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The Sacred and the Scandal: On Religious References in Advertising¹

1.

However we judge this fact, references to religion in contemporary advertisements serve as a persuasion device as much as, say, erotic motifs do². Their role is to encourage the consumer to purchase particular goods or services (or to adopt some attitude or conduct). Some forms of mass art, for example the cinema, have developed ways of evading sexual and religious taboos – for instance, using figures such as ellipsis or euphemisms in awkward contexts (Płażewski 259–260). However, the radically persuasive nature of advertising, the necessity to struggle through the information noise³ and to reach the widest possible target group lead to such a selection of motifs that, on the one hand, they overcome thinking routines and attract attention and, on the other, they carry clear message and stay in the memory better. Thus, we should distinguish in the above-mentioned group three elements: hyperbole (distinctively used in polysemiotic texts), repetition, and antithesis. In this context, it is worth considering the relationship between the openness to hyperbole and simplification considered once as a significant psychological feature of the crowd⁴ and the tendency to shifts in the value system (which is not, however, the aim of this essay).

2.

Paraphrasing Karol Irzykowski's words, we can say that a contemporary advertiser disorganizes conventions and organizes a scandal. It seems that, in a sense, scandal

¹ The text was written under the aegis of Laboratory of Intersemiotic and Intermedia Research, led by Dr hab. Ewa Szczęsna in the Institute of Polish Literature of the University of Warsaw.

² On the role of eroticism in advertising, see: Szczęsna 2008: 24–28.

³ What is interesting, some theologians – as a consequence of the reflection on the condition of advertisements – point at the need to look for – also by the church – effective ways of evangelization: Tomasz Węclawski, "Czy dusza może być jeszcze bielsza?," *Tygodnik Powszechny* 3 (1993).

⁴ Although it is not possible to identify a mass recipient of an advertisement with the crowd as such, it is worth mentioning the surprisingly current remarks expressed by a scholar working on crowd psychology. Gustave Le Bon demonstrated that the crowd is remarkably sensitive to unconscious impulses, absorbing ideas which are presented as images; it uncritically associates things which are connected by apparent bonds and reacts positively to exaggeration. Thus "an orator wishing to move a crowd must make an abusive use of violent affirmations. To exaggerate, to affirm, to resort to repetitions, and never to attempt to prove anything by reasoning are methods of argument well known to speakers at public meetings [...]" (Le Bon 43). Le Bon accentuated the masses' blind conservatism, but he also held them responsible for "destructions of a worn-out civilisation".

is a part of the essence of the advertising message: it is not only a possible, involuntary or – more often – intentional result in its reception in a particular community (i.e. a phenomenon of sociological nature), but also its “structural rules”. Hence, advertising contradicts logic, plays with accepted norms (even if the game is often skillfully disguised) and connects ideas, symbols, visuals, utterance structures, compositions, and other forms. Advertising texts often quite ruthlessly transgress the border between the sacred and the profane (e.g. combining religious symbols with sexual fantasies) and even aspire to question the border itself. In terms of boldness, the ideas of some, especially foreign, advertising campaigns⁵ are equal to those of baroque metaphysical poets. Of course, its trivial, commercial focus of function separates itself from this artistic tradition.

3.

In advertisements referring to religious motifs⁶, we can distinguish three variants of employing the persuasive function, which use various types of references to the sacred.

The above-mentioned criterion leads us to distinguishing in this group the following types of messages:

1. Sacralizing advertisements
2. Desacralizing advertisements
3. Ambivalent advertisements

Sacralising advertisements elevate the product by shifting connotations which are traditionally attached to objects of worship. This strategy leads to the final idealization of the product and to different forms of its hieratization. The sacralizing message refers to the human need to experience sanctity and mystery, but uses it as a pretext, sometimes more ironically, consolidating more or less openly the ideals of the era of consumption⁷.

Within sacralizing advertisements, we can distinguish two different types: **faith-oriented messages** and **polemics-directed messages**. According to Bakhtin’s terminology, the first one, represented by pastiche-related forms, should be associated with unidirectional double-voicing. The other one, including the forms of the other’s discourse, with stress changed – with double-voiced varidirectional word⁸.

⁵ One of the controversial photographers using religious references is Oliviero Toscani, working for Benetton.

⁶ In this essay, I concentrate on references to Christian tradition.

⁷ I do not examine the issues connected with religious advertisements (ones promoting faith), because its analysis would require a different research perspective.

⁸ See Bakhtin, Michail Michajilovich, and Caryl Emerson. *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984. 181-237.

The persuasive effect of a faith-oriented advertisement consists in referring to traditional motifs, symbols or notions, which seem to “lend” the product values and qualities associated with religion. Such references might be of enigmatic, only allusive character (as in the slogan advertising a security agency which uses satellite navigation: “24 hours under Heaven’s protection”); sometimes they are a basis for more developed storylines. As an example, we might use the award-winning commercial for a jeep – a paraphrase of the biblical motif of the beginning of the world – in the commercial, the car is the creation of an infallible God⁹. This case demonstrates that not only music and light shifts but also “slow motion” technique favor product-sacralization in the audiovisual message.

A representative example of this sort is a poster encouraging us to buy “biblical” bread (photo 1). In the foreground, we can see a grand loaf of bread surrounded by rays. Both the religious light symbolism and the slogan, which assures us that the product “has been heaven-sent”, in different ways form a separate meaning (thus an intersemiotic repetition) (Szczęsna 80). All this to make the customer believe, at least for a short while, that for 3.5 zlotys s/he will be granted the honour of joining divinity (indeed, according to the Gospel of St. John, Jesus said “I am the bread of life”).

On the other hand, an example of a variation on the sacralizing message might be an advertisement for Potocki vodka (photo no 2). This advertisement may form, incidentally, the basis for a polemic with an article published in “Tygodnik Powszechny”. The text suggested that Polish advertisers still do not use religious symbols in controversial contexts (Kuźmiński and Wilczyński 14).

The poster refers to religion in several ways and, at the same time, those references are of an object and structural character (i.e. they are determined by textual structures, traditionally used in religious works). Most of the poster is covered with a bottle of alcohol against a background of a black-and-white sky. Because of the lack of any point of reference in the frame, the bottle seems to be magnified and it, as it were, problematizes the issue of proportions (or maybe suggests the relativity of values) that we have got used to. The center of the composition is occupied by a logo (the Potocki family emblem) making us think of the cross: rays of light are decomposed as on a canvas depicting the Divine Mercy¹⁰; the final effect is strengthened by the image of a crown at the top.

⁹ The advertisement is analyzed by Ewa Szczęsna in *Poetyka mediów. Polisemiotyczność, digitalizacja, reklama*. Warszawa, 2007. 96.

¹⁰ On the Christian interpretation of light symbolism in the context of the Merciful Jesus (for example, the work of Eugeniusz Kazimirowski), see Elżbieta Siepak’s introduction to Faustyna Kowalska, *Dzienniczek. Miłosierdzie Boże w duszy mojej* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Księży Marianów, 2002) 13–14.

It is worth pointing out that both the use of colors in the background and the composition evoke religious, antithetical connotations of whiteness and blackness, right and left. The advertising slogan appeals to the customer to aim for the real discovery, to reach the essence of good. The persuasive character of the phrase *Discover true spirit* is based on the homonymy of the word *spirit*, and on the polemical character of the adjective *true* in this context.

Like other discussed examples, the advertisement for Potocki vodka sacralizes its object, but it also questions the dogma of faith. The good, which is really true, must be discovered: thanks to the poster, it is not, of course, any problem. It is difficult not to get the impression that the reason for choosing the foreign slogan¹¹ was not only semantic and connected with linguistic interplay with the customer.

4.

Desacralizing advertisements, in turn, are persuasive by referring to the *sacred* in a way that clashes with models approved by a particular community. It is essential that it is not “object deviation” connected with the choice of the object (as it was the case with both types of sacralizing advertisements), but “presentation deviation”, which is accompanied by (similarly to black humor) the triumph of violating the code of ethics.

Also, we should distinguish at least two different variations of desacralizing messages; however, the borders between them might seem rather fluid. Research into this problem requires an analysis of inherent functions of controversial references in a particular message and, undoubtedly, at least a momentary abstention from judgment. The number of works in this category of advertisements implies that the task is not easy, especially in view of those pop-culture texts which were originally supposed to be of a scandalous character.

The desacralizing concept of advertisements may be based, first, on the radical or scornful depreciation of the religious content (henceforth, I will call them “**profane advertisements**”). It is worth stressing the fact that shocking the audience is the aim *per se*, and not the side effect, as was the case with the messages using religious motifs that were predominantly supposed to stimulate aesthetic or aesthetic-emotional experience.

An example of a profane advertisement might be one of the vivid paraphrases of *The Last Supper* by Leonardo da Vinci: the theme which – probably thanks to Andy Warhol and later to Dan Brown – has made a great impact on pop-culture artists (photo no 3). The advertisement utilizes the composition of the famous fresco and, likewise,

¹¹ I have encountered this advertisement in the elite magazine “Czas Wina” (December 2008/January 2009).

portrays the biblical figures and their gestures. In contrast to da Vinci's painting, which commemorates establishing the Eucharist, the theme in the advertisement is daringly modified. Namely, Christ and his disciples are replaced by large, anthropomorphic rodents, gathered around a huge lump of cheese. What is more, their meal can be justifiably called a last one: the shocking, derisive message of the advertisement is that the product is rat poison.

In the advertisement, the redefinition of religious content and motifs is accompanied by intertextual references and deformation in the form of iconic animalization. Another way of achieving this effect is contextual depreciation, which does not have to interfere in a traditional representation. An example of this phenomenon is, for example, a poster encouraging us to buy Pony footwear (see photo no 4). The viewer is not likely to notice parodic¹² elements in the representation of punctured feet referring to the Passion. The provocative gist lies in separating the picture from traditional meaning and exposing it to trivialising recontextualization. The representation of Jesus' feet is a way of hyperbolic exhibition of the product's virtues, the image of which is located at the bottom of the poster. In view of the lack of a slogan, only the idea that the shoes are tremendously comfortable allows us to connect two heterogenic neighbouring images and satisfy the need for cohesion.

The other type of desacralizing messages is **equalising advertisements**. In this case, we can most often talk about the aesthetic, aesthetic-emotional, or humorous (but not scornful) functionalization of religious references. Among this group, we should rank messages in which religious connotations are of an ornamental character only, as in the Adidas advertisement. That message refers to models of decorations of temple vaults (photo no 5)¹³.

An example of "disinterested" and cheerful reference to the Old Testament, relieved from theological meaning, is an advertisement for Camel cigarettes (photo no 6), where the role of the snake is filled by an amiable camel (the slogan reads: "You can't help it"). The poster is mildly ironic: its persuasive power is based on an apparent disapproval (connected with the negative association with the snake), which is strengthened by the contrary dialog with the routine warning: "Smoking causes lung cancer and heart attacks", which is dragged into the advertising game with meanings.

¹² It is difficult to state with absolute certainty whether the feet are male or female. The doubt, however, does not change the fact that the poster's persuasive power is primarily based on the deprecating recontextualization of religious motifs. Incidentally, wounded feet in a cross-position reappear in foreign posters relatively often. The image was also used by one of Munich dance schools: they added a slogan: "Tango – Passion for beginners".

¹³ This makes us think of stars who wear a cross, which is in no way connected with her/his behaviour or the circumstances of the performance.

On the other hand, the poster of the Rock Planet radio is a paraphrase of a popular representation of Christ, which has become strong in common consciousness as a devotional object (photo no 7). A luminous aureole, a well-known hand gesture, a bright green robe uncovering the burning heart, and a face – of the Guns and Roses lead singer, who is, in fact, similar to artistic representations of Jesus. No slogans, only the logo. At first glance, it is impossible to connect it with polemic or humorous intentions. Even though we could think so, it does not hallow anyone. Axel Rose, whose face metonymically represents rock music *per se*, as an actor, simply puts on a recognizable costume. It is a plastic, consciously kitschy vision, nothing else. The significance of the Rock Planet poster, contrary to its plastic staffage, is not antireligious, but a religious. This interpretation occurs until we realize some indirect, allusive contexts, well-known to rock-music enthusiasts¹⁴.

5.

Another category of texts revolving around sacralizing and desacralizing tendencies is that of **ambivalent advertisements**. Definitely less popular than the others, this type includes semantically extremely complex advertisements, the correct interpretation of which (and, consequently, its justified judgment) requires greater perceptiveness, sensitivity to aesthetic aspects, and the ability to discover less obvious intertextual references. It seems that this category should be associated with some types of advertising based on absurd humour, which – as befits the representative of “philosophical humor” – is marked by dynamic and everlasting transfer of meanings.

The poster which encourages us to make use of the services of McCann Erickson advertising agency (see photo no 8) presents an utterly surreal situation, even if present in the modern office, one of the many around us. Its employees – young, elegant men – encourage a customer to select one from a variety of logos. They are determined to suggest to him a schematic representation of a cross, whereas the customer is clearly inclined to choose another project. The customer is Christ himself, not someone disguised, which can be proved by the halo around his head. The slogan reads: “McCann. You won’t be sorry you listened to us”. Understanding this advertising concept and noticing its humor is possible only if we can afford to assume that a holy person can participate in such a trivial situation and to negate simultaneously such a thought. There is no escaping the fact that the representation is full of absurdity the significance of which is ironic and deceitful.

¹⁴ Axel Rose used to wear a t-shirt with the image of Jesus in a crown of thorns and the inscription “Kill your idols”. This makes us notice a more complex semantic play in the poster.

Another example of an ambivalent advertisement is more controversial. Without referring to cultural traditions and intertexts that are difficult to find in so-called common knowledge, the Jesus Beer spot¹⁵ might seem to belong to the category of profane advertisements (although its inner laughter is not derisive). The video presents Jesus enjoying himself in the cheerful company. He travesties the liturgical formula: "This is my body. This is my blood. This is my Beer". We can see how beer fills up cups to the brim; it is flowing from a beer tap in the shape of a punctured hand. The tavern is filled with careless and common laughter. Let us suppress indignation for a while to see if the idea has originated from our corrupted times.

The play on biblical symbols, the motifs of transformation of wine¹⁶ into blood, and libertarian images of feasts belonged to the medieval and Renaissance repertoire of the folk culture of laughter, which gave rise to works such as *Gargantua and Pantagruel* and *Don Quixote*. Carnival culture relished degrading travesties of martyrdom, miracles, and rituals (one the favourite motifs was a Corpus Christi procession) (Bakhtin 332), and the customs were tolerated by both the state and the church. It must have been understood that degradation is not always equal to derision, and that every person sometimes feels an urge to free faith from the fetters of fear and seriousness.

The Jesus Beer advertisement seems to be a message stylized in the folklore-carnival spirit of laughter – common (because it unites all people, without a division into participants and audience) and ambivalent (because it expresses both negation and approval; it combines joy and ridicule). If we suppress this involuntary objection, we will see that the carnivalesque of the sacred is fundamentally different from profanation.

For many, using religious symbols in a context any other than the traditional one immediately means profanation or blasphemy. However, internally heterogenic, contemporary culture successively broadens the range of traditions and it uses its language to express its own ideas and ideals. It seems that the process is unstoppable. Protests or prohibitions (especially rash and incautious ones) may only accelerate it, for, as we know, nothing helps advertising better than a scandal. This should motivate us to think more about phenomena which evoke spontaneous objection or disrespect.

¹⁵ It is available on the Internet (www.jesusbeer.com). Theoretically, it is possible to assume that it ridicules the idea of advertising in general, which does not change anything in the context of the following essay. The presented examples are analyzed in terms of text creation, which assumes all possible ways of realizing advertising models.

¹⁶ See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993.

<p>Types of advertisements with religious references</p> <p>(divided according to the persuasive function referring to the sacred sphere)</p>	
<p>Sacralizing advertisement</p>	<p>faith-oriented</p> <p>e.g. "biblical bread";</p>
	<p>polemics-directed</p> <p>e.g. Potocki vodka;</p>
<p>Desacralizing advertisements</p>	<p>equalizing</p> <p>e.g. Camel cigarettes, Adidas accessories;</p>
	<p>profaning</p> <p>e.g. Mortein Raticida rat poison, Pony footwear;</p>
<p>Ambivalent advertisements</p>	<p>e.g. McCann Erickson advertising agency, Jesus Beer</p>

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