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Advertisement in the Perspective of World Religions – from Negation to Necessary Acceptance

Abstract: There are a few factors which influence the awareness and culture of the modern man. The most essentials include: religions, developing globalization and advertisements. The mentioned elements are related to each other and mutually restricted. Authors of advertisements still often use elements of religious life in order to encourage customers to buy particular products or make them loyal to a particular brand. Developing globalization allows for using multicultural elements, including the elements related to all major religions. We should point out that religions which promote self-restriction, renouncement and devotion remain in opposition to the developing advertising industry. In this world of advertisement, which seems unavoidable, religions have no choice but accept them. By setting forth justified ideas they make people think over the methods and limits of using religious elements in advertisements of products.

Keywords: advertisement, world religions, religious values

It is not easy to clearly identify the most vital factors which shape our culture and affect everyday relationships, contribute to an individual's self-realization and successes in his personal life as well as effectiveness and failures in professional life. These factors greatly depend on the individual's personal traits. Thus, it is difficult to present one systematized and reliable list approved by many analysts and observers of current social life. In order to carry out a further analysis let us identify a few such factors. They are widespread all over the world and can hardly be negated. The first factor which is definitely more and more affecting our culture and mutual relationships is rapidly developing globalization. First and foremost, thanks to modern and electronic media we are aware that we live in a "global village" and our

everyday life and activities influence different cultures and communities living on distant continents. World globalization, mostly driven by economy, are accompanied by social, cultural and political changes. These changes lead both to a closer relationship between nations and units, which till now remained divided, and also to serious confrontations [Sułkowski 2012, p. 20]. Another factor which affects our life, closely connected with human economic activity and globalization, is undoubtedly advertisement. It permeates all public life. It is visible everywhere – on the radio, in the press, on television, along roads and even in parks and gardens. While giving places which play an important role in our social life we should point out schools, hospitals, parks and even places of religious worship. Advertisements placed on buildings which serve religious purposes encourage passers-by to get involved in spiritual activities of a particular religious community, give information on the time when the services are performed and even persuade the reader that they are attractive. We remember that religious communities run their own schools. When they want to attract potential candidates and make them choose their school, they also have to use advertisement.

The phenomenon of permeating not only economic life by advertisement can be easily observed in the definition of advertisement. Modern advertisements no longer solely inform about an interesting product, encourage potential buyers to purchase the product or make him become loyal to a particular brand. Advertisements also serve entirely different purposes, essential in proper functioning of the society. They encourage people into getting vaccinated, getting involved in social and professional activities or protest against widely spreading pathologies. Visible changes in the attitude towards advertisement and various techniques which are used by people creating advertisements make us classify advertisement into social and political. According to the Code of Ethical Advertising economic advertisement can be clearly differentiated from social and political. The code states that social advertisement aims at “promoting behaviour which expected in a society whereas political advertising is an element of an election or referendum campaign”. It contains instructions “how voters are expected to behave in an election or referendum” [*Kodeks Etyki Reklamy* 2012, p. 2].

In discussions run by culture experts, educators and sociologists certain significant problems arise. Let us briefly present the most important one. It seems obvious that almost every advertisement should contain easily understandable images and catchphrases. Only then it becomes effective and gets to a potential customer. In this meaning advertisement reflects the culture which the recipient is surrounded by. Until recently all those interested in this topic have held a debate whether advertising affects our culture and thus our

lifestyle, values and their instilment in life [Czarnecki 2008, p. 206. Nowadays it seems undoubted that advertising not only generates a certain “consumption culture” but also effectively influences our personal and social life.

In this article we will present relationships between advertisement and various religions. It should be emphasized that we cannot omit this issue in our discussion. Despite rapid laicization, major religions, especially those present in societies of so called “western culture”, still influence social and cultural aspects of our life, thus, the economic aspect, too. Globalization has definitely a strong influence on religious life, as well. Cultural changes contribute to meeting of world religions. As a consequence of this phenomenon, people not only adopt other people’s customs and ways of performing religious acts but also accept or deny values. This article particularly deals with the issue of advertising in the religious perspective. First and foremost, as we observed earlier, worshippers and religious leaders use advertisement in order to disseminate their methods of performing religious rituals, doctrines or ethical values. However, it is not surprising that followers of particular religions appreciate commonly used marketing techniques and widely implement them in this commercialized modern world. On the other hand, it seems necessary for religious leaders to use not only advertisements and media which are used for disseminating particular values. Experts on culture, ethics and religion should analyze in their discussions the problem of the influence of advertising on the life and identity of an individual. It seems surprising that the issue of the close relationship between advertisement and religion is hardly ever discussed, even in the most important articles on the condition of the modern world. Here, a question arises: Why are experts on religion not as interested in the issue of advertisement as educators, sociologists, psychologists or, obviously, marketing specialists?

Let us point out the visible combination of religion and advertisement. Advertising particular products by people dressed in clothes normally worn by religious leaders etc. is an example of such a combination. Actors employed to play roles of the leaders do not only advertise alimentary products. The advertisements are connected with cultural life, serious social problems and problems directly related to economy, too. Despite that fact that Catholicism is a dominant denomination, authors of advertisements also use the image of Buddhist monks. Such an image appears in the advertisement of mBank – the first Internet bank founded in Poland. In this advertisement a young Buddhist worshipper, in a soft voice encourages a male customer to use services offered by the bank. He points out benefits of those services [*Mistrz buddyjski reklamuje mBank (wideo)*]. We can say that the idea of presenting a religious leader in advertisement is no longer as controversial as it was some time ago. It does not evoke so many emotions and negative reactions as before. However, we can

set a question whether the picture of a monk placed on bottles of beer (e. g. on labels of imported alcohol) or even on other everyday products is a proper and effective element of the advertisement which will attract a potential buyer. We can suppose that effect will be quite opposite. Another question arises: How does the image of people dressed in characteristic religious clothes and clearly identified with ecclesiastical life influence the institutions they belong to?

The next question of the article will refer to the attitude of world religions to advertisement. Should we think that religions generally are not in favour of advertisements, which aim at attracting customers and in specialists' opinion, contribute to consumption - unfavourable and even hostile to religious values. In articles on Hinduism, which is still widely practised in India, authors made observations that authors of advertisements have to stick to certain regulations which are really restrictions set to protect a customer against being misled. Moreover, advertisements should contain elements of renouncement, which is so characteristic in the Hindu culture. According to Hinduism worshippers modern advertisement creates an atmosphere in which "traditional renouncement and self-restriction are no longer highly valued" [Menski 2007, p. 66].

Let us look at advertisements from the perspective of religions, which are present in our social life. The observations made here are general. The author bore differences between religions in mind but emphasized common characteristics in other issues. To solve any and all modern problems, Judaism implemented such solutions which followed the Bible and advice given by rabbis [Wigoder 1996, p. 340]. Thus, Jewish religion has always stressed the necessity of delivering reliable information so its attitude towards mass media has been positive. Judaism worshippers are allowed to use media even during the Sabbath. This religion is also in favour of entertainment and using entertainment is often a method of communication between the recipient of an advertisement and its author. This oldest monotheistic religion condemns advertisement only when it is a source of gossips and unconfirmed information. It is one of the most important criteria for the evaluation of mass media as Judaism is strongly against disseminating slanders and misinforming recipients of information. We should also say that those who deal with analyzing modern advertisements stress there is no reliable information on the advertised product or services. So what is and is not allowed in advertisement according to Judaism? Even the Talmud allowed craftsmen to paint patterns on ceramic products to make them more attractive for a customer. However, it was strictly prohibited to cover old ceramics with pictures to make them look brand new. Thus, it is not allowed to present a false image of a product or try to persuade the customer the product has some features which it actually does not have [Lawton 2007, pp. 222–223].

Is Buddhism critical of advertisement? It is assumed that there are around five hundred Buddhism followers in the world. They are more and more often met not only in distant Asia but also on other continents, such as North America or Europe [Gadacz, Milerski 2001, pp. 309–313; Kowalczyk 2011, pp. 15–17]. Similarly to other religions, also Buddhism has a lot of forms. Of various features of Buddhism we can mention practicality and renouncement of the world. The latter feature involves having a proper internal disposition. It can be concluded that advertisement remains in opposition to almost all values in which Buddhists believe [Morgan 2007, p. 124]. I will try to present the most important in details. Like followers of other religions, also Buddhism points out a great responsibility for what its individual followers do. Involvement in social issues must result from righteous intentions initiated by a particular person. Thus, a Buddhism follower is not allowed to depend on any forms of pressure from his group or manipulated in any way. Those who want to live in accordance with Buddhist values in lay society are expected to adopt certain guidelines which are supposed to facilitate the realization of their own religious ideas. They are encouraged to abstain for a short period of time not only from dancing and singing but also from “wearing wreaths, using perfumes, fragrant lotions and other things which are meant to make the person more beautiful”, which obviously is against advertisement and purposes it serves.

Islam is also critical of advertisement. All Muslims definitely claim that their religion does not allow them to separate the religious walk of life from the lay one – unlike it is demanded by people brought up in the western civilization. We should also add that economics is not a separate, lay science. It must be treated as “an element of Quranic teachings and not as a scientific discipline, according to the western civilization” [Krawczyk 2013, p. 269]. Islam is considered the youngest of all major religions of the modern world. It has spread all around the world. The majority of Muslims still live in Asia and Africa [Netton 2008, pp. 155–156]. However, the number of the Islamic religion followers is growing in Europe and North America. In what way is Islam against advertisement? Muslims emphasize that advertisements not only encourage customers to purchase a particular product but also persuade that the product is good. Alcohol might be a negative example as this religion strictly prohibits consumption of alcohol [Nanji 2009, p. 148]. Islam also points out the way in which a woman is presented. Her role is limited and she is supposed to care about her physical appearance only. On the other hand, advertisements are positive as their recipients are informed on new inventions, which facilitates broadening their minds and promotes creativity. Like in other religions, also Muslims stress the necessity of conveying reliable information. Even Mahomet insisted on telling the truth, keeping balance and giving up excessive attitude

while advertising products. Aggressive advertising might contribute to gaining customers but would probably “decrease blessing you will be given” [Mashuq ibn Ally 2007, p. 342]. This religion emphasizes a great role of free will in making commercial decisions. According to Islam the man has free will but at the same time he is weak, unreliable, mean and impatient and often changes his views and opinions. The Quran confirms that an individual is composed of two elements – material and spiritual. Both these aspects are treated as opposing to each other but complement each other. In other words, neither aspect can outdo the other one. Islam does not deny human material life [Nanji 2009, p. 143]. In this aspect it seems to be closer to advertisement than other ethical systems. There is one more positive element in advertisement. Success, which is reflected by material goods, should deserve appreciation. It serves the development of the individual and society [Galata 2007, p. 81].

It is not possible to present a general attitude of Christianity towards advertisement in such a short paragraph. We all know that there are a lot of denominations and within them there are contradictory communities. Nevertheless, we can say that Christians commonly accept mass media and take a proper advantage of them. Advertising is a way of attracting customers' attention to certain invaluable products. On the other hand however, it makes people buy products which they do not really need. All advertisements which persuade customers they will become more feminine or masculine, depreciate a human being and his system of values from the Christian point of view.

No matter what denomination is considered, the Christian point of view on advertisement is clearly expressed in a document “*Ethics in advertising*” [1998], issued by the *Pontifical Council for Social Communications*. According to the authors of this document advertisement is neither good nor bad. It is simply a tool which might be used either in a positive or a negative way. The authors confirm there are various kinds of advertisement: commercial, social and political. They believe that advertisement can have a positive or negative effect on some walks of life: economy, politics, culture, moral and religious life. The positive effect means creating honest and reliable competition. Advertisement contributes to economic growth and progress. Thanks to it people are informed about new and existing but improved products. All this enables customers to take reasonable decisions and contributes to lower prices. The authors of the document believe that advertisement boosts economic development and this in turn, favours the development of production and trade. Advertisement can also promote democracy by giving information on political parties and candidates, including candidates who are new and unknown to public”. With regards to culture, advertisement can also “promote the production of programmes which are highly intellectual, aesthetic and moral”. It can also promote

religious values, call for tolerance, sympathy, altruism and mercy towards people in need. The authors of the Vatican document make observations that advertisement has a negative influence, too because it can turn into a tool used in creating consumption mentality. The document criticizes potential practices of misinforming recipients by authors of advertisements. Such practices can have a negative effect on economy. It happens so when the advertisement is not informative but uses elements persuasion and irrationality. It can call for remaining loyal to a particular brand, prestige or fashion. In politics such misinformation practices might lead to presenting a false image of the political rival and his views or undermine his reputation. High costs of advertisements might inhibit honest competition. With regards to culture, misinformation involves replacing highly appreciated and respected artistic values with “superficial, vulgar and immoral practices”. The Vatican document criticizes advertisement and mass media by accusing them of ignoring educational and social needs and only being interested in deriving financial profits. Finally, with regards to religion, the negative influence might involve an instrumental use of religious elements or just treat them with contempt.

We should generally conclude that no religion is openly against advertising. It somehow introduces certain limitations. The mentioned Vatican document points out attempts of treating religious elements in advertisements in an instrumental way. Many people responsible for creating advertisements believe that elements of religious life are tricky factors which can be effectively used in order to gain a customer for their advertised products. It is not easy to determine when the author of the advertisement is against religion and religious feelings, depreciates them or treats them with contempt. The question of showing disrespect is highly subjective and greatly depends on a particular religious follower and him being a member of a more radical or more tolerant community. The Code of Ethical Advertising does not appear to be highly useful, as according to it, “advertisements cannot contain elements discriminating sex or nationality or be anti-racial or anti-religious” [*Kodeks Etyki Reklamy* 1012, p. 4]. Another restriction which refers to standards of advertising beer is also rather general. We read that “advertisement cannot be religiously offensive”. Both the limitations, the one which refers to discriminating elements and the one on the protection of religious feelings are very general and confirm the fact that the interpretation of a particular advertisement is exclusively subjective. Thus, cultural conditions and personal views of the recipient make up a negative interpretation of the particular advertisement.

As we observed before, advertisements reflect the culture which created them. Culture in turn, is shaped by many factors. One of them is religion. In these circumstances, a need to conduct studies on the influence of religion on

advertisement seems to arise. Let us make a different conclusion. The modern word of advertising, in which youth is glorified, old age depreciated and people constantly strive to gather more and more material goods, remains beyond any religion. Should we not conclude that in this confrontation religions must accept the fact that our life is dominated by advertisement? If there is no point in combating advertisements, they must be accepted. Making authors of advertisements constantly aware of introducing certain limitations can help them to think over the huge potential they have thanks to the advertisements and values which they create.

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