

(Un)marketing the Uncanny

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Abstract

1. Purpose: Argues that the *uncanny* should be retrieved as a valuable concept in understanding the relationship between religion and marketing.

2. Design/methodology/approach: Case analysis of reported apparitions in Ballinaspittle in 1985 and Medugorje since 1981.

3. Findings: Distinguishes between vicarious and unmediated consumption of the uncanny. Explicates how the uncanny and the sacred are distinguished from and relate to one another, and how the former may or may not be translated into the latter. Highlights the role of market actors and institutions in mediating the uncanny. Shows how the uncanny upsets some of the precepts of social science inquiry, as well as the scholar's mediating role between the emic and the etic.

4. Research limitations/implications: Scope for more research on the marketing of religion.

5. Practical implications: Building on the notion that the uncanny is an unconcept, the paper identifies *unmarketing* as a way of thinking about marketing in this context.

6. Social implications: Religious beliefs – which are a potent, peculiar and intoxicating admixture of the uncanny and the sacred – continue to have a unique hold on what we might describe as consumers. Consequently, it is important that they be studied.

7. Originality/value: Very little, if any, prior research on the marketing of the uncanny.

8. Keywords (between 3-6 keywords): Uncanny, sacred, marketing, religion, apparitions, post-secular.

Introduction

Marketing theorists have written extensively on how religious practices find expression in consumer culture. Within this literature, the general assumption is that nothing is inherently sacred. This paper follows a different tradition, wherein the sacred is seen as deeply, intimately and exclusively connected with the supernatural, and where, in particular, the *uncanny* is at the centre of religious experience.

The paper proceeds as follows. It begins by outlining the difference between “situational” and “substantial” analysis of religious phenomenon, where the latter is inextricably linked to the uncanny. The paper distinguishes vicarious and unmediated consumption of the uncanny, and the latter is explicated through analysing the case of the “moving statutes” in Ballinspittle in 1985, the reported apparitions in Medugorje in 1981, and other Marian shrines. Based on this material, the paper then presents the idea of *unmarketing*, which speaks to what “marketing” means in the context of the uncanny.

Religion and Marketing: Substantial and Situational traditions

There is a considerable literature on the commodification of religion as typified by publications with titles like *The Marketization of Religion* or *Shopping for God*. Almost invariably, these studies on the “secularisation of the sacred” assume that religion already exists, and that religious knowledge has already stabilized or been “blackboxed”. Indeed, one can only brand (or sell or consume) a religion after it has come to be understood as a religion; in other words, after it has been blackboxed.

Most religions came to be thousands of years ago, and so the process of blackboxing is not readily discernible, except, perhaps, to religious historians. The process can be studied more clearly when consumers infuse everyday consumption with spiritual meanings. This “sacralisation of the secular” involves the transformation of the profane into the sacred. Here, the seminal study is Belk et al.’s (1989) *Odyssey* project which inspired a line of research into how various apparently “mundane” consumption practices – from river rafting (Arnould et al., 1999) to mountain climbing (Tumbat and Belk, 2010) – seemed to resonate with religious experience. That literature has almost exclusively followed what Chidester and Linenthal (1995: 5-6) refer to as a “situational” analysis, which assumes that nothing is inherently sacred and that the term “can be applied to virtually anything through the human

act of consecration”. Chidester and Linenthal also identify a quite different tradition, which they term “substantial”, wherein “the sacred has been identified as an uncanny, awesome, or powerful manifestation of reality, full of ultimate significance” (p. 5). Far from being applied to virtually anything, the sacred is instead intimately, foundationally and exclusively connected to the uncanny. For Rudolf Otto, an important writer in the substantial tradition, religious phenomena stand apart from others, in origin and essence, through their unique foundation in a nonrational experiential core, a phenomenon that he terms the “numinous”, but which he elsewhere equates to the “uncanny” (Otto, 1917/1931: 40):

Religious dread (or ‘awe’)...first begins to stir in the feeling of ‘something uncanny’, ‘eerie’, or ‘weird’. It is this feeling which, emerging in the mind of primeval man, forms the starting-point for the entire religious development in history. (Otto, 1917/1931: 14–15)

An important component of the numinous is what he terms the *mysterium tremendum*, which incorporates

stupor ... blank wonder, an astonishment that strikes us dumb, amazement absolute ... a secret or a mystery in the sense of that which is alien to us, uncomprehended and unexplained ... the wholly other, that which is quite beyond the sphere of the usual, the intelligible, and the familiar, which therefore falls quite outside the limits of the canny, and is contrasted with it, filling the mind with blank wonder and astonishment. (Otto, 1917/1931: 26)

Hence, within this substantial tradition, attending church is analytically distinguished from visiting a shopping mall because the former is linked foundationally with the uncanny while the latter is not. Of course, this is not to say that shopping malls (or war memorials or football pitches) cannot become sacralized; rather this paper is concerned with those particular manifestations of the sacred that are intimately connected to the uncanny.

The Uncanny

We will now briefly discuss the concept of the uncanny. Freud’s (1919/2001) essay, “The Uncanny” (*Das Unheimliche*), underlies practically all writing on the subject, and for him the uncanny is concerned with the strange, the weird, the mysterious, and brings with it some sense of the supernatural. It disturbs our sense of reality, of who we are and our normal expectations of the world in which we live; “it tends to coincide with whatever excites dread”

(Freud, 1919/2001: 219) and yet it leads us back to what is long known to us; it involves, as Royle (2003: 1) puts it, “a peculiar commingling of the familiar and unfamiliar”. It is related to the aesthetic in that it has to do with a particular kind of feeling, sensation, or emotion, although, as Freud points out, it has been curiously ignored in the history of aesthetics, which instead has been concerned with the beautiful, the attractive and the sublime.

In his essay, Freud shows that the German word *heimlich* – which is the antonym of *unheimlich* (uncanny) – has two quite opposing meanings: on the one hand it means “familiar”, “native”, or “belonging to home”, while on the other it means “concealed”, “kept from sight”, or “withheld from others”. Hence, even the uncanny’s etymology incorporates a sense of “intellectual uncertainty” which is always associated with the concept and which distinguishes it from the merely novel.

Uncanny sensations can develop when this intellectual uncertainty is centred on whether an object is alive or not, which can happen when we believe that an inanimate object is too alike an animate one (cyborgs are a good example). Likewise, the uncanny is associated with “doubling”, be it a situation, thing, or twist of fate that recurs with remarkable and unlikely coincidence, whether this is a toy or robot that eerily appears to be alive, or the unnatural doubling that science can produce – think Dolly the sheep. Doubling can work to confound one’s deepest sense of self, which happens when one has the telepathic sense of possessing the same knowledge, feelings and experiences as another. The link with the supernatural is therefore understandable as it is tempting to ascribe a secret meaning to such involuntary repetition, or attribute it to unknown forces that one heretofore had never suspected.

Doubling is also instantiated in confrontations with mirrors and shadows, and in beliefs about guardian spirits. In particular, the body’s first double is perhaps the idea of the “immortal” soul, which, for Freud, builds a strong link with the death instinct, narcissism and the development of the ego, ideas that Lacan later developed through his concept of the mirror stage. In particular, catalepsy – a medical condition where the body becomes rigid and can be mistaken for a corpse – and the re-animation of the dead are recurring uncanny themes.

The uncanny brings with it a morbid sense of anxiety, a feeling of profound helplessness and a palpable sense of danger. Here, our contemporary experience of the uncanny links us directly with ancient, animistic understandings of the universe, where magical practices intervened in and interpreted reality. Drawing on his earlier work, *Totem and Taboo* (Freud, 1913/1960), Freud links the uncanny with a primitive, animistic mode of thinking where spirits, both good and bad, inhabit all things. In this world, our inner mental life is projected

onto (and is all-powerful over) physical reality, a phenomenon that he refers to as the “omnipotence of thoughts”. This finds expression, for example, when the instant fulfilment of wishes is attributed to a secret power to do harm or good. His psychoanalytic take on this is that each of us has gone through a development phase in early childhood that corresponds with early human’s animistic stage. In his hands, the uncanny becomes a rich resource for understanding, illustrating and connecting many themes that he explored elsewhere, including repressed infantile complexes like the castration-complex and womb-phantasies. Not surprisingly, his essay remains a touchstone for all subsequent explorations of the uncanny.

Vicarious consumption of the uncanny

The uncanny is a powerfully personal experience, and one that is axiomatically upsetting. However, it can also be mediated by other agents, and so we distinguish between personal or unmediated experience of the uncanny and vicarious or mediated consumption of the phenomenon. Perhaps the best examples of the latter are to be found in literature and popular culture where allusions to the supernatural are common-place (Royle, 2003; Masschelein, 2011). The uncanny also features in film studies where there is a long-standing notion of cinema as a magical or supernatural art and entertainment form. As Smith (2000) put it:

Early viewers of film were amazed and moved by this miraculous gift dispensed by film, that of reanimating what had gone...Like Christ called Lazarus, film seemed to bring back to life what had been irrevocably lost; it blurred uncannily the distinction between life and death. (p. 121)

In this sense, all film is uncanny (Pence, 2004).

At the same time, many films play quite explicitly with the concept, whether this be Kubrick’s use of doubles and déjà vu in *The Shining*, David Lynch’s juxtaposition of horror and the mundane in *Blue Velvet* and *Twin Peaks*, or his use doubling, repetition, hallucination, and dream sequences in *Mulholland Drive* all of which work to upset the sense of reality and self-identity experienced by the movie characters and, by extension, the audience. Uncanny elements also feature in many of Steven Spielberg’s films and, more broadly, it is a rather routine plot device in film-making and story-telling.

When the uncanny is depicted in fiction (whether in books or films), we know it is fiction, and so we term this the vicarious consumption of the uncanny. Here it is worth returning to

Freud, who notes that he “cannot think of any genuine fairy-story which has anything uncanny about it” (Freud, 1919/2001: 245). His point is that even though fairy-tales are crammed with inanimate objects springing to life, re-animation of the dead, wish-fulfillments, secret powers, monsters, ghouls and goblins, there is a difference between the uncanny that is actually experienced and the uncanny that we merely picture or read about. Thus, fairy-tales are framing devices that contain or tame the uncanny; the uncanny, through a fairy tale, is rendered familiar – normal even – part of a particular language game understood by both the story-teller and the audience. The uncanny in the “real” world, the truly uncanny, is a horse of quite a different colour. And it is to this that we now turn.

Moving Statues

For a real-life story of the uncanny, we first recount a phenomenon that occurred in Ireland during the summer of 1985. It began in County Cork in the small village of Ballinspittle where a roadside statue of the Virgin Mary was reported to have moved spontaneously. (An inanimate object apparently springing into life is a quintessential example of the uncanny.) Similar occurrences were reported at around 30 other locations around the country during that summer, often at grottos erected during the Marian Year of 1954. Thousands went to see what many believed were apparitions and it was reported that up to 100,000 visited the site during that summer (Mulholland, 2009). The media popularized the term “moving statues” because the people who witnessed the phenomena often reported that a statue levitated, gestured, or moved in some way.

The story has been well documented, which forms the basis for our research methodology. Specifically, around 100 newspaper articles that describe and discuss the phenomenon were read and analysed thematically and chronologically, as were various websites and academic papers (e.g. Mulholland, 2009; O’Leary, 1986; Donnelly, 2005), and a book (Ryan and Kirakowski, 1985) devoted to the subject. In addition, the “moving statues” story has to be understood within the context of the long history of apparitions that form part of the narrative and history of the Catholic Church (Krebs, 2017). There is a large literature about the sites where these various apparitions supposedly took place and this was also drawn on.

Since the third century, apparitions of the Virgin Mary have been reported in various places around the globe. However, only nine of these have been officially recognized by the Catholic Church – Guadalupe (1531), Paris (1830), La Salette (1846), Lourdes (1858), Pontmain (1871), Knock (1879), Fatima (1917), Beauraing (1932), and Banneux (1933) –

and these attract large numbers of pilgrims; for instance, five million pilgrims visit Lourdes annually, while Knock, in Ireland, receives one and a half million. The Catholic Church has a protocol, *Normae Congregationis*, for adjudicating on the veracity of apparitions, which is a formal process of sacralization through which an uncanny event comes to be recast as something that is authentically sacred. The Knock apparitions were formally investigated in 1879 and 1936 and these deemed the witnesses' testimony as trustworthy and satisfactory, though the shrine was only officially recognised by the Vatican in 1954. In 1979, Pope John Paul visited the shrine on the centenary of the apparition, inspiring an even greater devotion to the site. Almost half a million pilgrims gathered at Knock on that day.

In the summer of 1985, it is probable that some canny individuals saw the potential for Ballinspittle to emulate Knock, given that the village is only 30km from Cork International Airport and close to a long sandy beach. This was not to be, however. The Catholic Church sat on the fence, neither recognising nor dismissing the supernatural nature of the phenomena. This cautionary approach was well articulated by the Catholic bishop with responsibility for the area, Dr Michael Murphy, who issued a press release stating that:

Direct supernatural intervention is a very rare happening in life, so common sense would demand that we approach the claims made concerning the grotto at Ballinspittle with prudence and caution. Before a definite pronouncement could be made by the Church all natural explanations would have to be examined and exhausted over a lengthy period of time. In instances of this kind, one has to be extremely careful not to raise expectations unduly. I understand that crowds are gathering there in a great spirit of prayer. This is certainly a praise-worthy thing. It is in keeping with the devotion and respect that is expected at all shrines (*The Irish Times*, July 31, 1985).

The bishop refused to allow Mass be celebrated at the grotto on the Feast of the Assumption, but that did not dissuade some 20,000 people from attending a 12-hour Rosary vigil at the grotto while the bishop celebrated Mass at another shrine, some 35km away (*The Irish Times*, August 14th and 16th 1985).

Notwithstanding the large numbers travelling to the various sites where uncanny events had happened, the "moving statues" phenomenon was routinely ridiculed in the press and in popular culture. The Government press secretary was quoted as saying that, "Three-quarters of the country is laughing heartily. In Dublin, the citizens are anxiously watching a statue of

James Larkin in O'Connell Street to see if it will move" (*The Irish Times*, August 17th). A team of psychologists from University College Cork studied the phenomenon "scientifically":

Led by Mr Jurek Kirakowski, the team conducted experiments at another grotto last week and, using two hitchhikers as 'guinea pigs', succeeded in achieving the same results. Mr Kirakowski said his team had proved that light conditions as well as neck strain could explain the 'movements'. (*The Irish Times*, August 14)

By September, some Catholic Church leaders were taking an equally jaundiced view of things, with the Bishop of Killala, Thomas McDonnell, invoking the science of ophthalmology (the medical study of diseases of the eye) to explain apparent movements of lighted objects: "It seems to have been precipitated by air pilots making mistakes through seeing apparent movements of navigation lights. The phenomenon is called 'the autokinetic effect' and has been given scientific testing" (*The Irish Times*, September 24th, 1985).

Thus, the summer of 1985 was a time when different interpretations of the uncanny competed with one another. On the one hand, there were attempts to explain the happenings as a supernatural intervention, as the latest instance of the uncanny that would, in time, be understood as a sacred event, consistent with the holy traditions and narratives of the Catholic Church. While it is clear that not all of the thousands visiting the grotto were of this view, at least some were. As the journalist Mary Holland put it, "What has happened to them appears to have been a deeply moving religious experience and it is difficult to understand why it should have given rise to such hilarity" (*The Irish Times*, August 21st, p. 8). Others drew on different traditions and narratives. Some, like the university psychologists, explained the phenomenon as an optical illusion caused by staring at objects in the evening twilight. Some priests also contributed, linking the Irish Marian tradition with popular religion and secularisation, while others drew on sociological narratives to make sense of the "moving statues". The politician and journalist, Conor Cruise O'Brien, opined that "explanations based on the hard summer and the bad times have been offered" (*The Irish Times*, September 3rd, p. 8), stating that he would be "most interested to hear from anyone, sociologist or psychologist, who may now be accumulating data about the statue-watchers". One psychologist, Michael Sheehan, responded, saying that he had visited the grotto three times:

If I may be permitted, however, to extrapolate from my knowledge of many friends and acquaintances who have visited the shrine, then there is no reason to suspect that

the pilgrims are any different from any other cross-section of the population.

I was fortunate enough to have with me a fairly good pair of ordinary binoculars and, to my dying day, I will never forget the close-up oscillations and movements of the Virgin's statue. It was for me at any rate the most profoundly moving experience of my life.

Observing the events from Northern Ireland, Jim Wells of Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionist Party told the media that:

We find much of Roman Catholic doctrine repugnant... [we find it repugnant] that the Virgin Mary is regarded as a deity that can be prayed to, who can forgive sins and heal the sick and all that, that shrines which can supposedly move in Ballinaspittle or wherever it is can delude thousands into believing that there are some magical powers. That is superstition of almost African tribal levels. (O'Toole, 1985)

Writing about the events many years later, Mulholland (2009) drew on a range of sociological, historical, theological, and psychological narratives to make sense of the "moving statues", which he saw as a

modern manifestation of the kind of 'magical-devotionalism' that sections of the Irish Catholic population have long been prone to resort to during periods of personal or collective distress... They were products of an authoritarian, pessimistic, and guilt ridden religious ethos that stymied the emotional, religious, and cognitive development of many Irish children, undermined their capacity for self reflection and the possibility of developing a mature capacity for containing their inner fears and anxieties. (p. 176)

But the most telling contribution was made by three Pentecostals, who, on 31st October 1985, attacked the statue with a hammer and axe claiming that the pilgrims were engaged in idolatry (the worship of images) or Mariolatry (Marian veneration) both of which are antithetical to Protestant religious beliefs. While the statue was subsequently repaired, the crowds never returned and the events of that summer were largely forgotten. The grotto in Ballinaspittle did not become a sacred place, at least no more than any of the thousands of other grottos in Ireland. (These grottos were sacred, but few, if any, were associated with uncanny happenings). It certainly never competed in the international Marian market, and it never even made a list of the more popular Irish Marian shrines.

From the outset, the parallels between Ballinspittle and other shrines were obvious. As the *Wall Street Journal* put it in their front-page story: “The venerated shrine at Knock, which has spawned souvenir shops and even a partially-completed airport, comes up in the pub discussion. Asks one Ballinspittle resident, ‘If they can do it at Knock, why can’t we?’” (Putka, 1985). The parallels with Medugorje, where apparitions of the Virgin Mary had been reported over the previous four years, are perhaps more obvious and salient, and in the next section we will consider the uncanny events that occurred there.

Our Lady of Medjugorje

In June 1981 six children reported seeing an apparition of the Virgin Mary in the village of Medugorje, in what is now Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹ Other uncanny phenomena were subsequently reported at the site, such as the sun spinning and dancing in the sky, or being surrounded by hearts or crosses. Similar to Ballinspittle, the events attracted much media attention and a steady stream of visitors, including the usual mix of the curious, convinced and sceptical. However, in contrast to Ballinspittle, the six children continued to report visions and messages from the Virgin Mary on an almost daily basis, some right up to the present.

The official Marian shrines are sacred places – they are shrines after all – primarily because the uncanny events that once occurred there were, following detailed and formal investigation, deemed to be authentic and of supernatural character. This protocol can result in one of two possible judgments: *constat de supernaturalitate* (“It is confirmed to be of supernatural origin”) and *non constat...* (“It is not confirmed...”). The protocol was never invoked in the case of Ballinspittle, but it was in Medugorje.

The local bishop, Bishop Žanić, initially doubted that the events had a supernatural character, and became increasingly convinced of this over time. He established the first Commission – comprised of four priests, 3 diocesans and 1 religious Franciscan – in January 1982, and this group investigated the events until 1984. Its report to Cardinal Ratzinger (who subsequently became Pope Benedict XVI) was sceptical about the claims, observing that, “From the outset one can notice that the children have sometimes lied”.

In 1984, Žanić extended the membership of the Commission to 12 priests and 3 medical experts. The following year, when the events were taking place in Ballinspittle, Ratzinger banned official, diocesan or parish-sponsored pilgrimages to Medugorje. In May 1986, the members of the second Commission voted that they could *not* confirm the supernatural nature

of the apparitions (11 voted “for”, 2 “against”, 1 accepted “in nucleo”, and 1 abstained). In the same year, Ratzinger transferred responsibility for the issue from Žanić to the Yugoslavian Bishops Conference.

In January 1987, Cardinal Kuharić and Bishop Žanić announced the formation of a third Commission comprised of 11 priests, 4 psychologists and one religious sister as secretary. In April 1991, the Yugoslavian Bishops Conference accepted the report of that Commission, (19 bishops voted for, while one abstained) which declared that “so far it cannot be affirmed that one is dealing with supernatural apparitions and revelations”. However, recognizing the large number of pilgrims travelling to Medjugorje, the Bishops also confirmed that “a healthy devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary may be promoted in accordance with the teaching of the Church” and that the Church would continue its investigations. Ratko Perić, who succeeded Žanić as Bishop of Mostar-Duvno in 1993, continued to take the view that the alleged apparitions were not supernatural, which he made clear in a letter to a French Catholic magazine, stating that his “conviction and position is not only non *constat de supernaturalitate* [the supernaturality is not proven] but also the other formula *constat de non supernaturalitate* [the non-supernaturality is proven] of the apparitions or revelations of Medjugorje”. In response, the Secretary of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Archbishop Bertone, wrote that this was only Perić’s “personal opinion”. Perić subsequently produced a long document in which he recounted the major events of Medjugorje, including the personal details of the “so-called visionaries”, the messages and secrets allegedly given to these visionaries, as well as the history of the Church Commissions and interventions. Perić calculated that the number of alleged apparitions had reached a total of 31,860 by December 2002, a phenomenon unprecedented in the history of the Church, which was a major reason for his scepticism.

And so it continued. As did the apparitions. And the pilgrims kept coming, usually in organised pilgrimages along the lines of well-established pilgrimages to Lourdes, Knock, Fatima and other Marian shrines (Foley, 2011). Accurate figures on the number of pilgrims are not available, although websites claim that over 40 million people have visited Medjugorje since 1981 and that over one million pilgrims visit every year. Some 20,000 pilgrims travel from Ireland every year, compared to the 50,000–70,000 Irish pilgrims that travel to Lourdes, with one private tour operator having 85% of the market. While the tours might not be officially sanctioned, they are routinely organised by groups within parishes and dioceses,

and are typically punctuated by prayers and religious services, while a number of Catholic priests are invariably available for “spiritual direction”.

According to Wikipedia, over a thousand hotel and hostel beds are available for pilgrims, while Figure 1 shows the number of concelebrating priests in Medjugorje.

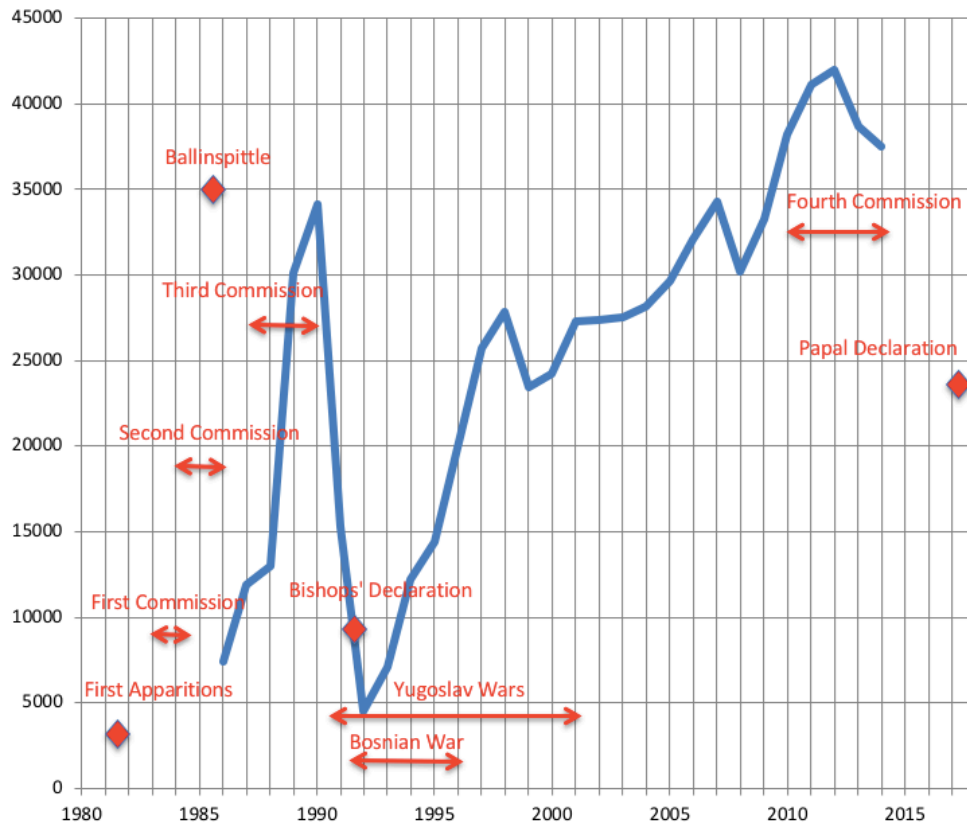


Figure 1. Number of concelebrating priests in Medjugorje

In 2008, the Vatican authorized “severe cautionary and disciplinary measures” against the priest who had served as spiritual director to the visionaries, sanctioning him “for the diffusion of dubious doctrine, manipulation of consciences, suspicious mysticism, disobedience toward legitimately issued orders” as well as charges that he violated the Sixth Commandment.

The Vatican established a fourth commission in 2010 to examine the Medjugorje phenomenon. Chaired by Cardinal Camillo Ruini, it consisted of five cardinals, five theologians, two psychologists, an anthropologist, a Mariologist, and a canonist. Bishop Perić was not a member. Three years later, the Papal Nuncio (Vatican Ambassador) felt it necessary to advise the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops “that clerics and the faithful are not permitted to participate in meetings, conference or public celebrations during which the credibility of such ‘apparitions’ would be taken for granted”. In January 2014, Fr.

Lombardi announced that the Commission had had its last meeting and would “submit the outcomes of its study to the Congregation [for the Doctrine of the Faith]”. In June 2015, Pope Francis told reporters that “we’ve reached the point of making a decision” though it was a further two years, in May 2017, before any decision was announced. The Ruini Commission distinguished between the original apparition phenomenon and its subsequent development and voted 13-1 in favour of recognising the supernatural nature of the first seven appearances in Medjugorje. However, it was divided on the supernatural nature of later events, a position subsequently endorsed by Pope Francis. The Commission also recommended that the ban on pilgrimages organised in Medjugorje be ended, that an authority dependent on the Holy See be established in Medjugorje, and that the parish be transformed into a pontifical sanctuary. This recommendation was “based on pastoral reasons – the care of millions of pilgrims, avoiding the formation of ‘parallel churches’, clarity on economic issues – which would not imply the recognition of the supernatural nature of the apparitions”. While the Pope’s personal opinion was that the later “alleged apparitions have no great value,” he acknowledged “‘the spiritual fact, the pastoral fact’ that thousands of pilgrims go to Medjugorje and are converted. ‘For this there is no magic wand; this spiritual-pastoral fact cannot be denied’”. Bishop Peric continued to argue that nothing supernatural ever occurred in Medjugorje, posting the following on his diocesan website on Feb 16, 2017: “Considering everything that this chancery has so far researched and studied, including the first seven days of the alleged apparitions, it can peacefully be affirmed: The Madonna has not appeared in Medjugorje!”.

Making Sense of the Uncanny

Axiomatically, the uncanny is un-understandable, at least when initially experienced. What interests us here is how the uncanny is transformed into something sensible, and, in particular, what “marketing” might mean in that process and context. We have already distinguished between the fictional and non-fictional uncanny, with the former most commonly found in literature and film. From the consumer’s perspective, the uncanny is vicariously consumed in fiction, and so the experience necessarily requires a *mediator*, such as a script-writer, film production team, or a magician playing tricks on an audience. In this case, the consumer typically understands the uncanny as fictional, which frames the whole consumption experience. Hence, the fictional uncanny is a contrived production, and can be packaged and branded using a slew of available marketing techniques. In this way, tall tales are re-told and retailed. However, the fictional uncanny is not our concern here.

When there is no apparent mediator, we have the non-fictional (or real) uncanny, as we find in the case of Ballinspittle and Medjugorje. The experiences recounted in Ballinspittle were personal and consistent. Here, the local policeman recounts, in 2015, his original scepticism when he was first told about the phenomenon:

“The following morning I went up there and checked out that statue. I felt like someone was playing tricks on me and I was amazed to find no wires or trickery there at all. I was so convinced this was a hoax I had searched behind the statue and also tried to move it,” he said. “It wouldn’t budge.”

So, one explanation is that the phenomenon is a hoax, with an unseen mediator playing tricks. Even if one dismisses this, one can still employ rational rather than supernatural explanations, such as when the Bishop of Killala invoked the science of ophthalmology to explain the statue’s apparent movement. More generally, highly unlikely coincidences – which create an uncanny experience – can be explained by appealing to the “law of truly large numbers”, which asserts that if the sample size is large enough then almost any outrageous event is bound to occur (Diaconis and Mosteller, 1989). We refer to such rational, “scientific” explanations as *secular*.

However, highly unlikely coincidences, and similar uncanny phenomenon, might also be used to justify a belief in the paranormal or supernatural (Rushnell, 2003). Here, we move into the realm of the sacred, which requires us to explicate the distinction and relationship between the uncanny and the sacred, not least because the sacred is the central concept in marketing’s engagement with the literature on the sacralisation of the secular.

The two concepts are closely connected, though they are also different in important ways. The dictionary tells us that the uncanny refers to the “strange or mysterious, especially in an unsettling way”, while its synonyms include words like preternatural, supernatural, unearthly, other-worldly, unreal, odd and weird. The word “sacred” shares none of these synonyms, but, like the uncanny, is certainly linked with the unearthly in that its dictionary meaning is given as “connected with God or a god or dedicated to a religious purpose and so deserving veneration”. If the uncanny is unfamiliar and potentially dangerous, then sacralisation can be understood as a process through which the uncanny is tamed, domesticated and made familiar.

We begin by summarising the attributes of the sacred, drawing on the extensive writings on the subject. For Durkheim, the sacred-profane dichotomy was foundational to all religions,

which he famously defined as “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them” (Durkheim, 1915/1995: 47). Moreover, he argued that

All known religious beliefs, whether simple or complex, present one common characteristic: they presuppose a classification of all things, real and ideal, of which men think, into two classes or opposed groups, generally designated by two distinct terms which are translated well enough by the words *profane* and *sacred* (Durkheim, 1915/1995: 37, original emphasis).

The anthropologist Malinowski concurs: “In every primitive community, studied by trustworthy and competent observers, there have been found two clearly distinguishable domains, the Sacred and the Profane; in other words, the domain of Magic and Religion and that of Science” (Malinowski, 1948: 17). However, subsequent scholars have taken issue with this essentialism and universalism, with Evans-Pritchard (1937/1976; 1940) arguing that “religion” and distinctions between the natural and supernatural, or between the sacred and profane, were not features of tribes like the Azande or the Nuer. Goody (1961) also rejected Durkheim’s foundationalist view, arguing that many societies do not have words equivalent to sacred or profane and that the sacred-profane dichotomy, as well as distinctions between the natural and supernatural – and, by extension, the conceptual carapace framing the idea of the sacred – are more a feature of European religious thought rather than a universal aspect of all religions.

Yet it would be imprudent to jettison the concept of the sacred, even if we don’t buy Durkheim’s notion that the sacred-profane distinction is an essential and basic feature of all religions. This makes much sense because the sacred and its associated constellation of terms still provides an important framing device for thinking about individual and social phenomena (Eliade, 1959/1961; Girard, 1977/1995; Acquaviva, 1979; Walsh, 2011; Taylor, 2007). It is perhaps no surprise that anthropologists and sociologists of religion continue to use the concept, but it also features in the consumer behaviour literature, most notably in Belk et al’s (1989) seminal paper on *The Sacred and the Profane in Consumer Behavior*.

Unlike Belk et al, we distinguish between “substantial” and “situational” understandings of the sacred, where the former sees religious phenomena as categorically distinct. Thus, our focus is on comparing and analysing the connection between the (substantial) sacred with the

unmediated uncanny. In Ballinspittle, the individuals who apparently saw the statue move had an unmediated experience while others experienced the uncanny vicariously. From the outset, Ballinspittle had a religious dimension – after all, it was a statue of the Virgin Mary that apparently moved – and so we can say that Ballinspittle was a site of the *latently sacred*, in contrast to Lourdes which is *manifestly* sacred. At least initially, those travelling to Ballinspittle were not pilgrims – even if the vast majority were Catholics – and instead it appears as if most were curious onlookers, aroused by the possibility of experiencing an apparition. Pilgrims, in this sense, are consuming the sacred rather than experiencing the uncanny. Over time, Medjugorje has come to be sacred – not least because the six visionaries have allegedly continued to receive messages and visions – and so the site has transitioned from the latently to the manifestly sacred.

Armed with these distinctions, we can now more carefully compare the substantial sacred and the unmediated uncanny. Hereafter, we will drop but assume the adjectives “substantial” and “unmediated”.

The sacred and the uncanny share a number of properties though there are also important differences. The first property of the sacred is the notion of *hierophany*, which, according to Eliade (1958: 7) is “the *act of manifestation* of the sacred . . . i.e., that *something sacred shows itself to us*”. This sense of display, of becoming visible, is also a property of the uncanny, with the important additional feature that the uncanny “ought to have remained secret and hidden” (Freud, 1919/2001: 224). Since the sacred “shows itself”, Belk et al (1989: 6) interpret hierophany as meaning that, “phenomenologically, people do not create sacred things”. However, this interpretation is not supported by the cases studied here, as evidenced by the elaborate and protracted social process through which the uncanny becomes (or does not become) sacred. In particular, the Medjugorje case shows how “becoming sacred” is both a social and an institutional process, involving a “bottom up” mobilisation of large numbers of pilgrims, while the Catholic hierarchy ambiguously distanced itself and engaged with the phenomenon.

Both the sacred and the uncanny involve *objectification*, or the translation of elements of mundane existence into a transcendental frame of reference. Similarly, both share the property of *kratophany*, or the capacity to elicit strong approach and avoidance tendencies, creating an overwhelming power. However, kratophany occurs more acutely in the case of the uncanny, with the tension between the approach and avoidance tendencies creating an overall lack of orientation that is not manifest in the sacred. Mystery is also a property of

both the sacred and the uncanny, in so far as neither can be understood cognitively. However, they command very different emotional responses: if “the sacred commands love, devotion, fear, and related spiritual or emotional responses” (Belk et al., 1989: 7) the uncanny brings an overwhelming feeling of uncertainty and fear, rather than love or devotion.

Some properties are not shared by the sacred and the uncanny. One important difference is that while the extraordinary sacred is partly defined by its opposition to the ordinary profane, the uncanny is defined by its opposition to (or commingled with) the *familiar*, which is not necessarily the same as the profane. Likewise, while beneficent and evil sacred things have the power to contaminate through contact – for example, “holy” water from Lourdes – this is not an attribute of the uncanny. In other words, the property of contamination only emerges once the uncanny is translated into the sacred. Neither is sacrifice a property of the uncanny, though it is of the sacred, as, for instance, in the sacrificial self-abnegation of pilgrims crawling to a sacred shrine. Myths also play quite a different role in both phenomena. They not only document the status of the sacred but also partly constitute that status. In contrast, the uncanny is pre-mythological, preceding both narrative and theory, which is why Masschelein (2011) terms it an “unconcept”. Similarly, while ritual is an important attribute of the sacred, manifest as rules of conduct prescribing how one should conduct oneself in the presence of sacred objects, such rules of conduct are absent in the uncanny, simply because there is no time for such rules to be formalised. Indeed if following rules and ritual is an important feature of the sacred, the uncanny is a moment when rules appear to break down; or, as Royle (2003: , p. 1) puts it, the uncanny is a “crisis of the proper”. And this crisis extends to the deepest sense of identity, with the uncanny upsetting an individual’s sense of being. In contrast, individuals feel emotionally attached to the sacred, which therefore becomes important to, and constitutive of, their identity.

There are also properties that seem to ambiguously relate to both phenomenon. For instance, *communitas* is a well-recognised feature of the sacred, and captures the idea that the sacred creates a transcending camaraderie of equals, with participating individuals freed from their usual roles and statuses. The unmediated uncanny is a profoundly personal rather than collective experience and so the notion of *communitas* does not apply here. That said, *communitas* is very much a feature of the *vicarious* consumption of the uncanny and is also a feature of pilgrimages to sacred places. Moreover, even in the case of the unmediated uncanny, there were cases in Ballinspittle where multiple individuals apparently had the same experience of seeing the statute move and, in this case, there was also presumably a sense of

communitas. Similarly, the sacred has the capacity to produce an ecstatic experience, wherein one stands outside one's self, which seems to be somewhat similar, but not the same as, the numinous (which speaks more to the idea of religious dread or awe rather than ecstasy or flow).

Some of Heidegger's ideas are also helpful in drawing out this relationship between the uncanny and the sacred. In extending Freud's notion of the *unheimlich*, Heidegger asserts that the fundamental character of our being in the world is uncanny, unhomely, or not-at-home: "*From an existential-ontological point of view, the 'not-at-home' must be conceived as the more primordial phenomenon*" (Heidegger, 1927/1962: 234, original emphasis). The uncanny comes first, but we all work individually and collectively to cover the fundamental groundlessness of our existence by embracing what one might call "fantasies of familiarity", such as, in the cases studied here, successful or unsuccessful constructions of the sacred.

Mediating the Uncanny

Mediators play an important role in constructing and maintaining these "fantasies of familiarity". If the real uncanny is unmediated, then the translation to the sacred necessarily involves mediating practices and actors. In the vicarious consumption of the uncanny, the mediating role is taken by the scriptwriter and director of the horror movie, or the magician playing uncanny tricks on an audience. In the case of Medjugorje, where the uncanny was slowly translated into the sacred, the mediating role was taken by two key actors: first, by marketplace actors such as pilgrimage tour operators who used routine marketing practices to promote the site to pilgrims, and, second, by the Catholic Church which judiciously asserted its traditional right to mediate the authority of a transcendent God and, through its actions and statements, to performatively constitute the sacred. What is perhaps most interesting about the uncanny is that it exists without a mediator; once mediators come into play the uncanny becomes something else – perhaps, but not necessarily, the sacred. This is why it is important not to subsume the uncanny into the sacred, but to see the two concepts as analytically distinct.

We have argued that, as students of consumption and marketing, it is worth distinguishing between the "situational" and "substantial" analysis of the sacred.² Situational analysis is very much the dominant approach within consumer and marketing research, and is exemplified by Belk et al.'s assertion that, "Anything, may become sacred" (Belk et al., 1989: 13), with "anything" being something as apparently mundane as a collection of Mickey

Mouse memorabilia (p. 30). Accordingly, they have no truck with the substantial-situational distinction, arguing that:

For many contemporary consumers, there are also elements of life with no connection to formal religion that are nonetheless revered, feared, and treated with the utmost respect. Examples include flags, sports stars, national parks, art, automobiles, museums, and collections. Whether we call the reverence for these things religious, contemporary consumers treat them as set apart, extraordinary, or sacred, just as elements of nature are sacred in naturistic religions and certain icons are sacred to followers of contemporary, organized religions. (p. 2)

However, once anything can become sacred, the term and its associated set of concepts can be applied *ad nauseum*: a holiday becomes a pilgrimage, a habit becomes a ritual, an ordinary object becomes extraordinary, a sentimental gift becomes a sacred thing, a department store becomes a cathedral, an item added to a collection becomes ennobled. And while an heirloom can undoubtedly be described as “sacred” – in that it has special meaning for an individual – this understanding of the term fails to do justice to the stories of Ballinspittle and Medugorje, which, crucially, are distinguished by the uncanny. This is perhaps best illustrated when we consider the notion of kratophany, or the sense of an overwhelming power, which is an essential feature of both the sacred and the uncanny. Notwithstanding the scale of the Odyssey project and the amount of data collected, the only evidence of kratophany presented was of a seven-year old boy who was frightened to go into the room where his father kept his collection of Mickey Mouse items (Belk et al. 1989: 23). That, however, seems qualitatively different from a terminally ill person visiting Medugorje, hoping for a miracle. And that hope is real, not least because there have been about 7000 cases of unexplained cures in Lourdes, of which 69 cases have been recognized as miraculous by the Catholic Church, most recently in 2013. To gloss over – or to not recognize – this difference is to make a significant category error.

In social science, the terms *emic* and the *etic* are used to differentiate the native’s point of view from the social scientist’s interpretation. However, what these terms mask, and what our discussion on the uncanny highlights, is the social scientist’s role in mediating uncanny and sacred phenomena. Consider, for instance, a social scientist studying a nun blessing herself with what she believes to be holy water. While the water is sacred for the nun – the *emic* position – this belief is not shared by the social scientist – the *etic* position – who instead

believes that the water's "powers" are confined to the community of believers, and that other communities will ascribe a similar power to other "sacred" objects. Moreover, while the social scientist recognises that the holy water is meaningful (or meaning-full) for the nun, it is devoid of at least three properties of the sacred *for the social scientist*: hierophany (the sacred showing itself), kratophany (the sacred's overwhelming power) and mystery. In other words, the water is sacred for the nun, but not for the social scientist. And if theorizing is axiomatically about holding beliefs in ultimate *uncertainty*, then the social scientist has to reject the concept of the truly sacred because this is axiomatically characterized by immediate *certainty*. Of course the nun may be profoundly wrong in her religious and metaphysical interpretation of events, but her point of view is still important, not least because, as Thomas's theorem puts it, "if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Thomas and Thomas, 1928: 572).

In adopting the situationalist view that anything can become sacred, marketing scholarship sits comfortably – perhaps too comfortably – within the tradition of twentieth-century social science that positions modernity as essentially hostile to religions and assumes an inevitable, global secularization. We now live, as Charles Taylor (2007) puts it, in a secular age where belief in God is merely one position among others. The difficulty with this thesis is that it doesn't accord with the empirical reality, except, perhaps, in secular Europe, which is now probably best seen as an exception in a world where religion continues to play a central role. And even in Europe – given the millions of pilgrims that visit Marian shrines – one would be unwise to assume that religious beliefs and practices are irrelevant vestiges from the pre-modern, destined to inevitably and inexorably decline. For instance, the number of reported Marian apparitions worldwide *increased* from 299 in the 34 years between 1945 and 1979, to 393 in the 19 years between 1980 and 1999, with the US percentage of the worldwide total increasing from 7% to 38% (Apolito, 2005: 27). Faced with this and similar data, social scientists in the twenty-first century have been scrambling to make sense of the role of religion in what many are now describing as a "post-secular" world (Habermas, 2006; Areshidze, 2017; Fordahl, 2016). But while it has been easy to invoke a new label, it has proven more difficult for social scientists to make sense of this world while remaining true to the precepts of social science. Part of the problem is the peculiarly Western idea that one can somehow step outside religious experience, objectify it and mediate the phenomenon through theorizing. As the historian of religion, Jonathan Z. Smith, put it:

While there is a staggering amount of data, phenomena, of human experiences

and expressions that might be characterized in one culture or another, by one criterion or another, as religious, there is no data for religion. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no existence apart from the academy. (Smith, 1982: xi)

Timothy Fitzgerald (2000) makes a similar point arguing that when the category of religion is used in non-theological (contemporary) scholarship, it has little if any analytical purchase and is likely to confuse rather than illuminate:

One finds in the published work of scholars working within religion departments the term 'religion' being used to refer to such diverse institutions as totems, the principle of hierarchy, Christmas cakes, witchcraft, unconditioned reality, the rights of man, the National Essence, Marxism and Freudianism, the tea ceremony, nature, ethics, and so on. But it seems obvious that these have very little in common in the abstract and that each can only be understood as institutions or ideologies that require interpretation in highly specific cultural contexts. In this case I argue that 'religion' dissolves or ought to dissolve without remainder into ideology or culture understood as institutionalized values and symbolic systems (Fitzgerald, 2000: 17)

Thus Fitzgerald, seeing no coherent concept of "religion", considers that the term should be scrapped, at least within academia. He takes a similar view on the sacred, distinguishing between a theological and non-theological use of the word (broadly equivalent to Chidester and Linenthal's (1995) distinction between "substantial" and "situational" analysis of the sacred). In the former, objects, places and times are sacred because they are in some way related to God or the transcendent. But when the word is used in a non-theological sense, then what is being said is that things are considered sacred by a community because they symbolize the community's values, or provide fundamental ways through which the community thinks about itself and the world. In this case, the researcher's legitimate role is "to try to understand these collective values in the context of their actual institution in society" (Fitzgerald, 2000: 17). But then words like "sacred" and "religion" should be avoided – given their theological resonances – and instead one should simply speak of the community's collective values or the "inner" experiential dimension of religion (Dubuisson, 2003; Smith, 1962/1991). This problematises the whole "sacralisation of the secular" project and its particular instantiation in the marketing literature. The issue is important because,

while the social scientist or marketing scholar may seek to be agnostic about the merits, veracity or value of particular religious beliefs, the empirical reality is that religious beliefs continue to provide a primary basis for the identity of many communities across the world, but also, and more worryingly, are at the root of much contemporary civil unrest and warfare.

Discussion and Conclusion

The sphere of the numinous, of the uncanny, is *ganz Andere*, or “wholly other” to human experience. While this characterization is routine in theological reflections that conceive the deity as transcendent, it is intrinsically bothersome in social science generally and marketing scholarship in particular. This is not necessarily a problem, and, perhaps appropriately, it is good that the uncanny has the capacity to unsettle our deepest understandings of the nature of inquiry.

This unsettling extends to the concept of the uncanny itself, which is quite different from any particular *instance* of the uncanny. This is precisely why Jentsch eschews any attempt to define its essence:

Such a conceptual explanation would have very little value. The main reason for this is that the same impression does not necessarily exert an uncanny effect on everybody. Moreover, the same perception on the part of the same individual does not necessarily develop into the ‘uncanny’ every time, or at least not every time in the same way. (Jentsch, 1906/1997: 8)

Notwithstanding this epistemological difficulty, Jentsch proceeds to assert that this “does not mean to say that it would be impossible to give a working definition of the concept of the ‘uncanny,’ since one can perhaps suppose that the impression which generates the feeling will be constituted along the same lines for a certain psycho-physiological group” (p. 8).

Masschelein is much less confident, asserting that the uncanny “renders a sense of being in touch with ‘nonthinking’” (Masschelein, 2011: 11), which, when added to the uncanny’s lexical ambivalence, leads her to conclude the term is best understood as a “negative concept” (similar to the unconscious) or as an *unconcept*. This idea also speaks to the way that every attempt to conceptualise the uncanny “is doubled and also determined by failing conceptualizations” (ibid), or, alternatively, is a form of knowledge permanently linked to its negative and thus implicitly evokes the chaotic, the unknowable and unrepresentable.

Our understanding of marketing the unconcept that it is the uncanny is similarly unsettled. While the Odyssey project documented expeditious and almost “do-it-yourself” sacralization practices, the stories of Ballinspittle and Medugorje – and of other mystical sightings of Mary – show that sacralization of the uncanny within a religious community is likely to be torturously slow, highly contested, enfolded in a heritage of beliefs extending over millenia, and a popular and institutional activity infused with power and politics. The Catholic Church was the focal organisation in our cases, but it largely absented itself from any “marketing” activity and was ambiguous if not hostile to what were potentially “consumers” of its “product”. (Understandably so, for if the visions in Medugorje were officially recognised but subsequently exposed as a fake, then doubts would be raised about the authenticity of other shrines, Church authority, and perhaps deeper religious beliefs). Moreover, if marketing is fundamentally a *mediating* practice (Loacker and Sullivan, 2016; Moor, 2008), then it has little or no role in the direct, unmediated experience of the really uncanny and only begins to be mobilized as the uncanny becomes (or does not become) sacralised. Hence we introduce the idea of *unmarketing* to capture the idea that the uncanny is an unhomely place for marketing, at least as conventionally understood, and for marketing scholarship, given its grounding in social science. Religion and the sacred, in contrast, are homely places for both marketing practice and theory.

This study has retrieved the uncanny as an important and distinct concept that is associated with particular forms of (religious) consumption, as illustrated by two narratives of uncanny happenings. In distinguishing between the uncanny and the sacred, and in explicating the translation of one into the other, our analysis has added to the existing literature that has largely focused on the marketing and consumption of the sacred. The analysis distinguishes between vicarious and mediated consumption of the uncanny and reaffirms the importance of Chidester and Linenthal’s (1995) distinction between “situational” and “substantial” analysis of the sacred. Of course we can still do a “situational” analysis of the cases, without recourse to the supernatural or terms like numinous, *ganz Andere*, or *mysterium tremendum*, and indeed we saw how the Ballinspittle story can be narrated through a secular appeal to physiological or sociological explanations. However, this paper argues that this “common-sense” view of things is an unsatisfactory and insufficient way of understanding the complexity of the phenomena. This is timely and important, given the unique hold that religious beliefs – which are a potent, peculiar and intoxicating admixture of the uncanny and the sacred – continue to have on what we might describe as consumers.

Notes

- 1 Data was collected similar to the method followed in the Ballinspittle case, though a much larger body of material was available on Medjugorje.
- 2 Similarly, Iacobucci (2001) distinguishes between the 's'acred (extraordinary consumption experiences) and the 'S'acred (a "narrower instantiation of the 's'acred, specifically involving an individual's experience with religion, spirituality, worship, and God" (p. 110)). Having analysed the marketing literature, she concludes that consumer behaviour researchers have "rarely documented the 'S'acred" (ibid).

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