replaced by the idea of sustainable development – and the religions which are still alive may perhaps be refreshed. This idea should be promoted by the use of the best religious means.⁹³ As religions have always transformed the world, so marketing, if in good hands, becomes an unusually strong instrument to bring about large-scale social and cultural changes.⁹⁴ This thesis is also confirmed by Martin Lindstrom who says that each holistic brand has its own identity, expressed in its message, shapes, symbols, rites and tradition. It is an equivalent of today’s sport teams or religious beliefs.⁹⁵ No wonder that sometimes in the modern world it is difficult to tell faith from business.⁹⁶ The brand may even be regarded as something more concrete than religion. Brands incessantly flounder in successive reflections about the values they represent, whereas religion help us to approach what is elusive.⁹⁷ This happens, as Zygmunt Bauman notices, because in our times of radical change, the old strategies and experiences are no more valid.⁹⁸ The tension between continuity and changes is typical for both religions and institutions.⁹⁹ The development of sciences has revitalised and reoriented religions and their habits, provoking their adaptation to new circumstances.¹⁰⁰ What remains is the importance of symbol, invariably present both in religion and in brands. As Simon Anholt puts it, the symbol

⁹¹ G. Marrone, *Il discorso di marca. Modelli semiotici per il branding*, op. cit., p. 336.

⁹² S. Anholt, *Brand New Justice...*, op. cit., p. 54.

⁹³ S. Anholt, *Brand New Justice...*, op. cit., p. 228–229.

⁹⁴ S. Anholt, *Brand New Justice...*, op. cit., p. 232.

⁹⁵ M. Lindstrom, *Brand Sense...*, op. cit., p. 15.

⁹⁶ M. Lindstrom, *Brand Sense...*, op. cit., p. 205.

⁹⁷ M. Lindstrom, *Brand Sense...*, op. cit., p. 206.

⁹⁸ Z. Bauman, *Liquid life*, op. cit., p. 5.

⁹⁹ L. Kurtz, *Wierzenia, rytuały, instytucje*, op. cit., p. 807–808.

¹⁰⁰ L. Kurtz, *Wierzenia, rytuały, instytucje*, op. cit., p. 810.

is a vase in which the brand will gradually become mature.¹⁰¹ Here, Hello Kitty can serve as an example which has been presented and promoted as a type of “Saviour”, as a symbol of a perfect world.¹⁰²

An interesting analogy between brands and religion is presented by Bruno Ballardini. According to him, rite has a linguistic foundation: the scripture is death, the resurrection is in the spoken word. Jesus dies textually every time that one makes a reference to the Scriptures, whilst the orality of the sacrament makes him rise again. The Eucharist is vitally important because its rite establishes and fixes the rapport between Christians and the world.¹⁰³ Thus the sacrament is only seemingly an interactive rite: it results from the authority of a ministry which is in charge of it and it turns out to be absolutely a one-way reality. The Church was not only the first to bring to life this virtual reality, but it also made it a real event, stating a symbiosis of the divine with the human element in a sort of architectural *client-server*.¹⁰⁴ Ballardini sees the Eucharist as a basic model for marketing because the logic of classical marketing is a ...cannibalistic one. One fights one’s own adversary and, after being defeated, is engulfed.¹⁰⁵ Does his analogy end here, however? A few paragraphs earlier, Girard’s mechanism of the scapegoat was mentioned. Is the Eucharist a structural and anthropological base for brands? Or do both the Eucharist and the brand perhaps have a common, anthropological root? Looking at these questions historically, one could venture to state that without the Eucharist there would be no branding. Without Christian culture there would be no possible development of human dignity and needs or any new means of fulfilling them. The increasing power of the brand seems to be a result of secularisation – understood for instance in the light of Taylor’s categories of Intellectual Deviation and Reform Master Narrative.¹⁰⁶ This explains both the intellectual decline and a simultaneous grow of personal subjectivity in present-day society.

¹⁰¹ S. Anholt, *Brand New Justice...*, op. cit., p. 181.

¹⁰² M. Lindstrom, *Brand Sense...*, op. cit., p. 228–229.

¹⁰³ B. Ballardini, *Gesù lava più bianco...*, op. cit., p. 76.

¹⁰⁴ B. Ballardini, *Gesù lava più bianco...*, op. cit., p. 81.

¹⁰⁵ B. Ballardini, *Gesù lava più bianco...*, op. cit., p. 94.

¹⁰⁶ Ch. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, Massachusetts – London, England 2007, p. 773–776.

Conclusion

If religion means ties and if consumerism operates in (and thanks to) the global networking, perhaps their traditional antagonism is to be replaced by a complementarity – in the name of an integral vision of the human being. The analogies between these two realities, conscious or accidental, deserves to be well examined. Here are some fields of possible dialogue and mutual inspiration:

- discovery and formation of real human needs;
- importance and protection of human dignity and identity;
- necessity and formation of human bonds within society;
- a new debate about values.

Everything cannot be simply reduced to competition (consumption as a danger for religious practices) or, to too easy simplifications. The present career – but also dilemmas – of branding in the context of secularisation is very meaningful. There are some basic expectations we carry in our hearts and soul and they should not be ignored! They always look for an outlet, but, at the same time, deceived, they resume their inconsolable search. The two-fold character of the brand, in its inalienable ritual dimension, throws a new light on the issue of human desires, freedom and responsibility. These are the factors which constitute our relationships. Understanding and experience of community, as well as the whole base of our identity are here at stake. The transfer of rituality into consumerism may be regarded as a sign of the crisis of religion. If we look at it negatively, it is a dead end in the development of western civilisation. But if we look at it constructively, it might be a new opening into understanding religion – on a very concrete, anthropological and social level.

Summary

The Ritual Character of the Brand: the Challenge of the New Spaces between Consumerism and Religion

In a world where everything is connected even realms which seem remote can be close. The ways of commerce and religion have always crossed, but recently one can speak, at least, about mutual inspiration. To deal with this complex, but fascinating and highly relevant phenomenon it is good to find some categories which make a comparison possible. One of them is rite, whose importance in modern branding is growing. The fact that a sense of community and relations construct both good brands and profound religious experience seems to open up new horizons in a dialogue between economics and religion.

Keywords: brand, rite, religion, relationships, community

Rytualny charakter marki: wyzwanie nowej przestrzeni między konsumpcją a religią

W świecie, gdzie „wszystko jest połączone”, nawet obszary pozornie odległe mogą być bliskie. Drogi handlu i religii zawsze się przecinały, jednakże ostatnio można mówić przynajmniej o wzajemnej inspiracji. By zająć się tym złożonym, lecz fascynującym i wysoce aktualnym problemem, dobrze znaleźć kategorie umożliwiające porównanie.

Jedną z nich jest rytuał, którego waga we współczesnym brandingu rośnie. Fakt, że poczucie wspólnoty i relacje budują dobre marki i głębokie doświadczenie religijne wydaje się otwierać nowe horyzonty w dialogu pomiędzy ekonomia i religią.

Słowa kluczowe: marka, rytuał, religia, relacje, wspólnota

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