

# Marketing Religion

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### **Abstract**

Religion has been marketed since the beginning of its existence and simply by considering how many different religions there are today and how popular religion is, it is clear how successful the marketing has been. This paper is a literary review on how religion has been marketed to current and prospective followers. This paper argues that imagination helps promote religion by using stories and poetry within the religious texts to help give the lessons more context and therefore become more memorable and less confrontational. This paper also discusses how the positive environment that a religious setting promotes can be rather addictive and successful at keeping people engaged. Furthermore, music within religion helps “consumers” feel positively about a religion and therefore more attracted to it. This review highlights how many aspects within religion seem designed to attract followers. However it is important to understand that the idea that religion has been marketed does not diminish the validity of religion; many legitimate items throughout history have been marketed. Regardless, it is important to realize that no matter how legitimate something may be, understanding what is real and what is just the result of a marketing tactic is a crucial skill to have.

### **Introduction**

Marketing and religion are two aspects of society that have each been around for millennia now and have each had their own distinct effects on the history of the world. This paper reviews the ways in which marketing and religion have converged and how religion has been marketed to people, specifically during the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Marketing has been used for ages as a way to encourage someone to buy a certain product. Makeup, medicine, technology and politics are all objects that have been marketed through television, radio, newspaper, word of mouth and many other media. As technology has advanced throughout the 21<sup>st</sup> century, marketing methods have advanced to be more efficient and successful. New marketing methods have begun to incorporate scientific findings from fields such as psychology, sociology and neurobiology into their marketing techniques. This paper will focus on how neurobiology has been incorporated into the marketing of religion.

Religion is a difficult concept to define. Generally it is considered a collection of beliefs based on spirituality or the idea of an after-life or a higher purpose to life. Many different religions have been emerging for at least 2,000 or more years (Inzlicht, 2012; Tullet, 2012). Some of the most well-known religions nowadays are Christianity- and all of its different sects-, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism. Each of these religions is unique in its own sets of beliefs and ideals but they are also similar in many aspects. Many of the most well-known religions have their own book with stories and history; they incorporate music into their religion in some way, and they encourage their followers to attend some sort of social gathering (i.e. church). These similarities between the major religions are aspects that have been utilized to

market a religion to its current followers and to prospective followers. This paper will discuss some of the ways in which this has been done.

### *Imagination*

Religion requires a great deal of imagination. Something that many of the “big” religions have in common is that they all have some sort of text filled with their history and guidelines, usually written in a poetic or story-like style. Reading any type of book requires some sort of imagination, but reading a religious text requires just as much if not more imagination. This is because religion deals with many “out of this world” ideas that are very difficult to perceive and therefore require stories and imagination in order for the reader to “see” more of the intended picture and therefore believe more of the picture. Imagination plays a huge role in how we perceive the world. Whatever our sensory inputs don’t capture is filled in by our imagination, therefore allowing our imagination to define a large portion of how we view the world and live our lives (Abela, 2014).

When a religion uses light stories and poetry in their text to portray a certain idea, that idea then seems much less forceful and confrontational (Abela, 2014). The reader believes they are simply reading a story and interpreting a message from that story rather than being told a strict rule and forced to follow it. Also, by getting a message or a moral in the form of a story rather than a list of rules, it gives the rule context which makes it seem more meaningful and useful.

Another benefit of putting lessons and important ideas into stories is that it helps convert the lessons into long term memory. We have really exceptional visual and spatial memory (McPherson, 2011). Therefore by imagining a story rather than just memorizing a lesson people will be more likely to store a lesson in long term memory and internalize it instead of forgetting it and therefore some aspect of the religion itself. Furthermore, many times memory internalization depends more on emotional arousal rather than the importance of the information so religious stories will frequently evoke some sort of emotional arousal (McPherson, 2011).

### *Environment*

Another huge aspect of religion that has attracted many followers is the community that a religious environment promotes. A religious environment is traditionally considered a positive environment. Many of the major religions have some sort of social gatherings for their followers (i.e. church) where they are encouraged to entertain positive ideas and give thanks to god or other people.

Scientists have discovered that emotions are actually “contagious”. In fact, “the science of emotional contagion goes back to 400 B.C. when Hippocrates... observed that some women seemed to transfer hysteria to one another” (Wild; Erb; Bartels, 2001). The autonomic nervous system is wired to make us want to connect with other people (Wild; Erb; Bartels, 2001). Some of this connection may occur through the activity of mirror neurons, which will read someone’s emotions and then often promote a similar emotion within that person. (Kerfoot, 2011). Therefore, according to this theory, being in a positive environment constantly surrounded by other positive people will help someone feel more positive themselves. Since happiness and

dopamine are such addictive qualities, people will be encouraged to continue to go to church and engage in religious activities that put them in a positive mood. Other aspects of many popular religions that often encourage this sense of positivity and therefore draw people to religion are: prayer, giving charity, singing and so on. It is very common for missionaries to encourage prospective followers to attend at least one church event in order to feel this positivity and buy into the religion. Group mentality and peer pressure can also be a very strong driving force. By attending an event and being surrounded by people doing one thing, it is very easy to be drawn into the action and the mentality.

### *Music*

Music has become a very popular marketing tactic to get people to feel a specific emotion that will encourage them to buy a product. Science has shown that music is very closely tied to emotions (Bruner, 1990). Music is used very often in religion. Some examples of this are Christmas carols, prayers, church choirs and many, many more. Getting someone emotionally attached to religion is a very strong marketing tactic. Thus, music has been a tool to market religion for at least two specific reasons.

The first way that music is used is as substitute to get people to feel a similar emotion to the one that was discussed in the *environment* section of this paper. By using types of music that induce these feelings, the “consumer” will feel, happy, connected and subsequently attracted to a religion. High pitched music is perceived as happy music (Bruner, 1990). Consonant harmonies are perceived as playful, happy or serene (Bruner, 1990). Volume plays a significant role as well, in that louder pieces are considered triumphant and animated, excited and happy (Bruner, 1990). Bruner cited a study in which “faster tempo was linked with generally positive comments” (Bruner, 1990). Interestingly enough this same study also discovered that “happy music produced happier moods in subjects, but sad music produced the highest purchase intentions” (Bruner, 1990). This suggests that even some of the sad and slow tempo music incorporated into a religion has some marketing advantages as well.

The second way that music is used in religion is to create stronger memories. Events associated with heightened emotions tend to be more memorable than events with little emotional impact (McPherson, 2011). For example, most average Americans would be more likely to remember what they were doing on September 11, 2001 because of their heightened emotions of that day, due to the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers, than on January 21, 2014, which to most is just an average day with no heightened emotions correlated to it. Memories that are formed in times of heightened feeling or stress are better recorded due to the hippocampus’s link with emotion. (McPherson, 2011). Therefore music can be used to create a deeper emotion in association with an event and thus create a deeper and more permanent memory of that experience and the religion in general.

### **Conclusion**

Religion is very difficult to market because it requires the “consumer” to make a huge seemingly permanent change in their life. They are not buying a car or a toy, they are essentially buying ethics and a lifestyle. Therefore in order to “sell” religion it has to be done in

a very careful way. It is important to understand the methods that have been used to market religion in order for a consumer to make a well-educated decision on what religion to abide by; are they buying into the religion and all of its ethics, or are they simply hypnotized by clever marketing strategies? This is an important subject to study and more research should be done on it because religion has played, and continues to play, a very crucial role in history. Therefore, marketing of such a thing can become a very powerful tool that should be carefully watched.

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