



Religion, humanism, marketing, and the consumption of socially responsible products, services, and ideas: Introduction to a special topic section



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ABSTRACT

This introduction to the special issue provides an overview and brief summary of the eight articles that follow and take up the issue's theme. Despite the fact that religion and religious world views exert considerable influence on consumer attitudes and behavior, mainstream business journals have presented little research that explores the relationship between religion and marketing. Articles featured in this special issue examine three themes of interest: (1) the influence of strongly held religious or non-religious world views on the marketing of socially responsible behaviors; (2) how religious world views influence the conduct of marketing; and (3) what marketing scholars can learn from the marketing practices of various religious organizations. The authors extend a note of appreciation to the reviewers of the many papers submitted to the issue and to the editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Business Research*, Arch Woodside.

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1. Introduction

The idea for this special issue began with a between-session discussion among marketing faculty at the 2010 Society for Marketing Advances meeting in Atlanta. Conferees had just heard an executive from the Coca Cola Company speak at length about recycling initiatives her firm was undertaking. She had proclaimed that sustainability was the new mantra of consumers worldwide, and that effective sustainability programs were the new measure of a firm's true corporate social responsibility. These remarks amplified those of an earlier speaker, a green marketing pioneer, who spoke about some of the barriers to overcoming consumer lethargy and corporate reluctance to achieve real green success. One important barrier was said to be religiosity, because high religiosity consumers tended to believe that the earth was created to be used, not conserved.

Stimulated by these two presentations, together with individual concerns for human flourishing, conferees began a between session discussion. The discussion led to a tentative conclusion that most people seem to want the world to become a better place, but not all people agree on what that better place should look like. Alternate "worldviews" incorporating differing goals and strategies sometimes lead to a polarization in perspectives and an unwillingness to negotiate or find a middle ground. Many resign themselves to the idea that doing nothing is

better than working with a group that espouses a differing worldview. As a result, opportunities to serve the common good are lost.

A majority of the world's population belongs to one of the major world religions (e.g., Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism) and many others embrace Confucianism and secular humanism, non-religious systems of thought centering on human values, capacities, and self-worth. These religious and non-religious worldviews differ in substantive ways and, accordingly, adherents of one system often have difficulty understanding adherents of others. This communication problem is especially apparent when various green, healthful, safe, or other socially-responsible products, services, and ideas are marketed. Yet, some agreement among groups with distinctly different views is necessary if society is to achieve useful objectives.

Clearly, alternative worldviews have a profound impact on societal attitudes and opinions. Such worldviews provide an orientating framework to help consumers understand the big issues of life, such as what kind of world should society be trying to create? In turn, neighborhoods, communities, organizations, and political bodies are strongly influenced by the beliefs of the individuals who comprise their grouping. Marketing, on the other hand, is not so much oriented toward the big issues of life, but rather the tactical issues involved in structuring an idea, product, or service and communicating that idea, product or service effectively enough so that a defined target group of people becomes enthused. Competing religious and non-religious worldviews attract new acolytes and are spread through effective marketing; the practice of marketing lacks meaning without an organizing worldview to provide overall direction. Thus, marketing and religion have an important relationship. Both depend upon one other.

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2. Theory

Religion can be defined as a system of belief that recognizes a divine power (or powers) as the creator and ruler of the universe. Humanism, on the other hand, is a nontheistic, rationalist system that holds that man is capable of self-fulfillment and ethical conduct without recourse to supernaturalism (Neufeldt & Guralnik, 1988). Religion and humanism are considered comprehensive human existence philosophies or “world views,” and are referred to as such throughout this special issue.

Marketing strategy literature treats the presence of worldviews as socio-cultural environmental factors that help shape consumer tastes and preferences. Through church attendance, devotional practice, study or common experience, people absorb, almost unconsciously, a worldview that informs their beliefs and shapes their values. This worldview consists of core beliefs such as the worth of a college education or the importance of giving to charity; plus secondary beliefs such as which university is better or which charitable cause is doing the most good. Core and secondary beliefs affect product and brand preferences, and are linked through cognitive consistency theory (Chen & Risen, 2010; Cummings & Venkatesan, 1976; Festinger, 1957). Thus, marketers have some chance of changing secondary beliefs through effective marketing campaigns, but little chance of changing core beliefs (Kotler & Keller, 2009).

Verstehen sociology posits that human action is directed by meaning which can only be discerned by understanding the worldview of the social actor concerned (Herva, 1988). Over the course of history religion is often an important component of one's worldview. Accordingly, religious beliefs can not only direct social action (Alford & Naughton, 2001), but can influence social change (Jaspers, Lubbers, & Dirk De Graaf, 2007; Ozaki & Dodgson, 2010). For example, Weber attributes the early growth of capitalism in Northern Europe to allied Calvinistic Protestant beliefs.

Religious influence can be successful in promoting change in two directions: radical change in which a society is pushed to a new direction; and conservative change, in which a society is encouraged to return to the social arrangements of the past (Njoh, 2012). A good example of the former is Martin Luther King with his peaceful Christian protests that encouraged society to extend greater civil rights to African Americans. An example of the latter is the influence of the Ayatolla Khomeini, who advocated regressive policies that restricted the empowerment of women.

Religion can influence both consumer and managerial action. Research has shown that national religious beliefs influence corporate decision-making, the development of corporate culture and the valuation of businesses (Anderson, Drakopoulou-Dodd, & Scott, 2000). Religion is characterized as an antecedent to culture, and members of different religions have been found to exhibit differing levels of individualism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity (Hofstede, 1980). All of these factors in turn influence how consumers respond to marketing messages. Surprisingly, however, antecedents such as religion have attracted little systematic attention in international marketing research (Steenkamp, 2001). Further cultural research has been consistently identified as a need in international marketing research (Melawar, Meadows, Zheng, & Rikards, 2004; Yaprak, 2008; Zelizer, 2011).

3. The contributions of this special issue

The contributions of this special issue illustrate how the marketing of socially responsible products and ideas is influenced by various religious and non-religious world views. Three streams of research are represented. The first three articles examine the influence of strongly held world views on socially responsible behaviors such as supporting charitable causes or undertaking pro-environmental behaviors. Two more articles delve deeper into how religious world views may influence other aspects of the conduct of marketing, both with respect to management objectives and to consumer decision-making. The third group of

articles addresses what marketing can learn from the marketing practices of religious groups.

3.1. Socially-responsible behaviors

William Martin and Connie Bateman begin this section with an article that examines the antecedent role of intrapersonal religious commitment on ecocentric attitudes and environmental consumer behaviors (Martin & Bateman, 2014–this issue). Their findings negate the notion of a strictly negative relationship between belief in the Judeo-Christian faith and disregard for the environment. Religiously committed consumers appear to be no less receptive to pro-environmental messages or less likely to engage in environmentally friendly behaviors than non-religious consumers. Indeed, consumer education-based environmental appeals for low-commitment actions like buying environmentally friendly products had equal influence on both types of consumers. However, religious-based appeals clearly achieved greater success for high commitment actions such as requests for donations when applied to religiously-committed consumers.

Maria Kalamas, Mark Cleveland, and Michel Laroche suggest that individual beliefs about one type of world view, environmental locus of control, can have a profound impact on pro-environmental behavior (Kalamas, Cleveland & Laroche, 2014–this issue). These researchers develop a model and conduct research that examines how external attributions of control affect consumer pro-environmental behaviors. Specifically, they find that consumers ascribing environmental responsibility to powerful others tend to engage in pro-environmental behaviors, such as recycling, conservation, using public transportation, and donating to pro-environmental causes. These consumers look to large corporations to do their fair share in cleaning up the environment and then develop brand allegiance according to which firms do. However, those attributing environmental change to chance or fate typically avoid participating in pro-environmental behaviors. Consequently, the authors conclude that education regarding the causes of environmental damage should be a component of programs intended to convert consumers to participate in pro-environmental behaviors.

Christopher Hopkins, Kevin Shanahan, and Mary Anne Raymond note that non-profit organizations face increasing competition from other non-profits in raising donations, and consequently, the effectiveness of the advertising they employ is a strategic concern (Hopkins, Shanahan & Raymond, 2014–this issue). These authors explore the role of religiosity on intent to donate to the nonprofit sponsor of pro-social ads and find that religiosity does act as a moderator in the relationship between liking of the ad, perceived corporate social responsibility of the nonprofit and intent to donate to the nonprofit. In analyzing data from a panel of 306 consumers, these authors find that consumers scoring higher on the religiosity scale are more likely to become involved in pro-social activities that affected positive societal change through their churches and other faith-based activities. In addition, these authors find that high religiosity consumers respond more favorably to non-profit advertising. Consequently, the level of religiosity in a nonprofit's public support base is an important factor impacting the appeal and effectiveness of advertising.

3.2. Management objectives and consumer decision-making

The second research stream includes two articles that examine the potential influence of major religious world views on the conduct of marketing. Both works advocate changes in marketing practice to increase social justice.

In the first contribution, Ronald Hill and Michael Capella provide an overview of the body of knowledge known as Catholic Social Teaching (CST) which for a number of years has been proposed as an ethical means to organize all social interaction, including business (Hill & Capella, 2014–this issue). CST relies on four cornerstone principles – human dignity, subsidiarity, solidarity, and the common good – and from these four, another principle, called “preferential option for the

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