

Article

Parables of Modernity: Italian Advertising Meets Religion, 1890–1950

Carlo Nardella

Department of Social and Political Sciences, University of Milan, 20122 Milan, Italy; carlo.nardella@unimi.it

Abstract: The use of religious symbols in commercial advertising is not only a modern phenomenon. The research presented here traces its existence from the start of the last century through the analysis of a broad sample of advertising posters that circulated in Italy between 1890 and 1950. In presenting the main results of this analysis, this article not only sets out to document the variety and complexity of the historical materials belonging to a distant past but also seeks to pinpoint a potential thread running from that context to the present day, indicating continuities and differences that can help to understand some transformations that have taken place over time.

Keywords: advertising; religious symbolism; posters; metaphors; early twentieth-century Italy; Belle Époque; devil

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of commercial advertising that uses religious images and rhetoric to sell consumer products and services shows how, currently, the economic sector is actively taking possession of symbols and meanings historically pertaining to institutionalized religious systems.

The symbolic dimension takes on more and more importance in this process. Indeed, thanks to the symbolic power of the religious references with which they are associated in the advertisements, consumer products transform into tools of distinction and, therefore, of belonging and recognition.

Could this situation, more visible today than ever, be the culminating moment in a process that began further back in time? If we are to observe the Italian context, where the field of advertising has always used religious references since the beginning of the twentieth century, the answer is yes. As symbols and systems of interpretation, their very commonness generally allowed their de-contextualization, while the (relative) weakness of the religious field permitted, or nevertheless facilitated, their appropriation.

While this affirmation can be made at the general level, it becomes important to analyze how religious symbols were used in advertising in the past and what meanings they were given. As we will see, these meanings could be generic, in the sense that they were symbols that the public could place within a religious system, however vague that may be, maintaining their function but transferring their meaning (e.g., angel protection–life insurance), or maintaining their function but overturning their meaning (e.g., devil temptation–seduction with positive connotations). At the same time, what was considered a well-known specific meaning could be distorted through the complete appropriation of the symbol and its relocation in the field of advertising (e.g., devil–good devil in advertising).

2. The Migration of Symbols Model

The research that will be presented on the following pages is not one-off. It moves in relation to previous research that I carried out on the relationship between marketing and religion in which I identified the presence of levels of convergence and cast light on the use of religious symbols in Italian advertising, proposing a model of interpretation called “migration of symbols” (Nardella 2015).



Citation: Nardella, Carlo. 2024. Parables of Modernity: Italian Advertising Meets Religion, 1890–1950. *Religions* 15: 1540. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15121540>

Academic Editor: Roberto Cipriani

Received: 5 November 2024

Revised: 9 December 2024

Accepted: 11 December 2024

Published: 17 December 2024



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This model took into account the results of an analysis on a broad sample of print ads appearing from the 1950s to the present day, from which two general trends emerged. The first and most evident of these is that, in what we can define as “modern” Italy, the frequency with which religious symbols are used to promote goods and consumer services is growing and set to increase in the long term. The second trend concerns the use of this symbology in connection with a range of value systems contained in advertisements, including social distinction, self-satisfaction, sharing and reliability. This potpourri of values is interpreted as an indicator of the fact that religion has become a creative source that can be dipped into ever more liberally, in order to respond to a whole host of commercial ends.

From the theoretical point of view, the migration model proposed the idea of the symbols shifting (as they still do now) from the religious field—where they are historically produced and held—to a new social field—advertising—where the symbols end up being objectivized and living their own lives in this new dimension.

Furthermore, the model linked the exploitation of religious symbols to advertising’s attempt to make products and services acquire meanings far beyond their use value, transforming them into symbolic resources for consumers’ use in their everyday lives. At work in this operation is what scholars call “brand power”, which grows stronger the more the brand is able to slot into the consumers’ life worlds, aiming to produce particular forms of action, experience and emotion through its use and thereby becoming a sort of capital in itself.

The picture briefly traced here provides some pointers on the transformations of a phenomenon that has developed in Italy over the past seventy years. Currently in a phase of full-blown expansion, it is opening up new, as-yet-unexplored scenarios that can be interesting to investigate. One of the most intriguing challenges is to trace the phenomenon back to a past origin, or rather to indicate if and how it developed prior to what has already been identified. On closer inspection, however, it proves tricky to pin down the use of religious symbols in advertising in the past; if we want to solve this puzzle, we will have to make further reference to the data already at our disposal.

3. Advertising, Images and Religion

The results of research on modern Italy point to the mid-1950s as the period when religious symbols began to be used in advertising, while the frequency with which they were used in this decade was found to be the lowest in the entire time frame under consideration (see [Nardella 2015](#), pp. 51–53). One must bear in mind that the 1950s were a period marked by an important watershed in Italy, a new beginning and a phase of renewal in national life, which, to a large extent, continues to this day. One motive for this change was the end of the Second World War; the other, the explosion of the economic boom and expansion of consumer society.

Moreover, it must not be forgotten that the advent of this new phase corresponded with important changes inside the Italian advertising industry itself, breaking with the past once and for all as advertisers and customer companies sought new means and a new *modus operandi* ([Ceserani 1988](#); [Falabrino 2001](#); [Valeri 1986](#)). On one hand, this watershed entailed abandoning posters as the main means of advertising communication and ending the industry’s heavy reliance on the world of art where the poster artists came from ([Villari 2008](#)). On the other hand, in the postwar period, the set-up and working methods adopted in foreign—particularly North American—advertising agencies began to catch on, helping to streamline the Italian agencies’ organization and production methods and fostering their revival ([De Grazia 1989](#); [De Iulio and Vinti 2009](#); [Fasce and Bini 2015](#)).

Nevertheless, even though the data do confirm that, at this time, something new happened on this front, with a whole new era opening for the advertising industry as the criteria followed hitherto had altered, or even been turned upside down, the 1950s might not necessarily be the first time that religious symbols were used in advertising ([Gundle 2002](#)). As the emerging hypothesis goes, this is because we are looking at a phenomenon that proceeded in an inconstant way in the (very) long term, with various breaks (between

the postwar turn and the reconstruction, for one) from the previous phase that nevertheless marked a certain homogeneity within the single phases themselves (Pitteri 2006).

If we apply this hypothesis to the case of religious references used in advertising, it divides the phenomenon into separate components, thereby taking account of its internal complexity. As a result, it not only confirms the validity of the research already conducted on modern Italian advertising but also suggests new ideas, providing stimulation to continue along the path undertaken. On one hand, it shows that the choices made thus far, in particular, to carry out an ordered analysis, concentrating on one phase at a time, are good ones; on the other, it raises new questions. The first, obvious question is what relationship there was between advertising and religion in the previous phase, and, more specifically, if and how Italian advertising made use of religious symbols in the first half of the twentieth century too.

I will directly say that the answers to this question were positive. But even before I started to collect and analyze the empirical material, the value of carrying out this research in Italy was already confirmed in some international studies found in the literature, which revealed the existence of similar phenomena in other national contexts. One of the most interesting studies was conducted by Marchand (1985, pp. 264–84), who identified the presence of religious references in American advertising in the early twentieth century. This series of recurring visual patterns, or “clichés”, as Marchand (1985, p. 235) identified them, were mainly taken from religious art and included images of rays of light released from the advertised product or projected onto it from above, outsized depictions of the product, perspectives capturing the product from below, groups of believers in moments of prayer, and crowds of worshippers surrounding the product. Such images subtly invited attitudes of veneration or awe from the viewer, who was encouraged to transfer the qualities of the scene to the advertised product (Marchand 1985, p. 265).

By using these references, American advertising of the time, Marchand recognized, was making a twofold effort. On one hand, it wanted to arouse in the public wonder and admiration, as well as trust and reassurance, towards brand-new material goods that were presented as modern holy icons (from cars to vacuum cleaners, from fridges to toothpaste and mouthwash). On the other hand, it wanted to make these goods an integral part of the “American dream”, that is, insert them in the lives of US citizens for whom, at the start of the century, it was becoming the norm, rather than a one-off, to buy manufactured and mass-distributed products. How? Not only were they promoting these goods as useful or functional for certain social needs, but they were also presenting them as necessary tools to privately build new subjectivities capable of dealing positively with the changes being produced with the advent of modernity (Lears 1981, pp. 33, 208, 301; Leiss 1983). This study found the use of symbols from the religious tradition to be central in making this happen.

Let us come back to Italy. While differing in motives and manners, in early twentieth-century Italy, in the same way as in France and Germany, there was growing awareness of the importance of advertising (as well as of other means of communication, such as the press and cinema) as an innovative channel where texts and images could be circulated, promoting a new collective imaginary (Arvidsson 2003). For the first time, this communication was designed to reach a large slice of the Italian population, or at least the inhabitants of its cities, where the intensification of “nervous stimulation”—to use a term adopted by Simmel ([1903] 2021, p. 193)—that is, the noises, rhythms, sounds and colours of the new century, foretold of the speed with which modernity would gradually take over larger and larger spaces in the decades to come, in Europe too (Cavazza 2004; Scarpellini 2008).

In this scenario, a point of fundamental importance for us is the resulting awareness that individuals could be influenced by acting directly on the signs and images by which they were now surrounded. This was achieved by circulating advertising posters, a medium (and its relative production technique) that underwent remarkable developments in Europe, especially in Italy and France, between the end of the 1800s and the 1930s (cf. Chessel 1998). It was through posters that Italian advertising was able to start to implement the idea of opening an image- and text-based channel of influence and communication. It did not

matter how simple they were; they had to be able to focus the observer's attention—today, a scarce asset—on a single message and a single product (Arvidsson 2001).

And so, we come to my specific field of investigation. At this point, the research question can be fully formulated as follows: did these images and texts also include some from the religious tradition?

In order to answer this question, the sources I used were posters containing religious references, which circulated in Italy from the dawn of the poster age to the years before the economic boom. Historians agree in indicating the Belle Époque as the start of the golden age of posters in Italy (Fasce et al. 2016, pp. 23–33). To be more precise, we can say that it started around the 1890s, on the wave of the economic recovery that marked the uptick of Italian industry following the major world recession that had ended at the start of that decade (Toniolo 1990, p. 98 ff). Not only economic changes but also cultural shifts and media transformations characterized this fledgling phase of the Italian advertising system. In the early 1900s, Italian advertising studios were only those of poster artists, who usually also worked as painters and illustrators, to whom the producers assigned the work without intermediaries (Ceserani 1980). Since the 1920s, the studios of new artists were added too—graphic designers—who dealt with images, while slogans were developed by another emerging professional figure, the copywriter, usually a writer or journalist. Around the 1930s, special offices were created within companies to organize advertising campaigns, and, in general, posters became more tied to commercial needs than in previous decades (Falabrino 2001). The end of the golden poster age can instead be situated at the beginning of the 1950s, when posters gave in to the competition of two exceptionally powerful new advertising means: illustrated periodicals and television (De Iulio 1996). In the immediate postwar period, weekly news magazines and women's magazines had great fortunes in Italy and quickly became the most sought-after print medium for advertising. Shortly after, television advertising also began gaining a strong foothold in the country by putting a definitive end to the techniques and creative solutions that, until then, had made the poster stand out in the turmoil of modern life (Falabrino 2007).

The posters that I selected for my research come from the Collezione Salce archive. With a total of approximately 25,000 posters, it is the biggest collection of advertising graphics in Italy. I made the selection by operationalizing “religious reference”, using similar coding to what is used in the research on modern Italian advertising (cf. Nardella 2015, pp. 157–67). The historical presence of the Catholic Church, which does not seem to have lost its centrality throughout the twentieth century, makes Italy an interesting case to consider and distinguishes it from other national contexts in which the use of religion in advertising could be linked to other underlying cultural macrovariables, such as “laïcité” in France and the “civil religion” in the United States.

My goal was to focus on a mix between the economic and religious worlds, so posters that were not strictly commercial, in particular, posters for political propaganda or with exceptionally religious content (for example, for events, Catholic festivals or conferences), were left out of the selection so as not to distort the research results. These operations produced a total sample of 223 posters.

I carried out the quantitative and qualitative research by applying the content analysis method, which took account of various variables, including symbol type, product category and time period. I calculated frequency distributions for each variable and used contingency tables to analyze the relationships between them. In addition, I singled out the metaphors contained in the posters in order to find the global message conveyed by each one.

4. The Religion of Posters: An Analysis

I started the analysis of the posters from a general aspect, namely, by identifying the types of religious content used for promotional ends throughout the time frame under consideration (see Table 1).

Table 1. Frequency and percentage distributions of the sampled posters by symbol type.

Symbol Type	Frequency	Percentage
Devils	75	33.6
Angels and saints	74	33.2
Religious figures and places of worship	47	21.1
Biblical scenes	27	12.1
Total	223	100.0

Of the 223 posters analyzed, around one-third referred to the figure of the devil (33.6%), another third showed angels and saints (33.2%), and the remaining third included either members of the clergy and religious buildings (21.1%) or references to Bible stories (12.1%). May I immediately point out that, excepting the lower overall presence of references to the Bible, no relevant differences were seen in the general frequency of the various types of symbols, at least in terms of statistical analysis of the data. At the same time, one distinctive feature emerged, which highlighted a glaring difference in the use of some religious symbols in advertising in the first half of the twentieth century compared to today.

This diversity is evident if we consider the image of the devil: the frequency and, as we shall see, the way in which it is used. The presence of the devil in our posters, which was more frequent than all the other categories of symbols including, albeit by little, angels and saints (more versatile in advertising terms), followed an opposite trend to what has been found in commercial advertising circulating from the 1950s to date. Additionally, the advertising these days almost exclusively represents negative aspects of the devil, which the advertised product promises to neutralize or defeat. For example, a cough or cholesterol appears in the advertising for pharmaceutical products, or dust in advertising for cleaning products (cf. [Nardella 2015](#), pp. 77–78; [Giusti 1986](#)).

It must be specified that this “negative” use of the devil in contemporary advertising and the recent past was also seen in the posters analyzed here. However, the frequency was significantly lower (around one-quarter of the devils in the sample showed “negative” characteristics). Let me give some examples to immediately clarify what type of representation we are talking about: the poster for cachet Rosa pain-relief tablets shows a personification of the product pluck a devil from a man’s head (the slogan says the following: “Vince mali di testa, di denti, nevralgie, reumatismi”—Beats headaches, toothache, nerve pain, rheumatism); in the poster for Dr. Craveri’s phosphorous-free matchsticks, a desperate devil, shrouded in a cloud of smoke, is defeated by a host of lighted matches; and, then, the Ente nazionale per la prevenzione degli infortuni (National Institution for the Prevention of Injuries) poster invites us to replace electrical material in a bad state of repair by showing a dangerous electrical shock in the form of a devil (“L’insidia può essere mortale!”—A potentially lethal danger!).

5. Dual Symbols

One point of interest is that, despite their not to be underestimated importance, there were, nonetheless, fewer posters featuring the devil as the “enemy” than those that instead attributed positive qualities. In these, the devil was represented as a “benevolent” figure who allowed the main qualities of the marketed products to be brought out or expressed. To give a few examples, this type of use can be seen, among others, in the poster for Canetta bitters and Gilson cognac, in which a fiery red devil emits a flame, placing the attention on the liquors’ high alcohol content. Instead, in the poster for Pasubio soap, the devil offers the products to the crowd, who eagerly run up to get it (see Figure 1).

The symbol retained its positive function when represented following the codes of popular or literary culture, as seen at times in posters for invigorating or fortifying products. One such poster was for Robur elixir, in which Mephisto is seen offering Dr. Faust a bottle of the medicinal drink, thereby guaranteeing him strength and well-being (for a comparison with the devil represented as Mephisto in French posters of the Belle Époque, see ([Kneissl 2005](#))).



Figure 1. Poster for Pasubio soap, 1935. Museo nazionale Collezione Salce, Direzione regionale Musei Veneto, su concessione del Ministero della Cultura.

But the “good” devil was mainly used for another purpose in the early-century posters: to publicize the technological innovations of the era, from cars and their mechanical parts to technical domestic products such as fans and typewriters, whose availability on the market was a great novelty at the time. The association between the figure of the devil and this particular type of industrial good is confirmed in Table 2, which compares the type of symbol with the category of product publicized, corroborated by a definitely significant connectivity index ($\chi^2 = 50.254$, $p = 0.001$).

Table 2. Frequency and percentage distributions of the sampled posters by symbol type and product category.

	Product Category									
	Food and Beverage		Industrial Goods		Personal Care Products		Services		Total	
	f *	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Devils	26	32.9	37	58.7	7	25.9	5	9.3	75	33.6
Angels and saints	21	26.6	17	27.0	12	44.4	24	44.4	74	33.2
Religious figures and places of worship	18	22.8	4	6.3	3	11.1	22	40.7	47	21.1
Biblical scenes	14	17.7	5	7.9	5	18.5	3	5.6	27	12.1
Total	79	100.0	63	100.0	27	100.0	54	100.0	223	100.0

* f represents frequencies.

The devil–technology connection was used in quite a high percentage of cases (58.7%). Nearly every single case contained a positive use of the symbol. Moreover, it did not matter what material qualities the technical products had, or their durability. Indeed, positive representations of the devil prevailed in both posters marketing durable goods—tyres, pistons, objects for everyday use and even personal accessories such as pens or pipes—and posters for non-durable goods, principally chemical goods, such as insecticides and dyes.¹

Here are some examples of both. Let us start from durable goods: in the poster for Jeavons sheathing, a powerful winged devil wraps himself around a car’s suspension, promising to keep the springs constantly greased (“Le vostre molle sempre nell’olio”). A famous illustration by Gustave Doré, portraying the second circle of hell from Dante’s ‘Inferno’, accompanies the image of a Truffet fan, which cools down the damned by the storm that it generates. A man with a devilish appearance smokes a pipe by the Non canta

la raganella brand, highlighting the innovative air chamber that prevents the formation of condensation while smoking. Among the posters for non-durable goods, I can mention the ones for Tanglefoot fly paper in which the devil personifies the sticky substance that traps the insects, thus putting his most terrible characteristic in a positive light for buyers (“Unico distruttore pratico assoluto delle mosche e dei germi infettivi che esse diffondono”—Only practical way to totally destroy flies and the infectious germs they spread). Another is the poster for copper sulphate powder patented by Vittoria dei F.lli Ottavi that shows a horned devil with goat’s feet spray the product on bunches of grapes hanging from a vine.

Moving on to religious figures, we must remember that, during classification, I put this category together with religious buildings to make it easier to analyze the data. Hence, I accepted a certain loss of information. To look at how they were used more closely, one could say that references to members of religious orders and the clergy were used in two different ways in our posters: one positive and one negative. In some cases, images of monks and friars were used to visually express the care and devotion to work typical of monastic orders, which are characteristics that the poster artists skilfully transferred to products and their respective producers. In other posters, the religious figures break the rules and abandon themselves to the pleasure of consuming the advertised product. In all cases, the products were alcoholic drinks, so this contravention always related to the pleasure of drinking.

One example is the poster for wine made with Aleatico grapes from Portoferraio, in which a rosy-cheeked friar with half-closed eyes smiles contentedly as he holds a glass in one hand and a bottle of wine in the other (see Figure 2). In our sample, I noted that, in numerical terms, the positive use of religious figures prevailed over negative (or less virtuous) use. However, I might add that this ratio would eventually flip in print ads in the second half of the twentieth century. There would be a clear prevalence of these figures visibly giving in to consumer desires, so as to signal to all other consumers that it was not only permissible but dutiful, even, to be tempted by the marketed product or service.



Figure 2. Poster for wine from Portoferraio, 1920. Museo nazionale Collezione Salce, Direzione regionale Musei Veneto, su concessione del Ministero della Cultura.

In Table 2, we can see that over one-fifth of the posters containing images of religious figures and places of worship (22.8%) fall into the category of food and drink. This percentage accounts for posters marketing alcoholic products such as wine, beer and liquor through members of the clergy and religious orders.

Taking a closer look, a distinction can be made between these posters, separating the ones that emphasized a specific area or production zone from the ones that only highlighted the brand, anticipating a trend that would only emerge in full in modern advertising. In our sample, the majority of these posters indicated a place or specific area: for example, they advertise “passito del Santo” (the Saint’s fortified wine) by the Fassati wine producers in Poggibonsi, Chianti wine by the Bertolli wine producers in Lucca, thyme cream liqueur by the F.lli Pintus distillery in Ozieri, Alpestre bitters made by the Marist Brothers of Carmagnola and quinine liqueur made by the Discalced Carmelite Fathers at the Carmelchina distillery in Brescia. Instead, a focus on the brand indicated the excellent quality of the product, especially in posters for big breweries, such as Itala Pilsen and Cappellari, and liquor companies, such as Buton and Cinzano (still on the market today).

What can we say at this point? That, in early twentieth-century advertising, in the same way as in modern advertising, a distinction must be made between symbols of religious tradition used positively and those used negatively. So far, we have seen that a group of symbols was used for both ends, as they are polysemic by nature and can co-exist with two different meanings; indeed, they are found on posters for goods that are very different from each other. Interpretable in two different ways, these symbols were skilfully used by the poster artists, depending on what they had to express and the limits imposed by the decoding modes and expectations of the observers in that period of history.

6. Unambiguous Symbols

Not all of the symbols found in our posters were used in two ways: other symbols were restricted to a single use. In the sample, these include visual references to angels, saints, biblical scenes, churches and other religious buildings, which were only used with a positive value, that is, to create an association between religious tradition and the product (or service), to underline its goodness, value, usefulness or advantage.

Angels were the main vehicle of these types of association, like the one used in the poster for “pasta angelica”, scattering packets of soup pasta from on high, and the angel in the “Vesti bene, vesti lana” poster, giving an elegant gentleman the precious advice to “dress well, wear wool”. Table 2 offers interesting details on this, highlighting the prevalence of this symbol in posters to promote services (44.4%), in particular, in insurance and mutual aid. One example is the poster for the La Reale joint-stock cooperative in Bologna, in which the image of an angel rises up to protect a peasant woman, giving the service being promoted the ability to protect the harvest from hailstone damage (see Figure 3).

More generally, I observed that this solely positive use of angels in the posters was different than the dual representations of angels prevalent in present-day advertising. In the latter, it is not rare for the angel to be portrayed with female features and a sensual attitude or posture. In the role of “seducer”, the angel thus invites the public to commit a “consumerist sin” (Nardella 2015, pp. 77–78). We have said that this did not happen in the posters, with either angels or, by extension, the symbology traditionally referring to the heavens. This symbology included saints, the halo symbol and heaven itself, which we found used positively, for example, in the poster for a mineral water that sends whoever drinks it into ecstasy. Also fitting into this category was the poster for the Nafta oil company, in which a halo surrounds an oil lamp to signify enlightenment, and the poster for the Longo typewriter ribbon company, in which a roll of carbon paper is enveloped in a mystic aura to underline its reliability.



Figure 3. Poster for the La Reale joint-stock cooperative, 1902. Museo nazionale Collezione Salce, Direzione regionale Musei Veneto, su concessione del Ministero della Cultura.

If we are to separate the figures of angels and saints, grouped together in a single category for calculation purposes, we observe that, while angels were more present in posters for “protective” services, saints were equally present (44.4%) in posters for personal care and well-being products (see Table 2). They publicized products or medicinal preparations above all to treat non-serious illnesses such as coughs, sore throats, the flu, constipation, nerve pain and baldness, as well as much more serious illnesses such as epilepsy (cf. [Borello 1999](#)). One should note that the name used to advertise these products was that of the local chemist’s pharmacy lab or even the actual chemist who devised the compound, in contrast to the importance that the big pharmaceutical brands have acquired in advertising since the end of the Second World War.

Some examples include the following: the poster for the “pillole di Sant’Antonio” (pills of Saint Anthony) (“Specifico sovrano nell’influenza e per la tosse”—The cure for flu and coughs) shows the classic iconography of the saint with the baby Jesus and a lily; a Madonna and child appear on the product package (“Guariscono qualunque tosse anche la più ostinata”—Healing even the most stubborn coughs) in the posters for the Madonna della Salute lozenges by the Alberani pharmacy lab; the poster for Dr. Paneraj’s lozenges invents a new saint whose halo contains the words “Salus” (from “salute”, health); the poster for Santa Fosca laxative pills refers to the Venetian chemist’s of the same name that invented them; and the poster for the anti-epilepsy drug Aleptil, by the Rossi pharmacy lab in Turin, shows Saint George defeating the dragon while promising to defeat the illness in the same way.

The posters containing religious places also built positive-only associations for the goods and services that they advertised: firstly, images of churches but also the (less frequent)

images of mosques and minarets. Table 3, showing the symbols' distribution during the three main phases of the poster era, indicates that these references tended to increase between the two wars (22.6%) and in the pre-economic boom years (27.7%). They show a significant connectivity index ($\chi^2 = 13.180$, $p = 0.04$). Even though the percentages are quite similar, it is worth pointing out the interesting differences in contents of these two groups.

Table 3. Frequency and percentage distributions of the sampled posters by symbol type and time period.

	Time Period							
	Belle Époque		Between the Two Wars		Up to the Economic Boom		Total	
	f *	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Devils	29	41.4	35	33.0	11	23.4	75	33.6
Angels and saints	26	37.1	36	34.0	12	25.5	74	33.2
Religious figures and places of worship	10	14.3	24	22.6	13	27.7	47	21.1
Biblical scenes	5	7.1	11	10.4	11	23.4	27	12.1
Total	70	100.0	106	100.0	47	100.0	223	100.0

* f represents frequencies.

The posters that appeared between the two wars used references to churches and bell towers to advertise town festivals and fairs: the posters for the fairs of Alessandria and Padua show, respectively, the bell tower of the cathedral of Alessandria and the basilica of Saint Antony in Padua. Insurance and banking services also used these images. Examples are the posters for Assicurazioni Generali with the Basilica of San Marco in Venice and for the Cassa di risparmio delle province lombarde with Milan Cathedral. Furthermore, references to Islamic places of worship, namely, mosques and their minarets, were not lacking in this period: examples are the Gurgi Mosque used to promote the lottery of Tripoli and the Jama Masjid Mosque in New Delhi to promote the Lloyd Triestino shipping company.

Instead, in the years up to the economic boom, these symbols were used more frequently for tourism purposes—trips and holidays—than for selling goods. In particular, posters circulated with churches and bell towers advertising coastal destinations; for example, the cathedrals of Rimini and Caorle were used to promote the riviera and the seaside town, respectively, and the bell tower of San Marco the Venice Lido. This method was also used to promote important cities of art, such as Florence and Palermo. Mosques and other Eastern religious buildings were used in this period with exotic connotations, above all, in posters advertising cruise lines and airlines. For example, the poster for Linee Aeree Italiane shows the Iranian city of Teheran with its minarets.

One last type of symbol that tended to be used in an unambiguous way remains to be analyzed: biblical scenes. Let me start by saying that the main references in this category are to Noah's Ark, some key episodes from the life of Jesus and the temptation of Eve. Aside from the numbers—12.1% of the total number of posters analyzed—this type of symbol is interesting for us because it reveals two trends that emerged on the Italian advertising scene between the end of the Second World War and the start of the economic miracle. The first is linked to the advent of consumerism, with individualistic desires instilled by advertising whose content and forms had changed since the start of the century: at the level of religious symbols, temptation was increasingly used to make desires visible. The second trend was connected to the transformation of the main religious festivities into consumer traditions, highlighted by the growing use of references to Christmas and Easter for commercial ends.

The data in Table 3 confirm that references to the Bible were mostly concentrated in posters appearing in the period up to the economic boom (23.4%). In these years, the story of temptation allowed the poster artists to equate the product sold with forbidden fruit, like in the posters for Eva lipstick ("Seducente come il peccato"—Sinfully seductive) or for the Fenix tonic against "breakdowns, weak nerves and sexual issues", in which an "Adam"

in elegant pyjamas tries in every way to pick the product, represented as a tasty red apple, from a tree. In the same period, a La Rinascente Christmas poster contained references to the nativity, with a toy replacing the baby Jesus in the manger, and the poster of the award-winning Banchini factory in Parma showed the Three Kings bringing sweets and chocolate as gifts rather than gold, incense and myrrh.

There were also other biblical references. Noah's Ark is recalled in the poster for Escoffier oil, in which Noah looks towards the horizon at a dove bringing not an olive branch, but a whole tin of oil. Of the episodes from the life of Jesus, we find the resurrection of Lazarus quoted in the poster for Radiolitina sachets, which transform water into "luscious, radioactive drinking water", through the slogan "Alzati e cammina" (Get up and walk) (see Figure 4). The poster for Ferrarelle water quotes the verse from the Gospel about Jesus's encounter with the Samaritan, showing Jesus drinking water of this brand at Jacob's well (the slogan reads as follows: "Fons Vitae"—life source).



Figure 4. Poster for Radiolitina sachets, 1926. Museo nazionale Collezione Salce, Direzione regionale Musei Veneto, su concessione del Ministero della Cultura.

7. From Symbol to Metaphor

In sum, the indications emerging from the data verify the presence of different—positive and negative—categories in the use of religious symbols in posters; in turn, the negative symbols doubled up as they could be used in two different ways. On one hand, the negative meaning of the symbol remained unaltered; on the other, the negative meaning was either abolished or nevertheless transformed, giving a positive meaning to traditionally negative aspects.

This was well illustrated by my further investigations of the devil symbol, which demonstrated this duplicity better than the other references. First, this negative figure could be used to represent a danger or a harmful presence for consumers, from which they could defend themselves using the advertised product. But, by reducing this meaning,

or making it disappear altogether, the devil could also be used to convey a message of acceptable seduction or even of goodness and reliability.

At the end of this comparison among trends in the use of symbols in early twentieth-century and modern Italian advertising, it would be interesting to take a step forward and seek to whittle down the broad spectrum of topics emerging from the quantitative analysis to a certain level of unity.

We said that a central point revealed by the research conducted since the mid-twentieth century is that advertising uses religious symbols to try to make the promoted goods relevant in the lives of the consumers. The resulting invitation to take action can produce a symbolic surplus, which, in turn, becomes an added value for the brand (cf. [Nardella 2015](#), p. 122). Remaining in this perspective, the question now is if the social processes seen in the poster era were somehow forerunners of those of the modern day.

To answer this question, the focus of my research on the posters shifted to the overall message conveyed by each one. Meanwhile, I kept in mind that, despite the variations in the type of symbol, the product advertised and the period of time, they all have a basic factor in common: they all use metaphors, with the religious code acting as a transposition factor.

By creating references to the system of religious meaning, metaphors reconfigure the advertised object, transferring or transporting specific properties or attributes onto it. This operation can take place through different metaphorical strategies. These strategies, and the relationships of meaning they establish between the religious and advertising systems, are summed up in following diagram (see [Table 4](#)).

Table 4. Metaphorical strategies and relationships of meaning established between religion and advertising.

Metaphorical Strategy	Relationship of Meaning
Transfer	Complementary
Inversion by difference	Contrary
Inversion by opposition	Contradictory

7.1. Transfer

This is the most straightforward case, when the metaphor transfers a property from the religious symbol to the product or brand promoted while leaving the symbol untouched. As such, a symbol that indicates a particular action or attribute in the religious system maintains the same meaning in the advertising system. The relationship established between the two is complementary since the characteristics of one correspond to the characteristics of the other, and they complete each other.

Let us give some examples. Angels are used to convey protection for insurance and mutual aid companies against great natural events (Società Cattolica di Assicurazione and Società Italiana di Mutuo Soccorso), frivolity for sweets and alcoholic drinks (Biscotti Delser and Birra Dolcificata Hengelhardt) and power for incandescent light bulb and lighting companies (Lampade Auer and Forniture per Elettricità Borda e Veccarino).

Saints also convey protection, but in the form of health protection, relief from suffering and as a prevention tool (pillole di Sant'Antonio). A particular case is when the saint's protection is taken away; in other words, it is no longer needed as it is ensured by the product or service. This is seen in the poster for Perrot brakes in which Saint Christopher, protector of car drivers, realizes that his medallions are no longer needed through the slogan "e San Cristoforo dice: Non do più medaglie. . ." (and Saint Christopher says: I don't give medallions away anymore. . .) (see [Figure 5](#)).

It is interesting to note that the transfer strategy can also apply to religious symbols in posters where a part is used to express the whole (synecdoche). This is the case of churches advertising big brands (such as Rinascente and Fiat) and tourist destinations, giving a positive meaning to the place where the churches are found. For example, by association, the cathedral of Milan transfers the superiority and excellence for which this city is renowned onto the Motta panettone.



Figure 5. Poster for Perrot brakes, 1930. Museo nazionale Collezione Salce, Direzione regionale Musei Veneto, su concessione del Ministero della Cultura.

Overall, this metaphorical strategy is principally used with those symbols defined here as unambiguous, above all those with positive meanings. An exception—which, nevertheless, seems to confirm the described mechanism—is the use of the devil with its original negative function, which is eliminated in the poster thanks to the action of the product. This indicates that, even symbols with negative meanings can be transferred from the religious to the advertising field, as we see happening in posters in which the devil remains an enemy. Here are some examples: a devil in the form of a snake ensnares a young woman treated with Grocco restorative pills in its coils; a crowd of little red devils escape from a bunch of grapes sprayed with Poggi e Astengo sulphur; a devil blows into a Fontana pressure gauge but cannot manage to deform it.

Finally, we can observe that this type of “antagonist” devil (only this type) is still found in present-day advertising, albeit in smaller numbers. Just think, to mention but two, of the advert for Neoborocillina lozenges, with the sore throat devil, and the advert for Kilocal tablets, in which the devil represents “bad” cholesterol.

7.2. *Inversion by Difference*

In this case, the metaphor takes its cue from religious temptation symbolized by the Bible story of original sin and other stories of more fleeting sinfulness to transfer the idea of temptation and seduction to the promoted product. Unlike religious temptation, this advertising temptation is “good”, and one can, or rather must, give in to it without danger or fear. As such, in the passage from the religious to the advertising system, the symbol undergoes an inversion, in particular, an inversion by difference, to become something fundamentally other—contrary even—to the initial temptation from which the posters clearly draw their inspiration. The biblical story most drawn from is the temptation of Eve, but there is also the temptation of Jesus in the desert, and the temptations of Saint Jerome and Anthony the Great. The relationship between religion and advertising established by this metaphorical strategy is therefore a contrary one.

This happens, for example, in the poster for Eva ladies' cigarettes (see Figure 6). Here, like the forbidden fruit, a snake offers the product to a woman who gives in to the “most innocent and irresistible of temptations”: not only the temptation to buy these cigarettes and smoke them in public, mainly the remit of men at the time, but also to become the tempter herself. The same dual message—let yourself be tempted and become tempters yourselves—is found in the poster for Candio champagne, which shows Adam and Eve drinking from the same glass held by a snake.



Figure 6. Poster for Eva ladies' cigarettes, 1900. Museo nazionale Collezione Salce, Direzione regionale Musei Veneto, su concessione del Ministero della Cultura.

Posters for wines and alcoholic drinks are the ones that most make use of this metaphorical strategy. In addition to the Bible story of original sin, another symbol to point out is the devil represented as a faun, with a human body and the hooves and horns of a goat, the symbol of carnal desire and libertinage. For example, a faun with a glass of Vlahov maraschino in his hand is portrayed between two attractive women, inviting them to abandon themselves to the same pleasures; in another poster, a faun with a woman behind him succumbing to the temptation of Florio marsala lets consumers imagine that they can obtain the same effect with this product.

But inversion by difference does not only involve seduction by the devil. Other, more fleeting temptations are represented too. Cupids make people fall in love, like in the poster for RRA pure silk stockings (“La calza galeotta”—The stocking you’ll fall for); religious men succumb to the pleasures of alcohol, like the abovementioned friar with the wine from Portoferraio (see Figure 2).

It is necessary to point out that this metaphorical strategy and the relative message of “good temptation” is the one still found—often—in present-day advertising, especially in adverts aimed at female targets (Nardella 2014). These adverts, principally promoting brands of jewellery (Bulgari, Cartier), perfumes (Guy Laroche, Krizia) and fashion (Dolce & Gabbana, Yves Saint Lauren), represent a “modern-day Eve”, at once tempted and tempter.

blows away); and the poster for Super-Iride dye, whose effectiveness the devil shows by lifting dyed fabrics from a tub (see Figure 8).



Figure 8. Poster for Super-Iride dye, 1937. Museo nazionale Collezione Salce, Direzione regionale Musei Veneto, su concessione del Ministero della Cultura.

In order to fully understand the use of the devil symbol following this metaphorical strategy, we need to refer to the specific historical context in which these posters circulated. Indeed, at this time, technical processes tended to be seen as “devilish” ideas. From this perspective, one might uphold that the posters referred to implicitly contained a sort of inverted message, which aimed to reassure that the products on offer were actually not “devilish”. This fear was comparable to the turn-of-the-century anguish caused by the advent of new technological means of communication, such as the phonograph and the gramophone. Their ability to reproduce sounds thought to come from beyond the grave had been connected to paranormal control, all of which led to an explosion of spiritism and séances (Adria 2023).

From a more general perspective, it has been argued that the appearance of “the good devil” did not start in early twentieth-century advertising but much earlier, approximately between the seventeenth and nineteenth century, when leading figures of the world of art and culture began to use this symbol in their works, gradually detaching it from its original religious meanings and transforming it into a sort of fascinating literary creation. According to Mauranne (2014), the turning points of this transformation of the devil from an evil figure to a good one include John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, in which Satan becomes a rebellious hero, the romantic paintings and engravings of Eugène Delacroix, who, in illustrating a French translation of Goethe’s *Faust*, depicts Mephistopheles as a brave young man and Gustave Doré’s engravings, whose devil calls to mind Baudelaire’s musing that “the most perfect model of virile beauty is Satan” (Milner 1960, p. 494). This long-term process brought to completion a change in the image of the devil, which, for some, even began with Goethe’s *Faust* itself (Guellec 2024), who, as a harmless figure, could have made

its entrance into the world of European advertising at the end of the nineteenth century (Mauranne 2014, p. 163).

Nowadays, a diametrically opposed message is found in advertisements for technological brands. Computerized products in particular are not offered to consumers as objects whose devilish nature is to be disproved but as divine gifts. Furthermore, it must be highlighted that, in the present day, the “friendly” devil has disappeared from Italian advertising. The last case that I have come across was the advert for Segafredo coffee, dating to the end of the 1990s. Set in hell and starring Renzo Arbore, it features a friendly devil who offers him and the damned a coffee. The coffee manages to resolve the ills of hell, making it an amenable place, where one might even hope to end up (cf. Nardella 2012).

8. Back to the Present

From the scenario outlined hitherto, we can both obtain a trend and suggest an interpretation to decipher the results of the research on posters and place them in a conceptual dimension.

Empirically speaking, there is no doubt that the use of religious references for advertising purposes is not only found in modern Italy, namely, in the period from the economic boom to the present day, but it dates much further back in time, to the start of the twentieth century. May I underline that this confirmation is anything but banal: both because of the lack of previous studies in the literature testing this specific point and because the analyses carried out on modern advertising indicated the mid-1950s as a possible moment when the phenomenon began. Indeed, the initial hypothesis envisaged an opposite situation.

As for their interpretation, if I am right to think that, at the time, advertising posters were an innovative form of communication, allowing one to highlight the marketed products’ properties and attributes and also—more deeply—to use images and words by placing them in a horizon of sense comprehensible to the public, then the religious symbology in them takes on an essential role. It is essential as a language that allows socially shared propositions to be expressed. By this, I mean propositions where there is agreement as to the code that makes the communication understandable. It is even more essential because it locates the advertised products within a universe of discourse pertaining to the public’s everyday life.

From this standpoint, it is conceivable that advertisers found themselves attracted to religious references because they provided them with visual and verbal content that could be easily recognized and decoded in the Italian context to commercialize industry-produced goods and services at a point in time where mass consumption was a completely new phenomenon that people still had to get used to. We have seen that one of the main functions that religious symbolism served in advertising posters was to reassure potential consumers not only of the perfection or indispensability of the products advertised but also that the dynamic forces of modernization brought in by mass industrial production and consumption would have a positive impact on them. Another function was to develop an advantageous creative solution for poster artists, who, in the absence of a codified advertising language, could draw from an already existing reservoir of signifiers and meanings that was easily accessible and known to practically the entire Italian public of that period, as well as to build a new secular “vocabulary” of visual motifs and recurring verbal patterns that intersected with the religious vocabulary and sometimes overlapped with it.

But one could go further. The use of religious symbols in the posters can be spoken of as a specific technique whose aim was not so much (or not only) to convince people to buy the advertised products as it was to place them in the lived environment, along with needs, desires and even actions, long before the products were actually bought. By adopting this technique, the product could be given a dimension of added value. Hence, the act of consumption was already achieved, in part, in the poster. The advantage of this technique for advertisers laid in its ability not only to direct readers’ attention toward the ad’s message, but also to lure readers into active involvement. This meant making sure that certain emotions, attitudes and even actions were inscribed and “anticipated” in the

poster, pushing the purchasing act to evolve in a specific direction (from buying some soap to buying a specific soap, that specific soap brand). In this process, religious references transformed the product into a “symbolic trigger” for producing those life-enhancing feelings that consumers would soon have started to avidly pursue.

As I see it, there is a continuity between the use of religious symbols in the poster era, which anticipated the social processes at play in contemporary brand communication, and the migration of symbols that can be seen today.

Funding: This research was funded by MUR PRIN 2022, grant number 202295MWTJ—Religion in Public: Forms and Dynamics of Religious Publicization in Italy (RE-PUBLIC), and University of Milan.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Note

- ¹ A separate analysis was run to determine the significance of the relationship between the symbol of the devil and the product category. The cases included in the variable “symbol type” were categorized as to whether the poster contained a devil or not. Of the 223 cases, 75 (33.6%) were alleged to refer to the devil, and the remaining 148 cases did not (66.4%). A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between this newly formed dichotomous variable and the product category variable. The relationship between these variables was significant ($\chi^2 = 32.887$, $p = 0.001$). Posters containing a reference to the devil figure are more likely to be used to advertise technical goods, compared with posters with a different religious reference.

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