

# ***Religion and Fashion: American Evangelists as Trendsetters and Fashion Innovators in Marketing and Communications***

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*Les phénomènes de mode dominant la vie religieuse et tout particulièrement le monde des évangélistes américains. Depuis le « Grand Réveil » du dix-huitième siècle, les églises américaines ont mis l'accent sur l'esprit missionnaire, sur le style et le ton comme clés de la séduction, donc de la « conversion ». Au dix-neuvième siècle, devenus propagandistes et hommes d'affaires, les évangélistes innovèrent dans leurs stratégies de communication, notamment dans les domaines de la mise en scène, de la publicité et de l'édition. Depuis, ils envisagent avec enthousiasme les possibilités de chaque nouveau média. Aujourd'hui, toujours grâce à sa capacité de conversion, donc à sa capacité de modifier l'opinion des fidèles, l'évangélisme américain continue à innover et à orienter le débat pour l'ensemble de la société.*

In their trend- and agenda-setting functions, contemporary fashion cycles—which virtually by definition concern style rather than substance—dominate religious life just as they hold sway over cultural and intellectual life. Today, “almost any extended discussion [...] of religious practices [...] is bound to record (and usually to lament) the sheer force of fashion [which is typically] charged with furthering the superficial and spurious, and with undermining the substantial and genuine.”<sup>1</sup> Fashion cycles are particularly influential in the American religious world as they thrive on the incredible variety of beliefs and practices, and on the evangelical movement’s disinterest in tradition. However, most observers from the academic and media worlds overlook the fact that religious currents—and particularly Protestantism—were largely responsible for shaping the values of a society dominated by individual choice, faith in progress, material signs of grace, and reliance on atmosphere and appearances as tools of proselytizing. Furthermore, religion in the US has always been, and continues to be, an important trendsetter and fashion innovator, in particular in marketing and communications.

## **Protestantism and the utilitarian tradition**

By emphasizing specific aspects of post-medieval Christian faith, namely its recognition of the value of earthly life which appears in its art and aesthetics, Lipovetsky has emphasized the admittedly paradoxical, yet very real link

between *homo frivolus* and *homo religiosus*.<sup>2</sup> A Western system, moved by faith in change and progress, thus obtained the blessing of the moral authorities of the times.

The Protestant Reformation represents a rejection of this corrupted tradition, but also a crucial stage in the growth of Western religious individualism. Conscience—based on the traditional virtues of community feelings—was first challenged by the Protestant promise of material signs of grace, then by the utilitarian tradition and its belief that individuals should be allowed to pursue the maximization of their self-interest. It was thus undermined as the central term for understanding individual motivation. With the shattering effects on community morals of the rural exodus of the industrial age and of the *laissez-faire* ideology, the biblical tradition was further corrupted so that religion itself lost any effective link to charity or community. “A purely private pietism emphasizing only individual rewards [...] was the expression of that corruption. [...] the rationalization of means became an end in itself.”<sup>3</sup>

### **Revivalistic practices and evangelical priorities**

In America, religious freedom and the challenge of the Frontier’s unchurched resulted in competition among sects which shaped the structure we recognize as denominationalism. The Protestant commitment to revivalistic practices, as initiated by the Great Awakening, geared churches toward conversions and missions and set in a spirit of anti-intellectualism. In this context, liturgical style and moral tone replaced doctrine as ways of characterizing churches.<sup>4</sup> Two fundamental characteristics of religious revivals—emotion-based seduction and ephemeral results implying the need for constant renewals—gradually came to dominate the entire culture as they became the organizing principles of modern collective life.<sup>5</sup>

Fashion’s link to commodification is coincident with the rise of the market economy and with the requirement that religion adapt the individualistic ethic of the utilitarian tradition to the industrial masses. When established elite religions did not effectively cope with social and economic changes, new beliefs, practices, and structures which maximized the possibility of conversions replaced outmoded theologies and unwieldy institutions. This democratization of salvation largely appealed to individuals previously unacceptable as church-goers. With the rapid popularization of the media gospel which began in the early nineteenth century, the genteel language of the educated clergy was replaced by the revivalists’ vernacular speech, and the message, dramatically delivered and emotionally stirring, was both simplified and homogenized, thus separating it from earlier traditions and practices.<sup>6</sup>

With innovators like Mason Locke Weems, who viewed religion as a commodity and emphasized attractive packaging, a new genre, “moral sensationalism” (abundantly illustrated) became and remained a staple of

commercial publishing. Weem's marriage of "aggressive marketing with a moral mission [was an] important starting point of America's nineteenth-century culture industry."<sup>7</sup> It convinced religious leaders of the need to remain attuned to popular consumer tastes as defined in moral and commercial, rather than in strictly theological terms.

A revivalist such as Charles Finney (1792-1875)—who saw himself as a specialized professional—adapted and invented business techniques and established an entrepreneurial organization for his evangelical purposes. His influence appears in the importance granted to the personality of the leader and in the aggressive tactics used to track down sinners.<sup>8</sup> In a carefully orchestrated and managed set of events, he was willing to use "any means" to generate the conditions by which sinners are converted. This called for constant "novelty and excitement," democratized salvation and active evangelism. According to Finney, who counseled revivalists to adopt a style later defined as "practical spontaneity," how the preacher spoke, not what he said, became a marketable commodity. Early religious reformers were quick to grasp the implications that the specific qualities of style affect the substance and specific form affects the content. In the popular, democratic style of gospel delivery, people wanted to "feel" the message, not just know it or understand it.<sup>9</sup>

### **Revivalism, entertainment, and marketing**

To meet this need, American evangelists became forerunners in their spectacular and often provocative use of communication channels such as advertising. Revivalism was always a combination of entertainment and religion, its meetings being highly dramatic and exciting. With their flashy costumes, misleading billboards, large tents and loud music, sensationalism and supernatural, freaks and miracles, itinerant preachers were often mistaken for circus performers, this being a deliberate tactic to attract crowds. The arrival of The Salvation Army in a town or neighborhood was announced by a band in uniform playing popular tunes and by "salvation lassies" inviting passers-by to join them for the evening show. Once rid of all inhibitions by their obsessive passion to save their fellow men, "sallies" often served as bait to attract men.<sup>10</sup> By emphasizing emotional expressions of faith, testimonies of the saved, powerful exhortations and dramatic conversions, circus-style revivalism significantly shaped the spirit and the structure of American Protestantism, even in its most traditional and mainline forms.<sup>11</sup> Evangelists were among the very first to adopt the culturally revolutionary principle: provide what people are likely to consume in order to maximize its impact. From then on, the "preach-whatever-the-market-will-bear" attitude was to dominate the American religious scene.

This process of popularization—which became the dominant marketing technique throughout America—led evangelicals to create thousands of media

organizations, from Bible and tract societies to publishing houses and religious newspapers. Evangelism was particularly well suited to “the marketing concept”:

*The gospel was an excellent religious message for mass distribution. Cast in the form of an easily communicated narrative, the story of Creation, the Fall, Redemption, and the Second Coming could be summarized for even the most uneducated and illiterate audiences [...] Christ's role in that story was personalized [...] the emotional appeal of the message [was] vicariously moving.*<sup>12</sup>

More generally, the history of reading has been bound closely to the history of religion, and the Bible, printed in the vernacular, has been a continuous best-seller. Protestant ministers pioneered in innovative ways to sell this message to consumers by demonstrating the possibilities of scale, by mass subscribing reading for the whole family (the *Christian Advocate* had over 400,000 subscribers in 1830). Popularization was no longer merely founded on the personality of the messenger or the significance of the message, but on sheer mass distribution. By organizing national networks and by thus showing the way for profit-making applications, religious missionary and tract societies crucially affected the nature of nineteenth-century commercial culture.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, by setting the religious experience within entrepreneurial and entertainment, consumer and commercial contexts, by using all available media and innovative commercial techniques, American evangelists blurred the lines between the sacred and the secular, between the metaphysical dilemma and the material concerns. They thus provided values, practices, and an overall spirit for the business community at large. Their tone was to permeate the whole commercial culture which, in turn, adopted a dramatic pitch and spell-binding images suggesting that it too was addressing the heavy questions of morals and salvation.<sup>14</sup> Thus, because of this nineteenth-century secularization of the sacred, today's commercials can claim to “save” their viewer-consumers just as televangelists can continue to “save” their faithful viewers.

The model of skilled church advertising was the “put Christ back into Christmas” campaign which required that “the ‘miracle’ of Santa Claus and his reindeer refer back to the ‘miracle’ at Bethlehem and the gifts that the three kings carried to the Christ child.”<sup>15</sup> This campaign provided the link between Christmas, the Christian spirit, giving, and consuming. Not only did church advertising give explicit approval to the advertising industry; it also provided the language of Christian service which flowed freely everywhere business was conducted. From Protestant ministers to Protestant retailers, from gods to goods, from conversion to consumption, from chimes to jingle bells to jingles.<sup>16</sup>

### **“Historylessness” and faith in technology**

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, numerous splinter groups emerged from Protestant denominations. Resting their appeal on new populations and new technologies, they proved most innovative. Even mainstream churches faced major changes brought about by their shifting internal ethnicity and the external pluralism of American culture. With religious options as available as any other mass-produced consumer product, “syncretism” became the dominant feature of American life.<sup>17</sup>

With their emphasis on entrepreneurial expertise and emotion-based seduction, late nineteenth-century Churches were becoming more “American” and less traditional, the past being largely dismissed as nostalgia. Fashion is a discourse that denies the possibility of any relation with its own recent past. This is especially true in religion with the “conversion” as a symbolic break. But only in the United States is “historylessness” the typical cast of mind of religion, as evangelicals lack a sense of their own tradition. Like other Americans, they generally look to the future which displays signs of the glory to be ushered in through prosperity, longevity, and the Second Coming.<sup>18</sup> They experience their innovative religious tactics as both a right and a duty, the natural right of the future over the past, and the duty to prepare as many souls as possible by all possible means, the most effective means, the most technologically advanced, the most global being the best. Their faith in technology is typically linked to missionary activity, especially since evangelization has always been viewed as a “mass” problem that necessitates “mass communication.”<sup>19</sup>

### **Evangelicals and the broadcast media**

Evangelicals were particularly innovative when it came to envisioning the potential of new media such as radio and television. In the early Twenties, over-the-air religious services and programs were already common.<sup>20</sup> Always willing to pay their own way, evangelicals promoted and helped justify the idea of broadcasting as strictly business, thus dismissing the social or other responsibility theories of the media, and this even in wartime as commercial religious programming—Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish—was among the first offerings in the history of television, in the spring of 1940.<sup>21</sup>

By integrating funding and promotional appeals in their shows, by meshing the Great Story and the “good news,” TV preachers were the first to blur the distinction between corporate or product advertising and programming. They were also pioneers in organizing elaborate syndication of programs—in the Thirties, the popular preacher Charles E. Fuller was heard on over a thousand radio stations—as well as in the use of direct-mail fund-raising and of personalized responses. Back in the late Fifties, evangelist Billy James Hargis was one of the first to use a machine to “personally” sign letters.<sup>22</sup>

The phenomenal growth in evangelical paid-time programs resulted from the eagerness with which these broadcasters adopted computer technology to develop audience support.<sup>23</sup> In the Sixties, evangelical programmers developed the art of mail solicitation, with millions of computerized names, with the ability to handle vast amounts (tens of thousands) of letters and calls every day, with masses of personalized mail appeals determined by highly sophisticated market segmentation strategies and automated key-word analysis.

Locked out of network broadcasting, evangelicals channeled their enthusiasm toward cable and satellite television, with the rise of the Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN)—which became “The Family Channel”—or Praise The Lord (PTL), or the Trinity Broadcast Network with its over 200 affiliated stations. Today, televangelists are actively involved in interactive communication: television, telephone, and computer.<sup>24</sup>

Recent religious activity on the Web is equally impressive, with over 410 000 references to God and 146 000 to Christ.<sup>25</sup> Some hope to create “cyberchurches” and new virtual-reality spiritual communities. Just as the printing press helped popularize the ideas of the Reformation, and just as television created mediated cults, so the Internet may well redefine forms of ritual, the meaning of faith, and our relation to the Church and even to each other. But aren’t, in fact, the media—the Book, then the “Tube, ” and now the Web—the real focus of worship?

Having succumbed to what Jacques Ellul has called “la technique,” the values of efficiency and control dominating all others, televangelists have moved from a dominant utilitarian speech—the morality of the technology lay in the morality of the user—to the production of their own rhetoric of technological salvation, articulating their success primarily in technological terms. According to Ben Armstrong, head of CBN, “Christian tv will be the tool that ushers in the triumphant return of Jesus Christ.”<sup>26</sup>

And indeed, television and proselytizing are congruent as “the tube,” the instrument of fashion in an other-directed society, is ideal for transmitting plain and easily understood messages. The American quest for heroes partly explains the formation of religious personality cults on television. Celebrity, the promotion of public personalities, partakes of a fashion-based mentality. Television provides the perfect frame to instantaneously deliver the televangelist’s expressive Southern-style image to the privacy of the home, thus creating the illusion that the preacher—who appears as the mediator to God—and the viewer are communicating personally.<sup>27</sup> Among our modern icons which are part of the contemporary frenzy of modern publicity and image-making, the televangelist’s face is a key symbol. It personalizes the secular image intended to put us in relation to the sacred and provides a concrete model of heroic human experience.

A modern manifestation of America's self-help tradition—the “rags-to-riches” syndrome—televangelism provides endless tales of success and an aura of optimism. A combination of televised Morality Plays (the American Dream revisited), of home shopping center with its non-stop invitation to give or buy, and of MTV religion with its upbeat messages and new-styled programs, televangelism is being reshaped by the marketing ethos of the broadcast industry.

Converging technological and social trends reinforce the impact of televangelism. Today, many public activities are privatized, including worship, while private matters—the personal dramas of individual lives—are exhibited to a fascinated audience. While remaining in a familiar home-setting and in a reassuring client-customer relationship, congregants need share only a viewing experience, not a relational one. Such mediated communication, without commitment but providing an impression of membership, is the fashionable way to communicate.

Fashion—the process of creating new feelings and needs—operates through the advertising and public relations industries. However, brand allegiance is notoriously strong and changes of opinions, although involving masses of people, are rather small and restricted to low- rather than high-involvement issues. The key to changing people's habits and attitudes is emotion, and that is the essence of evangelical messages. The “conversion” capacity of televangelism is particularly important because religion handles change on a continual basis, the expectation being that converted individuals will be transformed again and again, which refers to a renewal of the spirit, but also to the improvements in worldly circumstances anticipated by believers.

Furthermore, culturally-attuned, televangelism touches on all the high-involvement social issues which have traditionally been considered outside the rather narrow program category thought of—by many media and university secularists—as “religious broadcasting.” Its impact appears clearly: 1) in its agenda-setting role, bringing public issues and public figures, in particular preachers, to public attention; 2) in the “crossovers,” as religious rhetoric and symbols, with their allegorical and dramatic overtones, permeate secular speech and crowd into the commercial media, into places of entertainment and education; 3) in its unmatched infrastructure as evangelical organizations represent the single largest base for recruiting social movement participants.<sup>28</sup> Christian concern for public issues, Christian diversification underline the fact that today, a Christian perspective cannot be restricted to any specific area or preoccupation; it provides a relevant approach to any issue and a reminder of the forces, sometimes obscure but powerful, that shape American society. Having become a fashion-based communications industry, contemporary religious culture has the almost unique power to “fashion” people's opinions, to turn them around on very high-involvement issues, to radically reorganize a person's value system because, like fashion, it functions on immediacy, on

impulse, on emotion, on the need to be loved and on the fear of being forgotten, left out.

This mobilization potential appears clearly in the political clout of senior America, a population with increasing religious concerns which seeks to reconcile faith and works through participation in and contribution to a televised ministry. Believers are both concerned voters and avid consumers, and some of their organizations—the “Liberty League” or “Christian Leaders for a Responsible Television” (CLear-TV), for instance—have also proven most innovative as political lobbies and as media consumer defense groups, one of their crucial contributions being massive boycotts of sponsors of media products they disapprove of. This political role rests on a long tradition. Finney, the “father” of modern revivalism, was already concerned with numerous social problems with obvious moral implications, in particular alcoholism, delinquency, or slavery. Religion has always been central in the formation of American political life, and evangelical movements were often at the origin of political organizations. In the late nineteenth century, evangelists led the struggle to assert individual rights of freedom of speech and assembly, and resorted to the then novel tactics of civil disobedience in order to obtain these rights (sit-downs and jail-cloggings, for instance).<sup>29</sup>

### Reformulating the “secularization thesis”

Christian concern for public issues, Christian diversification (exemplified in Jimmy Bakker’s “Heritage USA”), underline the fact that, today, a Christian perspective cannot be restricted to any specific area or preoccupation: it is simply one way of approaching any problem, any concern, whether it be the media, business, fashion, or whatever.<sup>30</sup> Continually reshaped to appeal to the surrounding culture and to attract new adherents, evangelical programs adapt their message to the medium. By providing a synthesis of traditionalism and modernity, of emotionalism and professionalism, televangelism operates on both the individual and social levels, creating a self-identity for its viewers and proposing to transform the society. Like the fashion industry, televangelism projects what you are and what you dream of being.

Today, the traditional “secularization thesis,” according to which religion is peripheral in the fashioning of social, economic, and cultural change, must be reformulated. As religion, and in particular televangelism, are becoming more central, more influential in American culture, they are also being secularized by being “consumed” like any other program or product, thus turning their congregants into audiences and markets, and the gospel into typically American entertainment. While televangelism might be “de-Christianizing the Nation” by creating a new secular gospel—materialistic and patriotic—it has also managed the missionary zeal according to marketing and media rules, thus transforming it into one of the main opinion-leaders and fashion innovators in American society.<sup>31</sup>

## Notes

1 Fred Davis, *Fashion, Culture, and Identity* (Chicago & London: U of Chicago P, 1992) 194.

2 Gilles Lipovetsky, *L'Empire de l'éphémère. La mode et son destin dans les sociétés modernes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987) 78-79.

3 Robert N. Bellah, "New Religious Consciousness and the Crisis in Modernity," in Charles Y. Glock & Robert N. Bellah, *The New Religious Consciousness* (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: U of California P, 1976) 335.

4 James A. Moseley, *A Cultural History of Religion in America* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981) 62-63.

5 Lipovetsky 15 and 78-79.

6 See Linda K. Pritchard, "Religious Change in Nineteenth-Century America," in Glock and Bellah, *op.cit.* 297-330, and Quentin J. Schultze, "Keeping the Faith: American Evangelicals and the Media," in Quentin J. Schultze, ed., *American Evangelicals and the Mass Media* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan Corp, 1990) 35-37.

7 Laurence R. Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York and Oxford: Oxford U P, 1994) 22.

8 Charles-G. Finney, *Les réveils religieux: Discours* (Monnetier-Mornex, Haute Savoie: M. Weber, 1951, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.) 117-19, 180, 237-41. See also IX<sup>e</sup> Discours, "Moyens à employer à l'égard des pécheurs" 132-47.

9 Razelle Frankl, *Televangelism: The Marketing of Popular Religion* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois U P, 1993) 134, and Quentin J. Schultze, *Televangelism and American Culture. The Business of Popular Religion* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1991) 34-50, and Moore, *op.cit.* 48-49, 183.

10 For examples of circus-style revivalism, see my thesis, "L'Armée du Salut: Eglise, Armée, Oeuvre sociale. L'Adaptation d'une institution victorienne aux cultures nord-américaine et française au xx<sup>e</sup> siècle," Doctorat d'Etat en histoire, Université Paris VII, 1994, first and second parts, especially pages 107 and 208. It should be noted that the Great Revival of the nineteenth century had already allowed women to fulfill public roles, first in evangelical activity, then in social work.

11 See Schultze, *Televangelism and American Culture* 92-95, and Moore 43.

12 Schultze, "Keeping the Faith" 36.

13 Moore 13-18, and Schultze, "Keeping the Faith" 36.

14 For the traditional role of sacred images as evocations of questions and resolutions, see Gregor Goethals, "Sacred - Secular Icons," in Ray B. Browne & Marshall Fishwick, *Icons of America* (Bowling Green, O.: Popular Press, Bowling Green State University, 1978) 24-34.

15 Moore 206.

16 In 1925, advertiser Bruce Barton designated Jesus Christ as the "founder of modern business" because, with twelve ordinary men, he forged an organization which conquered the world. Around the same time, a pamphlet entitled "Moses, persuader of men," presented the prophet as one of the greatest salesmen and real estate developers of all times. Examples worth meditating for evangelists who saw themselves as propagandists and businessmen.

17 Ferenc Szasz, "The American Quest for Religious Certainty, 1880-1915," in Sam B. Gigus, ed., *The American Self. Myth, Ideology, and Popular Culture* (Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1982) 101. In their diversity, evangelical movements proved innovative in terms of both projects and methods. As early as the 1880s, the scope of their social services was unique. An organization like the Salvation Army developed highly sophisticated advertising and propaganda techniques and "hit the headlines" with its control-conversion-recruitment-training system.

18 Schultze, "Keeping the Faith" 26.

19 Schultze, *Televangelism and American Culture* 54.

20 See, for instance, "Radio Chapel Service" in *The War Cry* (US edition), June 17, 1922.

21 Peter G. Horsfield, "'And Now a Word from our Sponsor': Religious Programs on American Television," in *Revue Française d'Etudes Américaines*, 12 (October 1981): 259-62, and Dennis N. Voskuil, "The Power of the Air: Evangelicals and the Rise of Religious Broadcasting," in Schultze, ed., *American Evangelicals and the Mass Media*, 69-96.

22 Frankl 134, and Schultze, *Televangelism and American Culture* 54-55.

23 Horsfield 268.

24 Schultze, *Televangelism and American Culture* 55, and Frankl 151.

25 According to the Alta Vista search engine. See *Time*, December 16, 1996: 40-46.

26 Quoted in Moore 249. See also page 240.

27 See Schultze, *Televangelism and American Culture* 79.

28 Jeffrey K. Hadden, "Televangelism and Political Mobilization" 215-30, in Schultze, ed., *American Evangelicals and the Mass Media* 221.

29 See my thesis, "L'Armée du Salut," chapter VII, especially pages 225-30.

30 American evangelists have always considered that religion concerns all spheres of life. Thus, they were also particularly innovative in such diverse fields as food reform and health treatment. As initiators of such food reforms as wheat and corn flakes, grape nuts, coffee substitutes, peanut butter, and others, the Seventh-Day Adventists were largely responsible for introducing fashion in the food industry. By trying to bridge the gap between religion and science, numerous sects grouped under what we now call New Thought, often termed Mind Cure by contemporaries, pioneered the alliance between psychology and religion in the work of therapy and in faith healing. (See Szasz 95-98.) "This medicalization of morality, the linking of health to religious faith and virtue, has remained an important aspect of 20<sup>th</sup>-century American life with a wide range of commercial applications." (Moore 143.)

31 Schultze, *Televangelism and American Culture* 20-21.

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