Theology in 'contact with its own times'[1]: Advertising and Evangelization

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Abstract

The Catholic Church's efforts at evangelization must include even its own members in an age of growing secularization wherein religious impulses can be subordinated to culture even unconsciously. Bernard Lonergan observed that religious values should transcend cultural and personal values. But prominent advertising confirms that in contemporary Western societies religious values are subsumed under others, even where spirituality may be held important. The goal before the Church, then, is a transposition of values possible in focus upon a common perception of theology and the culture reflected in advertising—the felt transcendence of the human person. The Second Vatican Council called for the Church to engage with the world; if the message served by the Church is to be heard above the din of the larger culture, it must be delivered in manners persuasive upon the sensibilities of contemporary people. The powerful cultural transmitter that is advertising may assist in this task, for study of the anthropologies of advertising and theology reveals certain surprising commonalities suggesting that methods, if not media, could be equally effective in both realms. Advertising's use of ethnography and narrative, in particular, may provide lessons for the Church in defining audiences and targeting the message to them.

Keywords

Advertising, Consumerism, Evangelization, Lonergan, Theological Anthropology

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[1] *Gaudium et Spes*, in *The Basic Sixteen Documents: Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations*, rev. trans., ed. Austin Flannery (Northport, New York: Costello Publishing Company, 1996), para. 62. The initial ideas forming the basis for this article were presented at the 2007 meeting of the College Theology Society in a short paper entitled "Theology in 'contact with its own times': Interpretation of and Response to a Contemporary Cultural Lens." Development of these reflections by the same author, a former public relations practitioner for advertising/marketing/public relations firms, led to this revised and greatly expanded study.

When the Second Vatican Council opened the Catholic Church to a cooperative relationship with the world, it encouraged its members, in *Gaudium et Spes*, "to work closely with their contemporaries" and "to try to understand their ways of thinking and feeling, as these find expression in current culture."[2] The manner of working with contemporaries is given concerted reflection in this "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World," but the document is not specific in its instruction to the faithful in the more nebulous matter of understanding contemporaries' thinking and feeling. The Council's "Decree on the Mass Media" provides some guidance, through its attentiveness to art and to mass media outlets as barometers of culture. Yet it gives no specific attention to advertising, where alone we find the sole aim of harnessing the human needs, aspirations, fears, and values of a people, in order to elicit the specific concrete response of product purchase. Since advertising is an eminently practical field, systematic analysis of the human person to whom advertising is directed is not within that field's chosen purview. The field's proponents, therefore, are professionally unconcerned with the subjects of theological reflection except where these coincide with buying motivations. But the identification of these motivations and the means of marshalling them can reveal the underlying anthropology of advertising. Is this anthropology at all recognizable from a Christian, or more narrowly Catholic, theological view? If so, might not the science of advertising have lessons for the Church in the communication of its message? These are important questions to answer, firstly, because advertising has been indicted at least implicitly in post-conciliar pronouncements warning of the dangers of materialism and consumerism and, secondly, because attunement to the significant lifestyle influence which is advertising can assist in the correlation between religion and culture that allows the Christian message to be heard.[3] In a curious way today, the Church's efforts at evangelization must include even its own members who—in this age of growing secularization, at least in the United States and in Western Europe where advertising is pervasive and even formative of certain societal streams—are perhaps as likely to be "cultural" participants in the life of the Church as truly religious participants.

Identifying basic values communicated in and constructed by advertising, as well as methodological trends in advertising, can provide a sketch of an implicit anthropology that could be interpreted theologically for a "response" by the Church that truly communicates with the "modern world." To this end, briefly reviewed will

[2] Ibid.

[3] Recent papal documents discussing these perils include John Paul II's encyclicals *Redemptor Hominis*, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, and *Centesimus Annus*, as well as Paul VI's encyclical *Populorum Progressio* and his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*.

be the motivations of today's consumers as they are communicated in or influenced by the value sets identified by today's marketers— advertising professionals, as well as researchers, product designers, public relations practitioners, and media consultants—to uncover basic anthropological assumptions that may or may not be shared with those of theology. Next, the thought of Bernard Lonergan on values and the communication of the gospel will be glimpsed, to provide theory and framework for the indispensable theological activity of communicating Christianity to the larger culture. These initial steps are preparatory—justification and methodological guidance—for the final two sections of this article which suggest practical value of advertising's methods for the Church's efforts at evangelization. First, current key methods of research and marketing used by advertisers will be considered, in order to spot trends that may be consonant with those of theology either in the methods themselves or in the anthropological assumptions undergirding them. Second, exploratory thoughts about how the Church might beneficially attend to the messages in and methods of advertising will be offered.

This study does not intend to provide a comprehensive analysis of consumerism and its influence upon the Church, of reception by consumers of popular culture, or of advertising's influence upon culture at large, projects which have received considerable attention from such as Tom Beaudoin, Kelton Cobb, Michael Paul Gallagher, Craig M. Gay, John Francis Kavanaugh, Vincent J. Miller, and R. Laurence Moore.[4] It aims to offer a complementary vantage point— advertising's own intentions and methods in the execution of its craft of persuasion. The vantage points are not exclusive, of course, for advertisers' very business is to know how consumers will react to its methods and messages and to create strategies accordingly. But if any component of advertising is not objectionable and therefore a potential lesson for the Church which has in common with the

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[4] Important studies include Tom Beaudoin's *Consuming Faith: Integrating Who We Are with What We Buy* (Lanham, Maryland, and Oxford: Sheed & Ward, 2003) and *Generation X: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998), Kelton Cobb's *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture* (Malden, Massachusetts, Oxford, and Carlton, Victoria: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), Michael Paul Gallagher's *Clashing Symbols: An Introduction to Faith and Culture* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1998) [original edition, London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd., 1997], Craig M Gay's *Cash Values: Money and the Erosion of Meaning in Today's Society* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, and Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, and Vancouver, British Columbia: Regent College Publishing, 2004) [original edition, as part of New College Lecture Series, Sydney, Australia: University of South Wales Press Ltd., 2003], John Francis Kavanaugh's *Following Christ in a Consumer Society: The Spirituality of Cultural Resistance* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1981), Vincent J. Miller's *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York and London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004), and R. Laurence Moore's *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1994).

field of advertising the primary task of communication of a message to elicit action, the Church eventually must consider not only the effects of advertising upon our world but the causal factors that are responsible for the existence of the field at all.[5] This requires direct engagement with the profession of advertising—no easy feat given the aforementioned lack of an explicit philosophically theoretical foundation of advertising to serve as a basis of comparison and contrast with religious and specifically Christian grounds. Hence, this work is a rudimentary effort to initiate a theological conversation from the "inside" of advertising. First sought must be a warrant for such communication; this is found in anthropological assumptions shared by Christianity and advertising.

Motivations:

Communication and Construction of Values

Advertising appeals to buying motivations in the form of needs that are perceived to be able to be fulfilled through purchase of products or services material, intellectual, emotional, and/or spiritual. More controversially, advertising creates buying motivations in the form of desires to be met through product or service purchase. The Pontifical Council for Social Communications, in its *Ethics in Advertising* issued in 1997, was particularly concerned about this deliberate construction of desires that "cause people to feel and act upon cravings for items and services they do not need." This can exacerbate socioeconomic injustices by persuading the poor to attend mistakenly to "artificially created" rather than true needs, thereby forestalling progress toward alleviation of real problems.[6] Beyond influencing perceived needs for products, in distinguishing products, advertisers communicate as well as influence the values of individuals and of societies. About this, too, the Pontifical Council for Social Communications was concerned. Advertisers tend to cater only to demographics with buying power, disregarding other segments of society; they can resort to stereotyping and to pandering to base instincts, thereby

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[5] While it is an easy assumption that advertising exists because of consumerism, the case could be made that advertising has always existed. The great rhetoricians of Ancient Rome, for example, were no less adept at promoting their aims by showing an agenda's consistency with an accepted or desired worldview than advertisers are at convincing of the importance—real or imagined—of today's products and services to our world.

[6] Pontifical Council for Social Communications, *Ethics in Advertising* (Vatican City: Vatican, 22 February 1997), para. 10 [updated 15 July 1999; cited 5 April 2007]. Available from http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_22021997_ethics-in-ad_en.html.

lowering moral and even artistic standards.[7] These practical problems are the result of a basic principle at work in advertising—the construction of subtle and not-so-subtle relationships in the minds of consumers between particular products—and brands of products—and value sets. These relationships are meant to play a powerful role in self-identity so as to motivate purchasing, and it is on this level that advertising can be most effective and therefore either beneficial or dangerous. To explain, the needs of human persons, which advertisers generally assume are expressed adequately if not definitively in the now classical listing of Abraham Maslow—physiological needs, safety needs, social needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization needs—are met in particular social and cultural contexts, and there is diversity of opinion on whether or not they are met across these contexts according to the hierarchy suggested by Maslow.[8] So while its concrete and immediate aim is to sell a product and to train consumers to be predisposed to purchase other products by a seller in the future, advertising must concern itself with the cultural and personal values of targeted demographics because these may condition the perception of needs and their manner of fulfillment. Advertising even seeks to influence these values insofar as the values may predispose consumers to purchase.

Since values condition need fulfillment, one way of exploring the anthropology assumed by advertising is to examine the values that marketers identify as driving a particular society. Because advertising is directed to targeted groups, advertising analyses will not necessarily net a single anthropology. Looking at Western civilization where advertising is most pervasive and sophisticated, marketers report that values show a marked shift in our day, from a "self-denial ethic" to a "self-fulfillment ethic," from a "higher standard of living" to a "better quality of life," from "traditional sex roles" to "blurring of sex roles," from an "accepted definition of success" to an "individualized definition of success," from "traditional family life" to "alternative families," from "faith in industry" and "institutions" to "self-reliance," from "liv[ing] to work" to "work[ing] to live," from "hero worship" to "love of ideas," from "expansionism" to "pluralism," from "patriotism" to a "less nationalistic" attitude, from "unparalleled growth" to a "growing sense of limits," from "industrial growth" to "information and service growth," and from "receptivity

[7] Ibid., para. 10–12. The document recommends three moral principles for advertising—truthfulness, respect for the dignity of the human person as an intellectual being with freedom, and social responsibility (Ibid., para. 15–17).

[8] See Abraham H. Maslow, *Motivation and Personality* (New York: Harper, 1954). Maslow's hierarchy included the named needs in the order given, with self-actualization as the highest need but the last to be met, after the more basic needs. The 1970 revised edition of Maslow's work included two categories above self-actualization—to know and understand, and aesthetics.

to technology" to "technology orientation."[9] Such shifts are tracked in order to mark and to respond to trends and sometimes to drive them; as such, they may be temporary and therefore not reliable indicators of basic human qualities. But the categories used for such identification are more stable, revealing certain commonly-held beliefs about the human person. From the categories of analysis given for the values of Western civilization a picture of the human person emerges (1) as one lacking a "perfection" at which progress can be made, whether through asceticism or through indulgence, (2) as one who must determine the value of the material relative to other essential properties of human life, (3) as one who is gendered, which tends to influence societal roles, (4) as one with a drive to achieve, to make progress in life, (5) as one who is social, whatever the communal construction of one's life may be, (6) as one who is dependent upon others yet responsible for self sustenance and fulfillment, (7) as one whose life must involve occupation or industry, perhaps in balance with leisure, (8) as one who is inspired by models or forms, either of other persons or of ideas, (9) as one consciously both distinct from and united with "others" in essential properties, and (10) as one with privilege in and responsibility to the world which changes rapidly due to forces within and without the person which can enhance or detract from personal development at both individual and societal levels.[10] Intriguing links can be made between these ten characteristics and those of the human person as validated by the Christian tradition. For example, Gerald O'Collins, in his book *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus*, cites nine "essential traits of human existence"; human persons are "bodily, rational, free, emotional, remembering, dynamic, social, and limited/unlimited beings."[11] A critical anthropological correlation is not an aim of this project and, since it requires little imagination to understand the theological and philosophical dimensions of human reality suggested by O'Collins's concise summary of its components, that which must be noted is only that implicitly included in O'Collins's outline are the categories suggested by marketers' analyses of values; the two sets of human characteristics are not antithetical. Simplistic and ultimately

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[9] Roger D. Blackwell, Paul W. Miniard, and James F. Engel, *Consumer Behavior*, 10th ed. (Mason, Ohio: Thomson South-Western, 2006), p. 436, cf. Joseph T. Plummer, "Changing Values," *Futurist* 23 (January/February 1989), p. 10.

[10] While there is overlapping of values in many of the categories identified, roughly each value shift identified inspired its own category, with the exception of the final two categories. "'Expansionism' to 'pluralism,'" as well as "'patriotism' to a 'less nationalistic' attitude" inspired category nine. "'Unparalleled growth' to a 'growing sense of limits,'" "'industrial growth' to 'information and service growth,'" and "'receptivity to technology' to 'technology orientation'" together inspired category ten.

[11] O'Collins, Gerald, *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 231–232.

false is a typical dualistic presentation of the person in the larger culture versus the person in the Church.

For all of the reports of Western civilization's demise, it should not be a large surprise that values of Western civilization should bear some likeness, however dim, with those of a Christian anthropology, so imbedded has been Christianity in the development of the Western world. The evidence exists especially in Europe, where, despite the Constitution's absence of mention of Christianity or other religions that contributed to European civilization, ancient and medieval churches, paintings, sculptures, and music survive as some of its prized emblems. And historical, theological, and otherwise academic writings of or preserved by the Church remain foundational for many fields of study today, if not always for the self-understanding of all Western Europeans and those of their descent. Marketing professionals explicitly credit societal units such as religious institutions, as well as families and educational institutions, with instillation of values in societies' members. Indeed, marketing studies even have confirmed explicit connections between religious belief and consumption patterns. For example, studies suggest that, in the United States, many are more interested in spirituality than in "traditional religion," apparently because "[s]pirituality is more personal and practical, involves stress reduction more than salvation, and is about feeling good, not just being good."[12] The focus on spirituality coincides with the burgeoning "big business" of "an increase in the sales of religious books, spiritual retreats, religious logos on apparel, alternative health care, spiritual education, religious broadcast stations, overseas missions trips, and crossover religious music . . . , " according to the authors of the most widely-read textbook for college marketing students in the United States for the last couple of decades, *Consumer Behavior*, now in its tenth edition.[13] These authors also credit to this enlarged concept of religion the high number of Americans—90 percent—who report that religion is important in their "everyday life."[14] Yet a poll conducted and reported by *Newsweek* in March 2007 would seem to repudiate part of this analysis by validating the impact in the United States of traditional religion: of American adults, 91 percent reported belief in God, 87 percent reported identification with a particular religion, and 82 percent reported that their religious affiliation is Christian.[15] The latter number has been validated by recent

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[12] Blackwell et al., *Consumer Behavior*, 439, cf. Richard Cimino and Don Lattin, "Choosing My Religion," *American Demographics* (April 1999), pp. 62–65.

[13] Ibid. See Moore's *Selling God* for an analysis of the history of religion's marketing in North America.

[14] Ibid., cf. Louise Witt, "Whose Side is God On?," *American Demographics* (February 2004), pp. 18–19.

[15] Brian Braiker, *Newsweek* at MSNBC.com [posted 31 March 2007; cited 31 March 2007]. Available from http://www.msnbc.sms.com/id/17879317/site/newsweek/.

Gallup pools.[16] This dominant spiritual identification of Americans with traditional religion is perhaps tempered, though, by another trend earlier reported by *Newsweek*: some Christian denominations have in recent decades engaged in "niche marketing," especially for the attention of "Boomers," in catering to the larger culture's values such as "autonomy and freedom of choice" using approaches such as "megachurches" with "a cafeteria of worship options" and "complete lifestyle services."[17] Just as marketers identify values for a practical aim, there may be pragmatic issues that govern churches' attentions to the cultural values impacting our "buying" motivations, then. To be sure, there is danger in this. Vincent J. Miller has discussed the commodification impulse of those in a consumer society, showing how this tempts religious believers to pick and choose from their traditions, unmooring practices from the community in which they have their meaning.[18] "Cafeteria Catholics," to use a term in common parlance, have been a concern for the Church for decades now. At what point in churches' openness to the world does religion become simply servant to culture? Likewise, at what point does the church disappear in the pool of new cultural streams if it cannot articulate its relevance to the world at large? In Europe, a 2004 Gallup collection of data from the Eurobarometer and the European Social Survey revealed dwindling church attendance, with 20 percent or greater weekly worship service attendance reported in only nine European Union member countries.[19] But trust in religious institutions remains high in parts of Europe, with half to three-quarters of adults affirming such in one-third of European Union countries.[20] This is a perhaps hopefully impressive number given the frequent

[16] See Frank Newport, "Questions and Answers About Americans' Religion," Gallup, Inc., at Gallup.com [issued 24 December 2007; cited 8 February 2008]. Available from http://www.gallup.com/poll/103459/Questions-Answers-About-Americans-Religion.aspx. See also Joseph Carroll, "Religion Is 'Very Important' to 6 in 10 Americans," Gallup, Inc., at Gallup.com [issued 24 June 2004; cited 8 February 2008]. Available from http://www.gallup.com/poll/12115/Religion-Very-Important-Americans.aspx.

[17] Jerry Adler and Julie Scelfo, *Newsweek* at MSNBC.com [posted 2 December 2006; cited 2 December 2006]. Available from http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/14754222/site/newsweek/.

[18] See especially Miller's *Consuming Religion*, as well as his articles "The iPod, the Cell Phone, and the Church: Discipleship, Consumer Culture, and a Globalized World," in *Getting on Message: Challenging the Christian Right from the Heart of the Gospel*, ed. Peter Laarman (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), pp. 173–191, and "Taking Consumer Culture Seriously," *Horizons* 27, no. 2 (Fall 2000), pp. 276–295.

[19] Robert Manchin, "Religion in Europe: Trust Not Filling the Pews," Gallup, Inc., at Gallup.com [issued 21 September 2004; cited 8 February 2008]. Available from http://www.gallup.com/poll/13117/Religion-Europe-Trust-Filling-Pews.aspx.

[20] See also Robert Manchin, "Trust in Religious Institutions Varies Across EU Map," Gallup, Inc., at Gallup.com [issued 24 August 2004; cited 11 February 2008]. Available from http:/www.gallup.com/poll/12796/Trust-Religious-Institutions-Varies-Across-Map.aspx.

loud cries of the triumph of secularization in Western Europe, but it means that less than half of adults in two-thirds of European Union member countries claim trust in religious institutions. Interestingly, advertisers' very job is to articulate the relevance of its products and services to those who may sense no need of them.

The concern about the domination or elimination of religion by culture raises the critical matter of a hierarchy of values. While one contemporary approach to correlation of religion and culture is to dissolve the distinction that allows religion to critique culture, another common response of Christian churches to the larger culture and those who market it, so to speak, is a wholesale critique of its values. It may be that an effective, mediating response—one that preserves the possibility of mutual critique of Church and world even as it promotes genuine "dialogue" that might lead to common efforts fostering human development—would be concerted attention to shared values and a consideration of the possibility that disjunction between cultural and religious values occurs largely with respect to the ordering of values rather than with respect to the values themselves. Given the suggestion of a broadly-speaking shared anthropology assumed by advertising and Christianity, with their overlapping constituencies in the West (if not elsewhere, too), attention to value placement promises fruitful "conversation" between Christianity and the larger culture, for a more effective "response" to culture by the Church. This matter can be considered via insights from Lonergan.

Theology and Advertising:

Interpretation and Response

Lonergan noted in *Method in Theology* that division within community may result from "a diversity of culture and the stratification of individuals into classes of higher and lower competence" or "from the presence and absence of intellectual, moral, or religious conversion."[21] The latter case is the more severe, as it can indicate the presence of ideology in those "alienated from . . . true self . . . in the refus[al] of self-transcendence" which leads to conversion.[22] If it were the case that advertising bespeaks a decisive division within the world community in which resides the Church, that would mean that there is nothing reflected in advertising of the larger culture—or of particular cultures that may or may not intersect with the concerns of the Church—that can serve as the basis of genuine fruitful

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[21] Bernard J.F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, repr. ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), p. 357.

[22] Ibid.

communication. The assumption that this is so can lead to alienation of the Church from the larger culture, and vice versa, in accusatory stances that create polarization where recognition of even meager common perceptions could result in growth in understanding leading to conversion. But the shared values noted of the Church and the larger culture suggest that any "division" between the Church and the world reflected in today's dominant advertising in the West is not necessarily due to a refusal of self-transcendence, even where it might signal a misidentification of the means of self-transcendence. Therefore, there is of course the possibility that the Church can communicate successfully the message of Christ in a way that will allow the larger world to understand it and to receive it. As Lonergan wrote with respect to his functional specialty of communications, the final of his eight theological specialties:

> The Christian message is to be communicated to all nations. Such communication presupposes that preachers and teachers enlarge their horizons to include an accurate and intimate understanding of the culture and the language of the people they address. They must grasp the virtual resources of that culture and that language, and they must use those virtual resources creatively so that the Christian message becomes, not disruptive of the culture, not an alien patch superimposed upon it, but a line of development within that culture.[23]

Lonergan submitted that the pluralist "does not consider it his task either to promote the differentiation of consciousness [as of personal and cultural development[24]] or to ask people to renounce their own culture. Rather he would proceed from within their culture and he would seek ways and means for making it into a vehicle for communicating the Christian message."[25] He recognized three types of "theology in its external relations," which is the functional specialty of communications: those of an academic interdisciplinary nature, those that are "the transpositions that theological thought has to develop if religion is to retain its identity and yet at the same time find access into the minds and hearts of men of all cultures and class," and "the adaptations needed to make full and proper use of the diverse media of communication that are available at any place

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[23] Ibid., p. 362.

[24] Ibid., pp. 305–319.

[25] Ibid., p. 363. Lonergan stated: "If one is to communicate with persons of another culture, one must use the resources of their culture. To use simply the resources of one's own culture is not to communicate with the other but to remain locked up in one's own. At the same time, it is not enough simply to employ the resources of the other culture. One must do so creatively. One has to discover the manner in which the Christian message can be expressed effectively and accurately in the other culture" (Ibid., p. 300). Such discovery is not an easy task, for, as Lonergan also noted, "A culture is a set of meanings and values informing a common way of life, and there are as many cultures as there are distinct sets of such meanings and values" (Ibid., p. 301).

and time."[26] While this project is of the first type, it seeks to offer guiding insights into the other two types. Lonergan's discussion of values assists.

In Lonergan's vision, cultural and personal values are immediately transcended by religious values. Conversely, in advertising and marketing, societal/cultural values are preeminent; religious values may influence but not supplant them. The textbook *Consumer Behavior* explains that individuals "abandon values when the values no longer meet the needs of society. In fact, some anthropologists view culture as an entity serving humans in their attempts to meet their most basic biological and social needs. When norms no longer provide gratification to a society, the norms lose their relevance to the majority of people."[27] Clearly it is a daunting task to reverse a hierarchy of values. Church documents such as *Ethics in Advertising* provide ethical guidelines for advertising and for media generally, designed to keep media's own consumer mentality in check (e.g., "voluntary ethical codes" for advertisers,[28] governmental regulation of advertising,[29] media monitoring of advertising,[30] personal ethical responsibility among advertisers[31]). These are important, indubitably. But since the purveyors of culture are themselves "products" of culture to some degree, they are not necessarily any more capable than their audience of critiquing that culture and its expressions. Recommendations for the Church itself—chiefly for the hierarchical apostolate (e.g., communicating the Gospel message in "new ways" via "new techniques," educating Church members about advertising's role and "its relevance to the work of the Church"[32])—are more easily controlled. Ideally, the goal would be not only to make Church members—particularly those of the lay apostolate—wiser in the degree to which they accept consumerist philosophies but to make them more capable of making the correlations between the Gospel and cultural messages that would help them to see how they might reverse in their own minds and lives

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[26] Ibid., pp. 132–133. It is at the level of the seventh functional specialty, systematics, that "appropriate systems of conceptualization" are worked out "to remove apparent inconsistencies" in "doctrinal expression" and, importantly with respect to communications' concern for cultural plurality, "to move towards some grasp of spiritual matters both from their own inner coherence and from the analogies offered by more familiar human experience" (Ibid., p. 132). In Lonergan's first four functional specialties—research, interpretation, history, and dialectic—the tasks of theology include consideration of broad human experience as well as that specifically Christian. For concise explanations of the eight functional specialties—research, interpretation, history, dialectic, foundations, doctrines, systematics, and communications—see *Method in Theology*, pp. 127–136.

[27] Blackwell et al., *Consumer Behavior*, p. 431.

[28] Pontifical Council for Social Communications, *Ethics in Advertising*, para. 19.

[29] Ibid., para. 20.

[30] Ibid., para. 21.

[31] Ibid., para. 23.

[32] Ibid., para. 22.

the dominant cultural ordering of values. In this way the onus is upon
Church members to live the Christian message in the culture, yet in
counter to the culture insofar as Gospel values are placed, for an
enculturation of the Gospel that could even impact advertising since
that field is itself market-driven even as it in part drives the mar-
ket. The new style of evangelization that can result when Church
members internalize and then communicate by example this trans-
position of values requires that the commonalities of values that the
Church shares with the larger culture be emphasized. The starting
point could be the seemingly common human experience of the drive
for transcendence which, as has been noted, appears to be an ac-
knowledged dimension of life by most "Westerners." Indeed, even in
Western Europe where many claim secularism ultimately will reign,
there are reports of new religious fervor in some locales.[33] *Gaudium
et Spes* recognizes that all people "feel unlimited in their desires and
their sense of being destined for a higher life," despite their "many
limitations" due to their status as "created beings."[34] In our time our
limitations are manifested in materialism, "fashionable" world-views
offering a false sense of peace, attempts toward an "earthly paradise"
to be achieved "through human effort alone," and the "foolhardiness"
of believing that one creates one's own meaning of life.[35] Indeed,
advertisers attempt to construct such expectations; so, too, do they
sometimes attempt to convince that a kind of transcendence—even if
only a self-image unencumbered by the reality of one's concrete aims
and actions—can be achieved through product purchase. "Nonethe-
less," the Pastoral Constitution offered encouragingly that "in the
face of modern developments there is a growing body of people who
are asking the most fundamental of all questions or are glimpsing
them with a keener insight: What is humanity? What is the meaning
of suffering, evil, death, which have not been eliminated by all this
progress? What is the purpose of these achievements, purchased at
so high a price? What can people contribute to society? What can
they expect from it? What happens after this earthly life is ended?"[36]
From recognition of these questions flow key values that must be pro-
moted beyond others. But other values must be validated explicitly,

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[33] See, as a sample of such reports, Andrew Higgins, "In Europe, God Is (Not) Dead,"
The Wall Street Journal Online, 14 July 2007 [cited 8 February 2008]. Available from
http://online.wsj.com/article/SB118434936941966055.html.

[34] *Gaudium et Spes*, para. 10.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid. These questions are communicated in "positive values" of "modern culture":
"study of the sciences and exact fidelity to truth in scientific investigation, the necessity of
teamwork in technology, the sense of international solidarity, a growing awareness of the
expert's responsibility to help and defend the rest of humanity, and an eagerness to improve
the standard of living of everyone, especially of those who are deprived of responsibility
or suffer from cultural destitution" (Ibid., para. 57).

too. Otherwise, individuals within the Church experience a disjunc-
tion between the great questions and lower pleasures; they experience
a dualism that is not only theologically incorrect but that does not
allow true integration of the Gospel message and daily living whereas
Gaudium et Spes has as its stated goal "to speak to all people in order
to unfold the mystery that is humankind and cooperate in tackling
the main problems facing the world today."[37]

The world today is one of instant communication; ideas and the
facts of events are disseminated widely but received with varying
degrees of interest, understanding, and/or acceptance. In this situa-
tion culture can become both more commonly shared (as in a global
culture that has in view the entirety of the planet and not simply
a civilization considered normative) and more proliferative (as of
many cultures or subcultures formed from increasing knowledge of
the sheer diversity of human situations and from rapid development
which does not carry all people(s) at the same rate or to the same
degree). This can be an opportunity for the Church, for in such a
nexus of culture(s) the common human experience of transcendence,
the questions that this engenders, and the values that result can more
readily appear. And there does seem to be a mode of discourse ex-
pressive of such central human concerns across many, if not all,
cultures. Story and the unique contributions that the field of adver-
tising contributes to story's development and "recitation" can serve
as vehicle of the Church's "response" to the world.

Two current, related methodological trends in marketing and ad-
vertising are ethnography and narrative, approaches consonant with
those of academic disciplines including theology, as well as of the
Church. They are effective, in each instance, not only because of
their ability to express the needs and desires of the human person but
because of their ability to persuade the human person. Theologically,
the ability of the human person to be persuaded is part and parcel
of the possibility of human salvation, for those with free will must
choose to accept God. But of course, this possibility of being per-
suaded can be exploited in ways that will not lead us to our ultimate
destination; this is manipulation, the danger against which the Church
wishes to guard the world and the very act of which advertising often
is rightly accused. The Church also is charged with cooperating with
divine persuasion, functioning as a vehicle of such to its members
and to the world at large. To the extent that advertisers' methods are
effective at persuasion of the human person, they may be effective for
the Church. Methods are not to be confused with media. The Church
must do more than utilize available communication vehicles—if and

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[37] Ibid., para. 10.

when that is appropriate—if it is to reach the minds and hearts of contemporary persons whose thoughts and feelings have been trained by secular culture at least as thoroughly as by religious tradition.

Methods:

Marketing/Advertising

The basic marketing of a product or service as a cultivator of lifestyle and as a means of constructing one's identity and meaning is a strategy that has been described thoroughly by those practicing business and theology alike.[38] The novelty recently introduced by advertisers is the combination of ethnography and storytelling to accomplish this. It might be readily and correctly suggested that the methods of advertising change with the times and that even its current storytelling device so compatible with theological methods is not universal and may even be a trend. But that is to the point that theology must engage with such changes if it is to benefit from advertising's own effective readings of the pulse of the times. A frequent current focus upon rapidly-developing technology's influence upon our views of self and world fails sometimes to recognize innovations in method as critically as those of media. In the order of method, the "branded" lives of consumers formed by such as logo and celebrity endorsements is an obvious marketing device; others more subtle and as given to evolution and change require as much scrutiny.

Ethnography, the branch of anthropology that studies and records descriptively phenomena of human cultures, only recently has been adopted by and adapted for the industry of marketing which includes advertising. Noting that consumers studied in focus groups and via questionnaires and polls do not always report accurately their preferences and behavior, market research companies in the last decade have implemented ethnographic methods of research to observe consumers directly in their natural settings—their homes, their workplaces, their centers of recreation.[39] Data is collected on consumers'

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[38] See especially Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide*, pages pp. 184–188 on "Accessorized identities."

[39] See a sampling of literature discussing the use of ethnography in marketing efforts, including research, product design, and advertising: Alladi Venkatesh, "Interpretive Research: Lessons from the Field and A Report from the World of Practice," *Advances in Consumer Research* 32 (2005), pp. 347–348; Jean Halliday, "Nissan Delves Into Truck Owner Psyche," *Advertising Age* 74, no. 48 (1 December 2003), p. 11; Olga Gonzalez, "Futurespeak" Interview: "Solutions for Evolving Consumer Needs," *American Demographics* 26, no. 3 (April 2004), p. 44; Kate Maddox, "Researchers Learn More From What People Do Than Say," *B to B* 91, no. 4 (3 April 2006), pp. 63–66; Todd Wasserman, "Sharpening the Focus," *Brandweek* 44, no. 40 (3 November 2003), p. 28; Stephen R.

actual versus reported diets of food, television, and such, which can then used to develop products that meet actual rather than perceived consumer needs or desires and to place products within cultural milieus of value sets that attract targeted groups of consumers. From a theological point of view, there could be little better indication of the fallenness of human beings than that we either do not know ourselves well enough to report accurately our behavior or we do not choose to report honestly that which we do know about ourselves. Interestingly, in marketing literature there is little speculation about why consumers' own reports are not reliable indications of their behavior. Those collecting and analyzing ethnographic data have given a guess where Church attendance is concerned, however, suggesting that we report that which we believe that we should do; in places in Western Europe where secularization is valued, churchgoers may under-report their attendance at worship services, whereas in the United States where religious impulses are valued, churchgoers may over-report such attendance.[40]

One practical application of ethnographic research is storytelling. Storytelling in advertising occurs today prominently in two ways. First, magazine and television advertisements sometimes are using ethnographic strategy not only to conduct research but to apply that research in advertisements that elevate a product or service in consumers' consciousness by association with a culture, a lifestyle, or a cause of which they already have positive impressions. More ambitiously, ethnographic elements are used in advertising to promote a product or service along with a lifestyle, a cause, or a value set.

Rosenthal and Mark Capper, "Ethnographies in the Front End: Designing for Enhanced Customer Experiences," *Journal of Product Innovation Management* 23, no. 3 (May 2006), pp. 215–237; Drew Barrand, "Closer Encounters," *Marketing (UK)* (14 July 2004), pp. 48–49; Louella Miles, "Living Their Lives," *Marketing (UK)* (11 December 2003), pp. 27–28; Theo Downes-LeGuin, "Integrate Ethnographic Data Into Decisions," *Marketing News* 39, no. 4 (1 March 2005), p. 51; Gavin Johnston, "Leveling the Field," *Marketing Research* 17, no. 4 (Winter 2005), pp. 16–19; and Erwin Ephron, "The Reality Show of Research," *MediaWeek* 16, no. 11 (13 March 2006), p. 28.
[40] A Gallup report addresses this "social desirability" theory as pertaining to church attendance, cautioning that observational data suggesting a discrepancy between Americans' claims and action may itself be inaccurate: "Americans may actually be accurately reporting attendance at various forms of worship, even if not the traditional church attendance," church attendance may be "a regular part of their lives, even if they are not there each and every Sunday," and "the reality of that perception [of regular church attendance] in their daily lives may be very real – regardless of their actual church attendance." See Frank Newport, "Estimating Americans' Worship Behavior, Part II," Gallup, Inc., at Gallup.com [issued 10 January 2006; cited 8 February 2008]. Available at http://www.gallup.com/poll/20824/Estimating-Americans-Worship-Behavior-Part.aspx. For additional information, see also the companion report, Frank Newport, "Estimating Americans' Worship Behavior," Gallup, Inc., at Gallup.com [issued 3 January 2006; cited 8 February 2008]. Available at http://www.gallup.com/poll/20701/Estimating-Americans-Worship-Behavior.aspx.

Such advertisements tell a story by depicting the very consumer behavior—flattering or not so—viewed by ethnographic research teams; consumers recognize themselves in the recreation of scenes observed by research teams, and this results in a positive association with a product or service featured as the solution to a particular challenge or as an emblem of a particular view of life or value. Second, some advertisements today function as short stories, showing a moment in the life of an individual or a group and integrating a product as a natural and enhancing element in that moment. While on the surface the product may seem peripheral to the story, consumers who identify with the story thereby may be conditioned to identify with the product. Usually such identifications are emotional attachments—the great merit of narratives, but sometimes the product is integrated into the advertisement in such a way that its "support" of the targeted demographic seems not only emotional but political. Occasionally such product "placement" is explicitly political; the story is told of actual circumstances in the public arena and a product or service "sponsors" a "real life" story or event depicted.

Advertising's use of narrative with incorporation of elements of ethnography at its most pointed, then, responds to and inculcates for values both cultural and personal, in a manner that is more intimately anthropological than other types of advertising and in common with religious traditions in its mode of discourse. The perhaps subtle move from selling products to selling values with positive product associations underscores a basic point being made that cultural impulses are not—at least in the case given of Western civilization—generally contradictory of theological impulses, even though lifestyles promoted by advertising, as largely secular and reversing the hierarchy of values recognized by theology, can be hostile to religion. Theology and many other fields have of late recovered recognition or newly learned of story's ability to communicate human hopes and fears on a deeper level than other forms of discourse. Since story helps illuminate the latent anthropology communicated in today's advertising, an anthropology that has been asserted to correspond on a basic level to that of Christianity, might this serve as a conversation point in education of constituencies of the Church and the larger culture about the Christian understanding of "humanity's noble destiny," in the words of *Gaudium et Spes*?[41] If so, since advertising's sole aim is to use its methods to persuade, as bold as the suggestion may seem, might advertising have something to teach the Church in the order of methodology?

[41] *Gaudium et Spes*, para. 3.

Conclusion:

Dialogue of Church and World

Where anthropology provides understandings of the human person common to advertising and theology, either culturally or meta-culturally, narrative can be effective in communicating the ordering of values held by Christianity. This ordering of values is, of course, pre-eminently preached in the Gospel narrative, but, given that this narrative is a call and the possibility of graced life, it can be preached in narratives about gospel reception, too. This is a purpose of the stories of the saints, but any Catholic who had been reared in the Church in the last half of a century has missed these stories that were once told prominently verbally and in imagery, in churches, schools, and homes, albeit often told in a way that does not meet modern sensibilities. If narrative were reintroduced in a prominent way to those in the pews and not just shared among those in the academy, advertising might have two lessons for the Church as storyteller—one, focus upon particular moments of a life as encapsulations or emblems of a value or a value set, and, two, use ethnography both to study the "audience" receiving messages and to tell stories in a way that creates strong emotional as well as intellectual associations with central figures or the circumstances of their lives. Neither of these suggestions requires advertising per se by the Church. Not even many contemporary historical-critical accounts of the lives of saints incorporate these lessons which would underscore the relevance of particular saints to our lives today; the stated task of recent biographies is, fittingly, to place the saints in their own historical-cultural locations. Yet doesn't St. Francis of Assisi—who rejected a life of privilege that might have been maintained through unbridled business practices—show the lie of the consumerism of our age? Doesn't St. Augustine of Hippo—in his examination and eventual rejection of all of his day's major thought forms claiming to be absolutes—show the folly of unbounded trust in today's commerce of trendy ideas?[42] Such Christian figures appeal even to the "unchurched." Indeed, for his love and simplicity St. Francis is known and admired even by many non-Christians. If drawn out explicitly, then, his life's "comment" on the shape of Western lives today might be heard more loudly than might be surmised.

[42] These suggestions are born of my own ongoing research and reflection upon the saints. But ratifying them is an intriguing segment of Miller's *Consuming Religion*, pp. 167–171, in which he describes Robert Orsi's research into the re-appropriation and, indeed, re-articulation of devotion to St. Jude "as a spiritual practice that enabled the devout [immigrant Catholics in the New World] to clarify their problems and focus their desires" (p. 170). For the original study, see Orsi, *Thank You, St. Jude* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

As to the first lesson, to return to the example of Western cul-
ture as glimpsed through the lens of advertising, the Western world
is face-paced; its younger generations have been trained—not only
by the experience of constant rapid change but by its delivery in
"sound-bites," video clips, and blogs—to digest reality in moments,
to live each moment as a moment. There are obvious deficiencies in
this approach to reality, since the view of the whole for which the
moments exist can be sacrificed. Yet this is where the Church can
guide, by stringing the moments together, showing how the values
captured in the stories that compel lead to larger questions and fun-
damental truths about the human person. It is worth noting that the
Gospel accounts do not provide us with a complete account of the
life of Jesus, but with a narrative constructed of key moments of his
ministry and the response of those who witnessed it and remembered
it from the particularities of their own settings. Such an ascending,
inductive approach to use of narrative which is attuned to cultural
sensibilities but not slave to cultural messages could be effective in
reversing the hierarchy of values seen in advertising, if the moments
are shown or "told" frequently enough and sufficiently targeted to
the audience both ecclesial and cultural. Stories of Christians (prefer-
ably dead, to safeguard humility) who may or may not be saints
but who, at least in a particular moment, showcased the possibilities
of real human transcendence could be juxtaposed to the occasional
moments of human transcendence depicted in advertising which are
shown to be achieved through the purchase of products and services
and/or which are used to "glorify" the accomplishments of human
persons rather than to recognize the graced existence of human per-
sons. Catechetical instruction and homilies are obvious locations for
such stories, but other venues in the Church might be considered, as
well, to complement the indispensable, preeminent deductive "task"
of proclamation of the Gospel. Both the deductive and the inductive
"moments" are contained in the full story of our salvation—the story
of the gift given and that of the gift received.

As to the second lesson, inclusion in these stories of details that
mirror those in the lives of audience members would pique interest
and intensify both affective and intellectual connections. As already
suggested, this is, perhaps, one way in which the stories even of
saints could be told more effectively, with an eye as focused upon
those looking to models as upon the models themselves.[43] Doing
so would require critical attention to culture(s) through ethnographic
data collection and description. The power of story is not only in

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[43] The saints' roles are model, companion, and intercessor, as affirmed by *Lumen
Gentium* in *The Basic Sixteen Documents: Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Decrees,
Declarations*, rev. trans., ed. Austin Flannery (Northport, New York: Costello Publishing
Company, 1996), especially chapters VII and VIII, "The Pilgrim Church" and "Our Lady."

the exceptional that inspires but in the ordinary that shows us that such inspiration is not futile. Advertisers convince consumers that the vision of life they construct for us is attainable through purchase; the Church aims to show that the vision of life that is divinely offered to us is available as gift. In either case, the effective "argument" is in the details, for it is through these that any "audience" recognizes itself in the story and is thereby impelled to action. Indeed, scholars make the point that we have access to Jesus' own sayings and stories, the parables, only from within their context within the gospels; lost to us are the original situations in which they were offered, the manner of their delivery, and their precise wording.[44] The evangelists transmitted faithfully the message of Jesus Christ in a manner compelling to their own communities. Not every story—even if told with the intention of disclosing the power of Christ's work in a life—is transformative; some now neglected hagiographical documents are proof that stories can be told ineffectively, at least for a particular audience. Advertisers dedicate tremendous resources to the development of stories that will appeal to a particular "niche." The homilist, the parish, the diocese, the charitable organization that truly will be successful in reaching the audience attends to its demographics, not merely aiming for the majority but—as does advertising—to each segment of a congregation. The Church has, or could have, the ethnographic data needed to identify it audiences. Upon joining a parish, for example, many Church members fill out identification and interest cards. These cards could be used more effectively, collecting specific information on state of life, career, etc.; the data could be monitored regularly and known to priests and pastoral ministers; it could be complemented by deliberate observation (by sight or through envelope collection, for example) of the demographics of those who appear for liturgy and other activities at the parish; and homilies, ministries, interest groups, etc., could be targeted and developed accordingly. The Church's wish is that action elicited by its stories' inspiration will be matched by guiding contemplation engaging the whole human person as intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and material. As shown, advertising has not such a goal. Again, a reversal of the order of values must occur for a harmony of religious and cultural worldviews.

While pastoral ministers are best positioned to lead method's explorations into the practical world of diocesan and parish life, since

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[44] This point is made in the opening chapter of John R. Donahue's *The Gospel in Parable: Metaphor, Narrative, and Theology in the Synoptic Gospels* ([Minneapolis]: Fortress Press, 1988), pp. 1–27, especially, pp. 1–4. Donahue admits the debt of this now universal insight to Joachim Jeremias; see his *The Parables of Jesus*, 2nd rev. ed (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1972), original edition, *Die Gleichnisse Jesu*, 8th ed., Gottingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1970, trans. S.H. Hooke, 6th ed., 1962. For a study of the development of the parables themselves, see also Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989).

they maintain and create the venues in which any "strategies"—to use advertising's term—might be applied fruitfully, even administrators must be involved at the "global" level. Concern for loss of the message in the medium understandably discourages many churches from traditional advertising, particularly in view of the evidence that some churches that do advertise have deliberately or in effect "sold" themselves via the philosophy of the marketplace—by commodifying their "products" spiritual and/or material. And, unwittingly today, many denominations might promote the marketplace philosophy in magazines and newspapers that tell stories of transformations or success of church members as "products" of Christian life; thereby the essential challenge presented by Jesus' own stories—the parables—is barely if at all reflected. The sometimes greater attention today to the production values of "Christian media" than to intellectual content also supports the pervasive cultural favoring of style over substance. But this philosophy is not media's indispensable partner. Depiction of transformative moments in the living of the gospel today has been the subject of understated, effective television advertisements of such as the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints. Catholics, Orthodox, Anglicans, and other Christian denominations the world over are in many cases quite effectively utilizing the Internet, making available to members and non-members alike the vast resources of their traditions. Such activities suggest an untraditional way of conceiving of the local church, one that might be explored to advantage—without erasing the geographically local church where alone Catholics can fully participate in the celebration of the Eucharist. Helpful might be websites that direct "surfers" to specific resources based upon their spiritual and ministerial interests. Observation of their site visits could be a form of ethnographic data collection, and their search for material relevant to their own situations could influence the Church's selection of stories deemed most important for the current audience. The young adult Catholic struggling with faith issues in the twenty-first century could thereby learn that St. Augustine of Hippo struggled perhaps similarly in the fourth century, as did Thomas Merton in the twentieth century. The adult woman finding her place in the Church could learn of the influence of and works about or of Sts. Macrina and Catherine of Siena. Both of these could find conversation partners and "virtual" directors on the same spiritual path. So, too, Church members could learn of valid ministries outside of their own parishes from which they could benefit or to which they could contribute.

The suggestions ventured here as inspired by lessons of advertising are merely rudimentary and would require concerted attention for proper execution, of course. But if theology will be in "contact with

its own times,"[45] as called for by *Gaudium et Spes*, the warrant for attending to both content and methods of the contemporary cultural lens that is advertising is clear: this field's pervasive impact upon human self-perception and motivation, particularly in developed and developing countries, can rival the Church's own influence upon its members and—through its members—upon the world at large. The world "preaches" its news around the clock, pointedly in advertising. How will the Church continue to communicate the Gospel without being drowned to inaudibility, even to the ears of its own members, by the persistent promotion of cultural and personal values as the source of fulfillment? Emphasis upon our felt transcendence, which from a secular standpoint has an analogous sense to religious and specifically Christian values, is perhaps only one of potentially many story lines that can resonate with common human experience and therefore prepare all "audiences" for reception of the Good News. Where advertising's anthropology is congenial to such themes, an attentive theology might subsume the cultural messages to religious ones, thereby using to spiritual benefit prompts perceived by or even supplied by the "world." As in the early Church's sublation of pagan celebrations by Christian holy days, transpositions of values among members of the Church can have an exponential effect beyond the visible boundaries of the Church and, hence, promote an evangelization of example that elicits curiosity about, if not hunger for, Christian words of explanation—and salvation.

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[45] *Gaudium et Spes*, para. 62.