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Researching the sacred

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Researching the Sacred.

A conversation with Samuelson Appau, Russ Belk, and Diego Rinaldo

The old saying goes “never talk about politics or religion”. We happen to like talking about both, and regularly! Here again, we are happily breaking the taboo of polite conversation by talking about religion, spirituality, and all things sacred, with a group of consumer researchers specialising in the field.

Once the domain of theologians, sociologists, and (religion) anthropologists, we have seen more recently how consumer researchers have contributed to the field with scholarly outputs in journals, handbooks, special issues, conference tracks and discussion panels. Researching the sacred can be fraught with challenges, in and out of the field. It necessitates multidisciplinary work as we aim to make sense and do justice to our fieldwork. As consumer researchers of religiosity/religion and spirituality, we each have explored the sacred in distinct ways: Mona has studied rituals in Muslim (walking) pilgrimages in the Middle East, Victoria has explored how spirit possession shapes the cosmologies and practices of AfroAtlantic and Pentecostal faiths in the context of Brazil, and Hounaida has examined religious values and sustainability.

For those projects, all three of us had to grapple with the issue of capturing the sacred, the extraordinary and the benignly mundane through our fieldwork. Thus, from our own conversations and reflections came the idea to reach out to colleagues who have significantly contributed to the field, to hear more about their experiences into the world of the sacred. Russell Belk, Samuelson Appau and Diego Rinaldo kindly responded to our invitation to illuminate key questions, issues and conceptualisations in the scholarship on sacred consumption contemplating the past and mapping future research avenues.

Our contributors provide here a candid discussion of their explorations and experiences in the field. These perspectives can be very helpful to those wishing to start their own (qualitative) ‘sacred’ research journey as well as for those who wish to reflect on their own engagement with religion and spirituality. Samuelson, Diego and Russ outline the present challenges and opportunities of conducting such research. A reading list is also included for those interested in joining us in this collective discovery of the sacred.

First of all, how has the study of sacred consumption evolved since you started researching the field?

Russ: When Melanie Wallendorf, John Sherry, and I began to write about the sacred in the mid-1980s, we had a revelation that there was something more profound to certain consumer behaviors than simply “high involvement,” which was the closest consumer research term at the time. Ironically, we began talking about the sacralization of the secular and the secularization of the sacred at the moment that religious studies and the sociology of religion largely abandoned these areas. But something else was happening: religious studies began to acknowledge consumerist practices in religion (e.g. Vincent Miller, Eric Schmidt, and Robert Wuthnow; and later David Morgan, Wade Roof, and Kathryn Lofton). Some consumer research scholars besides our initial triad also began to utilize concepts of the sacred, the pilgrimage, spirituality, ritual, death, sacrifice, and so forth. Scholars of holidays and holy days began to converge. We collectively began to re-examine the (sacred) meanings of consumer objects, gifts, groups, practices, fandoms, money, fetishes, talismans, charms, icons, relics, and other devotions.

Samuelson: When I started researching these topics just ten years ago, it was so niche that someone in a seminar I presented my work was offended that I was suggesting that religion, spirituality and the sacred can be consumed like a good or service. How much progress we have now made! I think this whole space in our field started with the seminal paper by Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry, which was extremely influential, especially for CCT scholars. What that paper did was give other researchers in our discipline permission to see, talk and think about the sacred aspects of consumption. I see that to be the first phase of the evolution as more researchers started to examine the sacred aspects of different types of consumption and even ways that consumer subcultures behave like religions.

The second phase trickled in slowly but it was the period when people started publishing work on religion and spirituality as the main context of studying the sacred, rather than as insights drawn from secular consumption. Notable examples for me are Elif Izberk-Bilgin (2012)'s "infidel brand" paper and the edited volume on *Consumption and Spirituality* by Diego Rinallo, Linda Scott, and Pauline Maclaran. These early works established religion, spirituality and sacred consumption as an area of research, which has now blossomed into what I see as the current phase where we have had multiple special issues, conference special sessions and dozens of publications on the topic. Obviously, this is an oversimplified overview and crude segmentation of the evolution, but I think it largely captures some key milestones.

Studying the sacred, whether in religion or the market is definitely now becoming mainstream with scholars self-identifying their research in the space. There is certainly more to come for a space that is now very much in a growth phase.

Diego: When I started my journey in our field, the notion of 'the sacred' was well-established, thanks to the work of Belk et al. (1989) that had legitimized it as a relevant category to investigate consumption. Most subsequent work had used this notion to explore extraordinary consumer experiences, often relying on magicoreligious metaphors to make sense of phenomena as diverse as the Burning Man, river-rafting, mountain men gatherings, and brand fanaticism. Such was the emphasis on secularization processes and consumers' search for the sacred in profane consumption contexts, that only in a later moment our field focused on examining how commercialism and consumer culture affects religious and spiritual fields. *Consumption and Spirituality* (2012), the volume I edited with Pauline Maclaran and Linda Scott – and various conference roundtables and special sessions before and after the appearance of the book – contributed to establish spirituality and religion as a legitimate area of enquiry, paving the way for more recent special issues on the topic of *Journal of Macromarketing* (2016), *International Journal of Consumer Studies* (2018), *Journal of Management Spirituality & Religion* (2019), *Journal of Marketing Management* (2019), *Marketing Theory* (forthcoming) and this special issue of *Qualitative Market Research*. There has never been a better moment in our field to study religion and spirituality!

An ongoing preoccupation of the field during these years has been the commercialization of spirituality and religion, which following Belk et al. (1989) we have tended to see as a possible source of profanation of the sacred. We are possibly influenced by images such as that of Jesus casting out the merchants from the Temple,

or Martin Luther condemning the sale of indulgences. However, even superficial research on the history of religion will confirm that religions and markets have always co-existed and influenced each other. As scholars, we should treat the profanation of the sacred by commerce and monetary exchanges as an emic rather than etic theme.

Two subfields have emerged in recent times: pilgrimages and sacred journeys on the one hand, and the ways internet and social media have changed religious/spiritual fields. The covid-19 pandemics have led most religions and spiritual movements to experiment with online services, rituals, experiences, and trainings. This has been a major disruption, and I expect much research appearing in the future on how the affordances of specific technologies and social media platforms affect religious/spiritual practices.

We have used a range of so-called qualitative methods in our work (e.g., interviews, participant observation, visual analysis and introspections including auto-ethnography and poetic method). We faced issues of access and positioning as insiders-outsiders alongside questioning our legitimacy as ‘researchers’ in sometime very sensitive contexts. In your opinion, what would be the critical methodological issues that researchers need to consider when approaching the ‘sacred’?

Russ: God forbid that we have a structural equation model or 2x2 experiment on the sacred, although I’m sure both have been attempted. The sacred to many people involves deeply inculcated beliefs. Miracles and answered prayers, both sacred and profane, are serious things to some people. Blasphemy to the most serious may be a capital offence. To others these ritual gatherings are casual social routines that they don’t think of as particularly sacred or religious. There is considerable difference in researching such diverse groups. Access differs according to the researcher’s sincerity and religiosity. When Sammy Bonsu and I were studying the Gospel of Prosperity among Pentecostal Christians in Ghana, we were asked over and over if we were believers. We answered honestly and said we were interested in learning what they believed. Participant observation is also a key research method in such circumstances. Access was helped by the fact that Sammy was Ghanaian and Black, but my non-Ghanaian whiteness gave me a privileged outsider status and lent some (undue) importance to our presence. For researching an ephemeral characteristic like sacredness, access to the insider perspective is all-important. Somehow our combination worked, but we still had to earn respect by giving it first. We found that the best way in was to show sincere interest. This is also what worked for Tom O’Guinn and me in studying the Heritage Village USA religious theme park.

Samuelson: Other fields in the social sciences have been taking sacred consumption more seriously and for much longer than we have so there is definitely a lot more to learn from these fields to extend our own contributions. Religious studies, sociology, anthropology, philosophy and psychology are some of the base disciplines that I have relied on in my own work. Anyone looking to study the sacred (especially doctoral students) should certainly read more into what these fields have covered about the sacred because it will help them engage better with conversations in our field.

Access and researcher positionality are perhaps other important considerations. I have always studied sacred consumption in religious contexts that I am familiar with, which has been helpful in negotiating an insider status. I am a Christian so going to church for

fieldwork, especially in my own culture was not as challenging, and to Russ' point, it always helps when you self-identify as an insider. The cost of that benefit is positionality because familiarity can blind you to seeing data that will be "interesting" for an outsider, and many people in our field (including likely reviewers of your work) are outsiders. What helped me overcome that challenge was working with such outsiders who were able to see these interesting aspects of the data and the fieldwork. For my part, I ensure that I collect every possible data, especially the ones that I find mundane.

Either way, studying the sacred will almost certainly have an impact on you in ways that are personal and unimaginable. As scholars, we have an ethical duty to be respectful of our informants and context and we also have an intellectual responsibility to be critical in the way we make sense of what we study. That balance is not easy to achieve, but it is important to be aware of one's own biases. As a Christian studying Pentecostalism, I am inevitably empathetic in my critical approach, and it is important to me that I am aware and reflexive about this empathy. There is nothing wrong with that. It is as legitimate as the ex- or non-religious scholar who may be less generous in their critical approach to studying the sacred in (non)religious contexts.

Diego: In my personal experience, a key difficulty is navigating between insider and outsider perspectives, and between the emic and etic level of analysis. Who we are affects the research questions we ask, our methodological choices, what we see in the field, the informants we have access to, and our personal spiritual/religious experiences during fieldwork (or lack thereof). If we hold atheist/materialistic beliefs, we risk misrepresenting our informants' spiritual/religious experiences – a point that Ozanne and Appau (2019) magisterially made in their *Spirits in the Marketplace*. Researcher reflexivity is possibly much more important when studying religion and spirituality than other topics. When reviewing manuscripts, it still often happens that authors omit explaining how their positionality affected their fieldwork. There can be value in atheist, anticlerical, and 'spiritual but not religious' views when studying religious or spiritual communities or practices. It might be very interesting too to have religious researchers studying religions other than those they grew up in. What I suggest is greater reflexivity in field notes and methodology sections, and possibly authorial teams spanning multiple perspectives.

Another important consideration regards the possible impacts of our work, once published. Some of the anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann's Neopagan informants, who had granted her access to insider-only rituals, resented her when reading her (1989) *Persuasion of the Witch's Craft*, which described their beliefs as forms of 'interpretive drift'. Scientology has a reputation for creating legal problems to scholar researching beliefs and practices of its followers. In our field, we do not face the same problems as sociologists or anthropologists of religion, yet our work is often critical and our emphasis on framing spirituality and religion as consumption or attention on commercial elements might be ill-perceived by religious/spiritual leaders and consumers, including our informants.

Consumer culture theorists, including those researching the sacred, tend to draw from various cross-disciplinary scholarly sources to inform their research. What are some of the key authors that have influenced your thinking?

Diego: Let me start with some work that deeply influenced my religious imagination long before I was a researcher. Carl Gustav Jung's *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* is a personal favourite. Jungian work has been extensively relied upon to psychologize and legitimize esoteric and New Age beliefs and practices. Considered as archetypes residing in the deeper layers of our psyche, the gods and goddesses of the past have acquired new meanings lying in-between spirituality and self-help, and this has paved the way for their return in consumer culture. Gender-oriented explorations of religion/spirituality would benefit from reading theological work. Theology (from Thea, Goddess, a neologism introduced in the 1970s), and feminist theology more in general, look at the sacred and religion from a feminist perspective. *Womenspirit Rising*, a 1979 book edited by Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow, sparked my imagination with its analysis of religion as a patriarchal institution that contributes to the oppression of women. Its chapters are neatly divided among those hoping that religious institutions can be reformed from the inside and those considering the image of 'God the Father' as incompatible with women's empowerment and a fulfilling spiritual life.

A personal recommendation, for those joining the field, is to engage with the theological work and the history and functioning of the religious institutions that shape the underlying consumption fields. For example, consumers might not be especially aware of how pilgrimage sites are run or the four dogmas of the Catholic Church about the Virgin Mary, but these factors do affect consumers' experiences at Marian pilgrimage sites such as Lourdes or Fatima. They represent 'the context of context'. For established religions, there is a lot to study. In the case of spiritual movements lacking strong institutions and with recent histories, this might be less of a challenge.

I would also immodestly recommend some of my own recent work to researchers interested in joining the field. In a chapter on "Religion, Spirituality and Consumption" forthcoming in the second edition of *Consumer Culture Theory* (edited for Sage by Arnould, Crockett, Thompson and Weinberger), Jannsen Santana and I offer an accessible introduction to the field. In "Where spirituality and Religion meet gender and sexuality" (forthcoming, *Marketing Theory*), co-authored with many bright colleagues, we deal extensively with researchers' subject positioning and its impact on fieldwork and what intersectional research in spirituality and religion might look like.

Russ: Mircea Eliade (*The Sacred and the Profane*) and Victor Turner (*The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*) gave Melanie Wallendorf, John Sherry, and me structures and concepts to frame our early work on the sacred. There are several books that I would recommend for work at the intersection of technology and the sacred: Erik Davis, *Techgnosis*; William Stahl, *God and the Chip*; Heidi Campbell, ed., *Digital Religion*; Calvin Mercer and Tracy Trothen, eds., *Religion and Transhumanism*, for starters. I would also recommend science fiction. For a primer, see James McGrath, ed., *Religion and Science Fiction*. Mariam Humayun, Ahir Gopaldas, and I have also written a small piece on the pursuit of artificial life which is a quest for the sacred: "Artificial Life in History, Myth, and Ethical Discourse," *Journal of Macromarketing*, 40 (2), 2020, 221-236

Samuelson: Apart from the seminal works in our field noted already, I was personally influenced by Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* and Kwame Anthony Appiah's *In My Father's House. Religion and the Individual* by Batson and colleagues is a very useful read. A hidden gem that was very insightful is Egil Asprem's *The Problem with*

Disenchantment. For those more interested in sacred journeys, I think the old classic, John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* is a fine work. It may appear on the surface as Christian propaganda, but this simple allegory is a feast for thought and a surprising blueprint for many sacred journeys. I dare you to read it.

In the case of pilgrimages or religious services, for example, we have been fascinated by the ingenuity of some religious groups in their use technology to reach worshippers during the pandemic and its related restrictions, but also by some others' staunch denial of danger and their 'business as usual' approach. Both the use of technology to facilitate worship and the resistance to any transformations of practices in the face of crises may be fruitful areas for further exploration. In your opinion, what do you think will be the key questions that researchers will need to focus on?

Samuelson: It appears that after millennia of trying to secularise all that was sacred, we have now gone into a hyperdrive of re-sacralizing the secular, or as in Firat and Venkatash's work, we are really re-enchanting our world. That is not to say that the sacred and enchantment ever disappeared. Rather, after centuries of trying to kill God, we now create more idols than ever. For example, the growing sacralization of speech and discourse has found its way into PC culture and the sacralization of humans that began with humanism has overdosed into post-humanism. Science and technology that helped secularise the world are now becoming increasingly sacred.

It is also the sheer pace with which we are doing this. A kid making YouTube content easily becomes a celebrity, and celebrities easily become "idols" for younger people who tremble at their every word.

Another important theme is the nature of the sacred itself. We are not just sacralising at will and speed, we are also changing sacredness. This is not just about blurring the boundary between the sacred and secular, but about redefining them. Sacredness is more ephemeral, set among us (than aside), approached for its danger, is occurring all the time, and is personalised and globalised at the same time. It is this changing nature, size, and speed of the sacred within and across a growing multitude of contexts that I find interesting. Is there an upside and downside to this? There is always a catch, and this is also interesting for future research.

Context is often the starting point and what scholars will focus on are the contexts where they have their most sacred experiences because studying the sacred is almost always personal.

Russ: There was a lot of attention to the sacred "cyberspace" in the 2000's decade, but not so much in consumer research. Occasional conference sessions on the sacred and books on spirituality edited by Rinallo, Scott, and Maclaran, on Death edited by Dobscha and on Eschatology and on Marketing Apocalypse edited by Brown, Bell, and Carson, as well as monographs on religion in advertising by Sheffield and by Einstein on faith brands have all explored various aspects of the sacred in consumption. Besides Sandikci and Ger on veiling, Craciun and Tarlo have written books in Islamic fashion. Besides Izberk-Bilgin on infidel brands, Shirazi has a book on brand Islam and Abdul Khabeer has one on Muslim Cool. And there have been papers by Varul and by Kurenlahti and Salonen as well as a book edited by Kitiarsa marrying consumption and religion. But there is much more to do as well as new areas of digital consumption, the

metaverse, and post- and trans-humanism and the push for secular immortality that offer fertile ground for future studies of the sacred. Festivals, travel, digital currencies, robotics, AI, cryonics, and other high-tech topics are sure to warrant more investigation for the sacred. But also, culture and traditional sacred including animism, object agency, anthropomorphism, sexuality, and fetishism all deserve more attention as well.

Diego: Much research in our field has so far focused on mainstream religions (Christianity, Islam) and highly visible practices such as yoga and pilgrimage. I would thus welcome more research exploring non-mainstream religions and spiritual movements, as well as some well-known consumption practices. The digital transformations of religion and spirituality, that has been accelerated because of the pandemics, will certainly attract more attention. I read with much interest Kapoor et al. (2022) investigation of Indian religious rituals during the pandemics. Some of the changes brought by Covid are here to stay. As also highlighted by Santana, Husemann and Eckhardt (2002), more research is needed in areas such as online spiritual/religious communities, the formation of spiritual/religious identities online, and religious/spiritual entrepreneurs' digital marketing approaches. Finally, as I also highlight in some of my recent co-authored work with Jannsen Santana, Carol Zanette, Laetitia Mimoun and others, the field needs to integrate critical and intersectional perspectives. Religion is one of the structures that create privilege for some and disadvantage for others- in most religions, women or openly gay or trans folks cannot be religious leaders, and the history of many religions is intertwined with that of colonialism and slavery. Also the unintended environmental consequences of the consumption and marketing of spirituality and religion need to be more systematically explored. Most pilgrimages, for example, generate huge environmental impacts. More importantly, the anthropocentrism of most theological views, which sees humans as the most significant beings in the creation, has enduring socio-cultural and political consequences at a time where the climate emergency is a race we are losing. Religion and spirituality can however be part of the solution. Some spiritual movements emphasize the immanence of the divine and sacralize nature. Others provide a context that can empower marginalized individuals and put women and members of the LGBTQIA+ communities in positions of leadership and influence. The spiritual relationships of many indigenous people with their ancestral lands can provide new models of stewardship of our fragile ecosystems.

Diego, Russ and Samuelson's reflections on studying the sacred provide food for thought for both novice and weathered researchers alike. We conclude this conversation by offering the following 3 points as we take a breath to pause and think about how and why we research the way we do. Our aim is to spark further exchanges to keep this research space dynamic.

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1) Researching the sacred both shapes and is shaped by our positionality: by our insider/outsider status, our gender and race, our cosmologies as believers or sceptics. Something as intimate and meaningful as the sacred cannot help but move us as social beings if not foreground our vulnerabilities as scholars. As such we should be mindful and reflective of our subject positionings as we approach, enter and leave the field.

2) Researching the sacred calls for scholarly as well as phenomenological curiosity. Being lured in by a 'sparkly' context will not suffice and we echo our contributors' suggestions of reading widely and across disciplines to better familiarise ourselves with our sacred context, help us

craft novel and meaningful research, and also acknowledge and draw from the work of those that came before us. Narrowing our field of vision to consumer culture theorists alone will thwart our understanding of this rich and complex field whilst potentially curbing our theoretical contributions.

3) Researching the sacred requires an open mind as we broaden our vision of what constitutes the sacred. The spiritual and religious marketplace itself is filled to the brim with competing belief systems, old and new. Institutional pillars that once exclusively dictated what was sacred and how it ought to be consumed have crumbled with the weight of competing identity markers, where a cornucopia of people, places, rituals, and things become (de-)sacralised and (de-)institutionalised through consumer society.

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