Markets and More?

By Shari Cohen

The power of brands, the marketing of lifestyles, the impact of corporations on employees' sense of purpose and meaning, and the blurring of journalism, entertainment and advertising are challenging the place of both government and religion in shaping the way we form our loyalties, our commitments, and even our ethical positions. Surely any discussion of religion in public life needs to address the inexorable reach of commercialization into every aspect of human existence. We need to consider whether shopping and working are replacing social activism, civic duty or religious ritual as the boundaries between the roles of the customer, citizen, congregant and employee shift.

What this all means –either analytically or for the health of our public life -- is not yet clear. We must start by acknowledging that this is a profound shift: commercialization is becoming increasingly intertwined with our very sense of self. Its impact is more far-reaching than government outsourcing to corporations, even in such critical areas as education or social services, or than the corporate power over public policy and mindsets that Marxists have long protested. While we have historically seen the market as corrupting -- in contrast to government and religion, which lift us above material interest -- we need to ask whether we could come to understand the market differently. As corporations become more powerful, in many instances exceeding states in size and influence, they are likely to be the location and mechanism not only for forging common purposes, but also for effecting social change.

By looking at five main areas – the market's monopolization of our time and attention, its increasing role in creating our loyalties and identifications, its shaping of our modes of thinking about individual choice, work's place in our lives, and the ways in which business might involve itself in critical aspects of social change – we can begin to sketch the crucial implications of these trends for independent thought, ethical sensibilities, collective action and human expression.

In his recent book, *The Age of Access*, Jeremy Rifkin points out that what distinguishes the current "knowledge economy" from prior periods of capitalism is the increasing reach of the market into the cultural sphere. Consumption has always been a source of joy and pleasure in peoples' lives, but the commodification of nearly every relationship and interaction, facilitated by information technology's extension of the scope of the market in both time and space, has produced a new phenomenon with which we need to reckon. Rifkin calls this the "commodification of play," by which he means the "marketing of

cultural resources including rituals, the arts, festivals, social movements, spiritual and fraternal activity and civic engagement."[i] This "experience economy" aims to provide not just "stuff" – goods and services -- but access to higher purposes and community. Examples of the marketing of experience are not difficult to find: the trend towards museums as entertainment, with complete product lines associated with blockbuster exhibitions; the incorporation of spiritual practices like yoga into commercial ventures such as health clubs; hotels such as Las Vegas' Bellagio, which replicates the Italian city for which it is named; and malls constructing themselves as town squares.

The market's reach would not be nearly so pervasive were it not for the increasing sophistication of advertising techniques and of the technologies that convey commercial messages. After all, advertising is all about linking products to higher meanings and purposes such as beauty, love and transcendence. As Douglas Rushkoff argues in his recent book, *Coercion*, corporations, thanks to sophisticated market data and research on techniques of persuasion, are increasingly attuned to peoples' longings, and increasingly adept at offering their products as the fulfillment of those longings. This is a refined version of a process that began early in our transition to a consumer economy, he points out, as manufacturers and retailers sought to make shopping into a new religion – complete with "atmospherics" devoted to simulating quasi-religious environments.[ii] What's different now? Never before have religion and public purposes been so little able to compete.

The market's monopolization of ever greater spheres of time and attention raises important questions: Should religious, civic and government leaders work to counter this trend, which appears to make all human experiences into business transactions and has enormous impact on how individuals form their opinions as citizens? How would they do this? Must market pervasiveness necessarily be seen as antithetical to the public good? Defenders of the market's contribution to the social good have long argued that capitalism fosters new sorts of cross-cultural understanding and empathy. Clearly commercial places like Starbucks or Barnes and Noble foster public discourse, albeit in a way different from traditional cafes or public libraries, which demanded little or no money from their patrons.

The market has captured more than our time and attention. It is increasingly shaping our identifications, loyalties, and the basis for our communities. If loyalty was once to God and then to the nation, now it is to Nike or Apple or Starbucks. It is not that any individual brand is replacing the kinds of allegiances people have historically given their countries, their tribes or their religions. No one, at least not yet, would fight and die for IBM. But brands are resilient in the face of a trend towards the decline of loyalties to institutions of all sorts. Unlike nations or religions, corporations demand little in return from their customers.

At the same time, the lifestyles purveyed in places such as Niketown or DKNY are actively succeeding in forging individuals' sense of who they are. Even a

rising interest in spirituality has added to, rather than diminished, the power of brands, as corporations appropriate religious or spiritual imagery. Aveda's coffee-table style Book of Rituals – which elaborates daily health and beauty rituals, all of which include the use of Aveda products -- is a good example. And, as Michael J. Weiss pointed out in his recent book, *The Clustered World*, consumption patterns "have become a force more potent than race, geography, gender or ideology in shaping voter attitudes."[iii]

More and more companies even go beyond shaping individual identities to create "communities of interest" around products or around topics related to these products, whether this is the Harley-Davidson community, or the community of people who own Apple computers. Indeed, community life itself becomes a commodity. This is particularly evident in on-line communities, such as I-Village.com and Blackplanet.com, both of which are "selling" connection to other people -- around gender in the first case, and ethnicity in the second. We can also see community for sale in places like Celebration, created by Disney as a planned community to simulate older-style small towns, and advertised as an antidote to suburban sprawl.

But to note that such communities are highly commodified does not necessarily imply that they are not real, or that relationships generated there remain rooted merely in fleeting mercenary transactions. Beliefnet.com, for example, is an interesting hybrid that demonstrates some of the potentially positive effects of the marketization of meaning-making. This for-profit, advertiser-funded, on-line magazine and community Web site offers a vast spectrum of organized and not-so-organized religion all in one place. It sells, among other things, religious and spiritual products – from books and CDs to ritual objects, to candles and meditation mats. But though it commercializes religious discussion and community, it also enables a type of cross-religious interaction. This is due to the potential that Web interaction offers for anonymous, low-commitment participation, and to the fact that the market does not privilege any particular religion, except ones that sell. The Web site undermines the power of any single religion, and of religious authorities, by giving users access to one another and to other traditions without any sanction. This does not mean that power is absent on the site or that it resides only in the hands of the users. The ultimate arbiters are the corporate backers of the site and the site's editors and "community managers" – who choose content, and moderate and create the frameworks for on-line interactions. Still, Beliefnet.com suggests how the market can create spaces for beneficial social interaction. Does this mean we need new ways of thinking about the market's potential for elevating purposes, even as we keep in mind its well-known corrupting potential? Does it offer a glimpse into how our current understanding of the boundaries between what is civic and what is commercial and what is religious might shift?

Even beyond corporate construction of loyalty, identity and community, the market -- the metaphor or mindset of buying and selling -- has come increasingly

to shape our understanding of the exercise of free choice in both religious and civic life. In a recent book called *The Spiritual Marketplace*, Wade Clark Roof demonstrates that baby boomers increasingly approach their religious identities from a consumer perspective. This means forging one's religious life as a consumer choice from among a range of possibilities in the marketplace, rather than taking on one's religion of birth. Whether at a site such as Beliefnet, or in the spirituality section of Barnes and Noble, or through multiple memberships in different religious institutions, or in spiritual stores that offer a range of Eastern practices from massage to meditation, individuals are circumventing religious authorities and hierarchical religious institutions as they search for their own sense of religious or spiritual identity. How does this new sense of individual empowerment affect the public sphere and our role as citizens? Frequent opinion polls and the energy expended by candidates selling their policies suggest that this trend affects party loyalty and voting as much as it does religious practice and sensibility. In a world shaped by consumer mindsets, power resides in new places. This suggests that we will need to rethink the fundamental social and political questions of accountability and efficacy.

The workplace in a knowledge economy is another window into the profound impact of increasing commercialization on how and where we connect to purposes larger than the self. An outpouring of books on spirituality in the workplace, for instance, is symptomatic of the increasingly important role that work plays as a locus of meaning and identification. If work, rather than family or other arenas, is where people most seek and find their sense of higher purpose, this means that employers come to function as arbiters of employees' spiritual lives and personal growth. Institutions such as Motorola University, for instance, take responsibility for the continuing education of Motorola's employees, while attending to it in a corporate context. Corporate retreats and leadership training programs draw upon spiritual techniques and ask employees to speculate about the personal meaning they find in their work. Books like *Reawakening the Spirit in Work* by Jack Hawley or *A Spiritual Audit of Corporate America* by Ian Mitroff and Elizabeth Denton reflect a serious trend toward embracing spirituality in the workplace, not just for the purpose of increasing profits, but for its own sake as well. According to Hawley (writing in 1993), "The key questions for today's managers and leaders are no longer issues of task and structure, but are questions of the spirit."[iv] Indeed, many of the last decade's most lasting and widespread new ideas about the pursuit of meaning have come out of the literature on leadership and management in business. Might corporations increasingly outsource to religious institutions for the purpose of employee development? Might religious leaders find themselves employed in corporate settings rather than in churches or synagogues?

The magazine *Fast Company*, which has become the voice for "new economy" businesses that see themselves as a revolutionary force in society at large, or the "business for social responsibility" movement, also show how the boundaries between work and cause, between the secular and the sacred, are shifting.

Companies like Ben and Jerry's or Working Assets base their business choices on criteria that include social contribution as well as profit, thereby making business success a mechanism for social change. They use the terminology of “spirituality” and “the soul” in articulating their business practices and the ethic they hope to instill among their employees. In addition, social change is an important part of the product they offer to consumers. The "business for social responsibility" movement boasts that 9-13% of investment assets under professional management use ethical and social screening criteria. This raises a number of questions: Are companies such as Working Assets filling a vacuum left by political activism or by politics itself? Are they replacing street protests as a means of expressing political concerns?

As business becomes more of a social cause for some (either as employees, as entrepreneurs or as consumers), we might increasingly see new combinations of market and ethical concerns. This is particularly likely given the fast pace of technological change – both in communications technology and in biotechnology – relative to the slow pace of decision-making about governmental regulation. Even in companies not concerned with social change per se, we might increasingly see a new type of ethical self-regulation.

The early Internet entrepreneurs understood that the choices they were making were going to shape society in significant ways. Not only were their choices important for how access, privacy and commercialization of the Internet would affect society at large, but they also were coming to shape such legal and philosophical issues as the changing meaning of property and our notions of authority. These entrepreneurs have had to grapple with reconciling the values of hacker libertarianism, competitive entrepreneurship and scientific collaboration.

Interestingly, religion might well have a role to play here. Biotech firms at the cutting edge of genetic engineering have formed their own ethical advisory boards in anticipation of emerging public concerns about the ethical implications of their work. Celera, the company that led the way in mapping the human genome, took on the Center for Bioethics at the University of Pennsylvania, which includes at least one rabbi and numerous ethicists on its staff, for this purpose. Thus groupings of religious authorities and academic ethicists, operating within corporate contexts, could come to take over the regulatory role that government might no longer play. Other new combinations must be considered if we are to think creatively about, and anticipate, new challenges.

Whether or not the amoral market could substitute in important ways as a generator of the common good for either the religious sphere or the political sphere is yet to be seen. However, without shifting our perspective about the likelihood of the market playing this role, and reconsidering the changing boundaries between these spheres, we will not understand the opportunities and constraints that these changes pose for developing creative policies to address socially significant priorities. The chaos of urban sprawl suggests that the market

cannot be left to its own devices in the area of sustainable development. What could turn out to be the unfettered development of powerful life-altering technologies poses another critical challenge.

All these shifts, of course, require that those who see themselves as involved primarily with religion and politics, not with commerce, begin to think about their roles differently. How religious and political leaders understand the power and role of the market will affect every aspect of their work - it will shape the way they think about structuring their institutions, it will determine how they make their alliances, interpret their mandate, preach to their congregants and campaign to constituencies. The debate about church-state relations must, thus, be cast in much larger terms. At stake is the social glue that holds us together as a society.

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[i] Rifkin, The Age of Access (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 2000), p. 7.

[ii] Ruskkoff, Coercion: Why We Listen to What 'They' Say (New York: Riverhead Books, 1999), pp. 77-79.

[iii] Weiss, The Clustered World (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2000), p. 37.

[iv] Hawley, Reawakening the Spirit in Work (New York: Fireside, 1993), p. 1.