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# CHRISTIAN AND SECULAR VALUES FOR SALE: THE RELIGIOUS APOSTASY OF CELEBRITY AND DISNEY'S "HANNAH MONTANA" STAR MILEY CYRUS

## ABSTRACT

Religious apostasy is a complex phenomenon that becomes even more obscure when it involves public figures in the media industry with economic interests at stake. A paradigmatic case is that of American singer Miley Cyrus, who went from being a famous religious role model for conservative American evangelical Christians to becoming a secular and liberal celebrity, playing in highly sexualized live shows and videos. Drawing on a complementary use of sociological, economic and language theories of value, this paper explores Cyrus' religious apostasy as a transformation from a Christian commodity to a secular one. Our study shows that, while for the industry, be it Christian or secular, Cyrus' sociological and language values are always subsidiary to her economic value as a commodity, for Christian consumers, her economic value depends on her social and language values.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

American singer, songwriter and actress, Miley Cyrus – a.k.a. Hannah Montana – is a current teen idol who transitioned from the evangelical Christian market to the secular one in such a successful manner that she became the 17<sup>th</sup> “most powerful celebrity”, earning just USD 36 million in 2014 (Forbes 2014a). Currently, she has 32.1 million followers on Twitter (being the 29<sup>th</sup> most followed) and over 46 million likes on Facebook. In November 2013, *Time* magazine chose her as one of the finalists for “Person of the year”. In 2014, a college in the United States of America announced a sociology course on Miley Cyrus, in which she would be used “as a lens through which to explore sociological thinking about identity, entertainment, media and fame” (ABC News 2014). Despite all this, Cyrus is probably best known for her continuous highly sexualized shows, videos and media appearances. This is in sharp contrast to her first years as a celebrity, during which she was very vocal about her Christian faith and wore a purity ring.

In 2009 and 2010, Cyrus underwent a public transformation that meant an important turn in her career. She stopped being the chaste God girl with faith in Jesus to become a “wannabe” sex symbol. This change altered United States of America’s public perceptions of her significantly. The until-then faithful evangelical audience rejected her. The secular market, however, welcomed a new idol. Taking Cyrus’ public discourse and behaviour as reported by Christian and secular media, this paper presents a short narrative of her public identity change and analyses the interplay of the social, moral, and economic values at stake in Cyrus’ transition from the evangelical to the secular market.

## 2. RATIONALE

### 2.1 Religion and the market: A complex relationship

Religious power, religious bodies, and religious media are somehow conditioned, if not determined, by the capitalist mode of production and the consumer culture developed during the second half of the twentieth century. This is as true in Western civilization (Miller & Miller 2005) as it is in non-Western countries (Usunier & Stolz 2014:27), with Turkey being simply one example of the latter (Izberk-Bilgin 2013). In the United States of America, the effects of consumerism has had so far for Christian religion are well known: the commodification of religion and the individualization of belief (Miller & Miller 2005). However, religion has also been able to shape consumer culture, introducing spiritual commodities in a market used to

sell only material artefacts (Cusack 2015). It has been argued that “religious consumption is not a subset of cultural consumption nor of religious practice but is some combination of both” (Park & Baker 2007:).

Market researchers and scholars of religion have taken up the challenge to study the realities and complexities of the relationship between religion and the market from different perspectives. Recent scholarship ranges from churches using marketing language to rethink their own activity (Dobocan 2015), to the influence on consumers of religious labels on food packaging (Rauschnabel *et al.* 2015), including the use of social theorist Pierre Bourdieu’s work for the analysis of the relationship between religion, social class, and power (Rey 2004), and for the study of identity crises of religious people, due to the conflict between traditional religion and modern consumer culture (McAlexander *et al.* 2014). However, despite this broad range of scholarly work, the study of the relationship between religion, the commodification of culture, and capitalism “remains under-theorized” (Thomas 2009).

## 2.2 The case of Cyrus’ apostasy

The case of Cyrus’ apostasy presents a higher degree of complexity when compared to the examples listed earlier. Cyrus’ case cannot be reduced to a single social group or an institution such as the church, because it includes a celebrity – Cyrus herself –, both secular and Christian consumers, and both the Christian and secular media industry. Moreover, Cyrus’ example is not a case of simply a one-way relationship, in which the object of study is the effects material products or modern ideologies have in a certain demographic. On the contrary, Cyrus’ story presents itself as a web of religious, cultural, and economic relationships between different agents in multiple directions.

In order to analyse Cyrus’ apostasy from multiple perspectives without turning to a set of multiple theories not always capable of dialogue among them, there is the need for an integral approach that accounts for the material and quantifiable aspects of Cyrus’ public identity change as well as for the immaterial-spiritual qualitative aspects. It is our understanding that such an integral approach can be built on the category of value. Value as a category is present in quantitative approaches to reality such as economics and mathematics, and in qualitative approaches such as ethics, law and semiotics. What varies is the different understanding and use of “value”. From an anthropological point of view, however, it is possible to talk about and try to combine different theories of value concerned with specific spheres of human life.

### 2.3 Value and values

Traditionally, social theory has talked about “value” in three ways (Graeber 2001:1):

- “Values” in the sociological sense: Conceptions of what is ultimately good, proper or desirable in human life.
- “Value” in the economic sense: The degree to which objects are desired, particularly as measured by how much others are willing to give up to get them.
- “Value” in the linguistic sense: This goes back to the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure (1966), and might be simply termed “meaningful difference”.

Following Graeber’s study on values, we note that values in the sociological sense are “conceptions of the desirable” (Kluckhohn, quoted by Graeber 2001:3) that guide people’s lives. By desirable, in this instance, is meant not only what people actually want, but what

they ought to want: [t]hey are the criteria by which people judge which desires they consider legitimate and worthwhile and which they do not (Graeber 2001:3).

Thus, values have “direct effects on people’s actual behavior” (Graeber 2001:3). In order to understand how different values influence human behaviour, Kluckhohn mentioned “value orientations”: “assumptions about the ends and purposes of human existence” (Graeber 2001:3), about what life should be. In Graeber’s words, thanks to Kluckhohn, cultures, in general, can be understood as different “moral projects” (Graeber 2001:22) for the world and its inhabitants.

Regarding value in the economic sense, Marx’s insights are fundamental. Marx opened *Das Kapital* with the assertion that, in capitalist societies, wealth – that which is valuable – “appears as an immense collection of commodities” (Marx & Fowkes 1977:125). The commodity is then the object of value in a market economy. A deeper analysis shows that, in fact, a commodity bears or contains three types of dialectically interrelated values. First, the use-value refers to the “usefulness of a thing” (Marx & Fowkes 1977:126). Secondly, the exchange-value measures the “quantitative relation” (Marx & Fowkes 1977:126) between different kinds of use-values; thus Marx wrote, “as use-values, commodities differ above all in quality, while as exchange-values they can only differ in quantity” (Marx & Fowkes 1977:128). The third type of value in a commodity is what Marx simply calls “value”. This represents the “socially necessary

labor-time” (Marx & Fowkes 1977:129) required to produce a certain commodity. In other words, how much time human work usually requires for a certain society to manufacture a certain commodity. In conclusion, market values are the conjunction of qualitative and quantitative notions of value materialized in the commodity.

The key to the linguistic notion of value is “meaningful difference”. In this instance, the meaning of the word is its value. What exactly is meant by this differs, depending on the school of thought. Graeber (2001:13) explained that social anthropologists such as E.E. Evans-Pritchard argued that the “value” (the meaning) of a word varies with context and that with each context the value of a word carries a certain emotional load that can result in a certain type of behaviour by the subject. The structuralist tradition, for its part, understands the value of a word in a “negative” sense. By this, structuralists mean “that words take on meaning only by contrast with other words in the same language” (Graeber 2001:13). It is the place, which a word or object occupies in the whole system, that determines the meaning/value. In conclusion, it is clear that both approaches understand that value (meaning) is anything but fixed: it depends on social and linguistic circumstances at least. While structuralists are more interested in syntactics for shedding light on the semantics (meaning-value), Evans-Pritchard focused on the effects of the semantics (values) over pragmatics (subject’s actions/behaviour).

These different theories of value offer the possibility of an integral analysis of Cyrus’ identity change, if we allow them to complement each other dialectically. Social values such as, among others, morality, spirituality, religion and ethics add a cultural dimension to the Marxist triadic notion of the value characteristic of commodities. Each product for sale in the market not only encapsulates the use value, the exchange value and the (socially necessary labour time) value, but also contains a social/cultural value. As Graeber (2001:16) wrote,

in a consumer society, marketing is often a matter of creating symbolic distinctions between products that are otherwise virtually identical

and, we can add, thus justify to the consumer’s eyes price differences between virtually identical commodities.

## 2.4 Methodology

This explanatory case study is built on primary and secondary sources, as well as on a qualitative analysis using the theoretical apparatus described earlier. First, the reader will find a basic historical context of the development

of the evangelical Christian market in the United States of America. For this, we draw on a couple of papers that showed how first the Christian and later the secular industry targeted conservative evangelicals as both believers and consumers. Secondly, we present Cyrus' identity change as revealed in her public discourse reported by the mass media, analysed with the value theories already mentioned. Our purpose is to better uncover the interplay of social, economic, and linguistic values that took place in the process of Cyrus becoming a secular commodity and leaving behind the evangelical market.

### 3. THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA EVANGELICAL MARKET

How American evangelicals stopped being ignored by the market and became a very profitable target is the first story in Hendershot's book *Shaking the world for Jesus* (2004:31-33). By 1980, the secular market ignored evangelicals, despite their economic potential as consumers. The reasons for this had nothing to do with economic values, but with social and language-meaning values. At the time, the entertainment industry saw evangelicals as a danger for various reasons. They were ready to boycott in order to pull out some shows from television: "they were willing to be non-consumers with a vengeance" (Hendershot 2004:33). Moreover, evangelicals were viewed as a threat to the separation of church and state. Finally, evangelicals were stereotyped as low-class persons.

Both the secular market and the secular media, in general, ignored evangelicals. This was a problem, given their clear intentions to influence United States of America politics through the Moral Majority movement and others (Armstrong 2001). They thus started to promote an image change among themselves and to create their own shows intended to replace mainstream media programmes. Now there were fewer reasons to continue organizing boycotts, because they had their own Christian products, which, leaving aside their possible contribution to their political interests, surely helped "create a place at the table of middle-class consumer culture for American evangelicals" (Hendershot 2004:32).

For Dr James C. Dobson, founder of a Christian organization called "Focus on the Family", the production of Christian media was a very lucrative business. His organization's income was \$78 million in 1992 and \$101 in 1995 (Hendershot 2004:34). Focus on the family targeted "bourgeois consumers, not Bible-thumping boycotters" (Hendershot 2004:34), because, beyond secular stereotypes, a study in the late 1990s showed that evangelicals tended to earn more and have more education

than secular people (Smith, quoted by Hendershot 2004:31). They simply had different values.

The manner in which the Christian industry created products for an evangelical audience showed the path for secular corporations to target evangelicals with success. The formula was to mix an evangelical content – filled with Christian-conservative values – and a current format that resembled the rest of the shows. A modern packaging of Christian products gave evangelicals the sense that they “belong in the modern world” (Hendershot 2004:34), obtaining simultaneously the best of both the evangelical and secular worlds.

From a values perspective, this first stage was clearly determined by social and language values. Secular corporations’ inability to understand evangelical language-meaning values along with corporations’ rejection of evangelical social and moral values created a wall between these two agents that impeded any transaction of values in the economic sense. Despite secular corporations’ need for profits and the availability of economic values in the evangelical consumer niche, it was the difference in secular and religious social and language-meaning values that directed both sides’ behaviour. It was only in a context free of dissonance in social and language values (the Christian industry producing cultural goods for Christians), when profit became a motive to produce social and language-meaning values in order to pursue economic gain from Christian consumers.

### 3.1 Evangelicals attack Disney

In her paper, Juschka described the conflicting relationship between the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), the largest evangelical denomination in the United States of America (Stetzer 2015), and the Walt Disney Company since 1984, when the latter abandoned traditional American family values and adopted corporate values. Until then, Disney, a key agent in the production of American values, was consistent in portraying

family values that included only heterosexuality, the patriarchal male role, a mother-father partnership that was headed by the male, and traditional submissive female roles (Juschka 2001:31).

But as American society changed, so did Disney media products:

Successful, decisive, ambitious, worldly, arrogant, and wealthy were the markers of the new heroic male figure, while the symbolism of Americanism itself was productivity, consumerism, technological superiority, wealth, and, interestingly, cultural ecumenism (Juschka 2001:32).

Disney's turn toward more liberal values in the 1980s coincided with the SBC electing a more conservative leadership. And so the war on the family began. In 1995, the Florida Baptist Convention criticized the Disney Company's morality for extending health benefits to same-sex partners. A year later, the SBC called on its members to first boycott Disney products, stores, theme parks and its subsidiary companies, and then to mail Disney letters of disapproval. In 1998, the Texas Board of Education, an organization with a strong SBC leadership, voted to divest 46.4 million dollars' worth of Disney stock. All these attacks made Disney hire a Catholic priest as a consultant (Juschka 2001:23, 30, 34; Hiscock 2005).

In the second stage, social and moral values played both a main and a subsidiary role, with commodities being the object in dispute. As a profit-driven company, Disney understood the need to adopt the new secular and liberal social and moral values in order to obtain economic value from society. In this instance, social values were a means to obtain economic value. In the case of evangelicals, however, economic values were the means to obtain a social value. It was evangelicals' will to fight certain moral values that motivated their economic boycott. Finally, it may be noted, in this instance, how the cultural commodities in dispute embodied a conjunction of sociological, economic and language values with no unique way of interacting with each other, leaving it to the interpreter to decide according to his/her interests and beliefs which value is the means and which value the end.

### 3.2 Disney targets evangelicals

The start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century marked the beginning of a new relationship between Hollywood and evangelicals, as Dupont (2013) showed in her journal article. After avoiding religion for most of its history, Disney knocked on the evangelicals' door with a movie based on the bestselling Christian author C.S. Lewis' book, *The Chronicles of Narnia* (Hiscock 2005). Several reasons pushed Disney to deviate from its corporate policy:

- The need for "a blockbuster hit that could deliver sequels, along the lines of the *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings* films" (Hiscock 2005:).
- The key role evangelicals played in the success in the box office of Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of the Christ* (Dupont 2013:3).
- The American Christian retailing industry represented \$3 billion in 2001 and \$4.63 billion in 2007 (Dupont 2013:3).



- The proven reality that Christian culture could penetrate American mainstream as the bestselling *Left Behind* series of Christian books had demonstrated (Dupont 2013:3).

There was another key factor that encouraged Disney to pursue the evangelical marketshare: *The Chronicles of Narnia* was co-produced with Walden Media, a production company backed by Philip Anschutz, a conservative evangelical billionaire with a moral and spiritual agenda, which included educational and entertainment media without sex, drugs and violence (Dupont 2013:5, 12).

In 2005, when the time to promote the movie arrived, Disney hired Motive Marketing, the same marketing company that ran the campaign for *The Passion of Christ* (Hiscock 2005; Dupont 2013:5). Motive Marketing used churches and key evangelical leaders to publicize the upcoming movie (Dupont 2013:6). These efforts paid off. The film grossed nearly \$300 million in the United States of America and over \$450 million abroad (Dupont 2013:7).

### 3.3 The search for common values

This seems to be the most complex stage so far in the relationship between the secular media industry and evangelicals when analysed from a values perspective. Until now, two antagonistic agents have been collaborating on the production of a cultural commodity that may appeal to both secular and evangelical consumers. The Disney Company followed the capitalistic logic uncovered by Marx, in which economic value is invested in the production of a commodity in order to obtain a greater economic value. In other words, social, moral and linguistic-meaning values are subsidiary of economic values. Walden Media, however, pursued the production of the same commodity motivated by social and moral values in the hope of contributing to the production of a certain type of society – a moral project. Thus, economic values are secondary to social values.

What was needed then was a cultural commodity that embodied certain social and language-meaning values ambiguous enough to be marketed to different consumer niches. This time, both social and economic values at least were primary and secondary, leaving it to language-meaning values to create a cultural commodity capable of appealing to everyone. Was there a common value between The Disney Company and Walden Media? Was there a main value to which all the rest would be secondary? Yes, indeed. It was the commodity (the film), the value of the market.

## 4. THE CASE OF MILEY CYRUS

In 2006, the Disney Company launched *Hannah Montana*, a teen sitcom aired on Disney Channel that lasted four seasons until early 2011. It had more than three million regular TV viewers and netted over \$1 billion annually through merchandise sale and concert tickets (Leichman 2008). It was nominated for the Emmy Award for Outstanding Children's Program from 2007 to 2010 (Wikipedia 2015). The storyline is about a teenage girl singer, played by Miley Cyrus, who has a double life: during the day she is a regular schoolgirl called Miley Stewart, while at night she becomes a famous singer named Hannah Montana. While the show in itself is not explicitly Christian, its star actress, Cyrus, produced a series of overtly Christian and conservative public discourses and practices during those years. Cyrus was a Christian celebrity starring in a neutral secular show.

### 4.1 Christian discourse

Born in 1992, Cyrus is the daughter of country singer Billy Ray Cyrus, considered a devout Christian and the son of a Pentecostal preacher. Hence, in her public discourse, Cyrus has shown dominance of evangelical values in the linguistic sense:

Every day I pray God will show me the doors He wants me to walk through, the people He wants me to talk to, the songs He wants me to sing. I want to be the light He wants me to be in this world (Tubbs 2009).

She declared to the newspaper *USA Today* that faith is “the main thing” in her life and that God had told her to be “a light, a testimony” in Hollywood (Tubbs 2009). In this sense, when a fan asked her if she was Christian, her answer was “perfect” and “spontaneous”:

Yes! We love Jesus! [...] Happy Easter, by the way. He died for our sins. That's how awesome he is. [...] Jesus rocks! That's why we do what we do. [...] Now that I think about it, I do everything for Jesus. We make the YouTube videos for Jesus. We're all about it.

The journalist reporting this news wrote that “her comments should come as no surprise to fans who have been following her career” (Garcia 2008).

### 4.2 Drugs and family

Packed with a clear conservative Christian discourse, Cyrus talked publicly about teens' worries such as drugs, family and sex, conveying evangelical sociological values. For instance, when questioned why stars may take

drugs, she referred to inadequate companies and “losing touch with God”. Cyrus confessed that she was facing the same pressures and temptations as young stars such as Britney Spears and Lindsay Lohan, but, in her case, faith kept her grounded (Riley 2008). Regarding family, Cyrus praised the value and importance of a Christian one (Riley 2008), while the Christian press applauded the fact that the movie made out of her sitcom *Hannah Montana The Movie* was family oriented: “[it is like] the Disney films of the ‘60s that felt like real five-course meals the whole family could go and enjoy” (Arends 2010).

### 4.3 Sex

How could it be otherwise, Cyrus’ language-meaning values regarding sexuality were in tune with evangelical sociological values. According to Hendershot, American evangelicals have been promoting a national abstinence movement since the 1990s. In the evangelical world, “chastity” is the language-value used, because it is taught as a matter of religious identity. The same practice, however, is framed as a health issue when presented to the secular world and thus, the word “abstinence” is used. This moral issue found political support in Washington:

[t]he pro-abstinence Bush administration pushed for increased funding, and by 2002 annual federal spending on abstinence programs had mounted to \$102 million (Hendershot 2004:90).

This federal programme encouraged the use of purity rings (Columbia News Service 2005), which were a symbol of a vow to abstain from sex until marriage. Cyrus also wore one.

I like to think of myself as the girl that no one can get, that no one can keep in their hand, [...] Even at my age, a lot of girls are starting to fall [...] and I think if [abstaining] is a commitment girls make, that’s great (Fox News 2008).

Not only did Cyrus excellently recreate the Evangelical social and language values regarding sex, but she also understood the customary conservative Christian discourse practices on this issue. Evangelicals, as Hendershot explained, create a paradox for their teens in which, on the one hand, sex is forbidden until marriage, while, on the other, it is always talked about. In the same way, Cyrus said once that she enjoyed HBO series “Sex and the City”, but later issued a statement clarifying that all she watched was the TBS-edited version. Her wish was to promote a “younger and cleaner” version of the show (Fox News 2008).

#### 4.4 Selling Jesus?

All these examples clearly portray Cyrus and the values she embodied. She prayed for God's will in her life, she resisted temptation by being close to God, defended family values, wore a purity ring very proudly and – the most important thing – she did everything for Jesus. Since her fans only have access to her public life – her shows, concerts, and interviews with the press – she was, in fact a star, a celebrity, for Jesus. Being a celebrity for Jesus means producing a public discourse full of sociological values that makes someone truly marketable for a Christian niche. Contrary to what religious people might think, associating the language-value “Jesus” to a commodity (be it a person or an object) is not so much about believing in Jesus, but about selling in the market. As Hendershot reported, Dan Harrel, a wealthy Christian talent manager and brother-in-law of Christian pop star Amy Grant has a clear opinion on what the Christian entertainment industry does: “Are we selling Jesus?”, Harrel asked rhetorically. “Absolutely. That’s our product” (Hendershot 2004:24).

Evangelicals found in Cyrus’ language-values the right mediation of the social and moral values they hold dear. Keeping in mind that

American evangelicals know what they are, at least in part, because they know what they are *not* – members of the secular, morally bankrupt world (Hendershot 2004:25),

Cyrus is for them a sister in Christ, someone who shares their worldview. Thus, whatever she does such as starring in a TV sitcom has the moral blessing of the church. This way, evangelicals obtain a combination of Christian morality and celebrity that makes them enjoy the best of the secular and religious worlds they inhabit. From Disney’s point of view, Cyrus’ self-identification as a Christian is a way to sell a secular product to evangelicals. As stated earlier, Hannah Montana is not a Christian show, but the person playing its main character is overtly Christian. Thus, while the Christian industry targets only Christian families with products that contain specific language-meaning values, Disney is able to appeal to both Christian and secular audiences simply by viewing them as consumers, thus ensuring that the show is in tune with whatever social values the two consumer groups have in common. In this instance, “consumer” is the transcendental identity that everyone shares in the context of the market – “in America to buy is to be” (Hendershot 2004:30) –, in the same way citizenship is the transcendental identity that all communities share in the context of the state. It is in the marketing process where differences in sociological and language values must be taken into account, in order to appeal to secular and religious people.

This formula, which was already tested with great results in the case of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, mobilized consumers' values in the economic sense. The *Hannah Montana* concert tour was a big success in 2007, "with anxious parents paying thousands of dollars for scalped tickets" (Christian Today 2008) and grossing over \$60 million in United States of America box office, at least (Riley 2008). In the 2007 list of Forbes' top 20 earners under the age of 25, Cyrus ranked No. 17 with, an annual income of \$3.5 million (Forbes 2007). This economic success was also made possible by parents buying Hannah Montana products for their kids, who, in 2008, voted Miley Cyrus the best female singer and actress at the Kids Choice Awards. When she picked up both prizes, Cyrus thanked "[her] Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (Christian Today 2008).

#### 4.5 Cyrus leaves conservative Christianity behind

In 2008, a photo session by the famous photographer Annie Leibovitz for *Vanity Fair*, which showed Cyrus topless with her chest covered, was the beginning of the end of Cyrus' Christian public discourse and practice. *The New York Times* reported the news with the following explicit question:

Did Miley Cyrus, with the help of a controversy-courting magazine, just deliver a blow to the Walt Disney Company's billion-dollar *Hannah Montana* franchise? (Barnes 2008).

The same article quoted several Wall Street analysts' scepticism that only one picture "could dent the *Hannah Montana* machine". These analysts mentioned the following: "executives are constantly battling to keep minor slipups from growing into full-blown controversies". Cyrus responded to the controversy, issuing a statement in which she declared to be embarrassed when she saw the pictures in the magazine: "I apologize to my fans who[m] I care so deeply about" (Barnes 2008;). Her fans, as *The New York Times* reported, were three million regular viewers aged between six and fourteen.

Two years later, just months before turning eighteen, Cyrus released a new overtly non-Christian music album entitled "Can't be tamed". It included a single by the same name, the video of which was very graphic about the transition she was trying to make from evangelical, conservative social and moral values to liberal secular values. Cyrus appears in it as a fallen angel with dark wings and, in some sequences, she wears a short golden dress as she lies on a green leaf showing an erotic attitude (Cyrus 2010b). The lyrics of the song seem to refer to a breakpoint in her life:

I can't be saved, I can't be tamed ... I wanna be a part of something  
I don't know /And if you try to hold me back I might explode /Baby  
by now you should know (Cyrus 2010a).

Cyrus' discourse had gone wild and so did her public practices. In her performance of "Can't be tamed" in the British show "Britain's Got Talent", she simulated a lesbian kiss with a back-up dancer. Of course, this caused a great deal of controversy, but Cyrus was already in another track.

I'm just at a certain place where I've changed a lot as a person. ...  
I've grown up a lot, which everyone does (Ross 2010).

Still in Europe, she was featured on the back cover of *El País*, the leading newspaper in Spain. Its headline was unequivocal: "I feel free after leaving Hannah Montana behind" (Pérez-Lanzac 2010). When the Spanish journalist asked her about the purity ring, she replied that it no longer looked modern to her, and that decisions such as being virgin until marriage are personal; there is no reason to go public with it.

Cyrus' language-meaning values underwent a change with social and moral implications. She transformed her Christian public discourse into a secular and liberal one. She stopped contributing to the production of conservative social and moral values and embraced a secular moral project. Cyrus herself, being the commodity in the market, used new language-meaning values to recast herself as a new commodity. As a Christian commodity, she embodied a set of social and moral values that earned her a great deal of economic value. Cyrus' use-value as a role model for younger Christians, in addition to her labour-time value (by this, we mean, in this instance, the social time and skills needed to produce a Christian celebrity, i.e., a celebrity that embodies Christian social values), made Cyrus' exchange-value very high in the Christian market. Thus, it could be argued that Cyrus was not only the commodity, but also the producer of another one: her public discourse. She sold moral values in exchange for people's economic values. In the process of becoming a secular commodity, however, Cyrus risked all these already acquired values. Cyrus' identity change was merely a change in social and language-meaning values. Her identity in the market was always the same: a commodity.

#### 4.6 Reactions to Cyrus' transformations

Before leaving the Christian social and language values behind, Cyrus had expressed her desire to "follow friend and fellow actress Hillary Duff's lead rather than go down the Lindsay Lohan, Britney Spears track" (Kimball 2008).

As Ham (2010) explained, she had captured the family-friendly market with the Hannah Montana show and the faith market with public declarations of being Christian. She had been a good-girl role model and a parent-friendly product (Kimball 2008). Needless to say, Cyrus' adoption of secular and liberal social and language values was very much noticed by the evangelical community. The publishing of Cyrus' nude pictures in *Vanity Fair* prompted Lin Burness, who runs a blog on marriage and parenting, to write that “[p]arents should be extremely concerned. [...] Very young girls look up to Miley Cyrus as a role model” (Barnes 2008). Indeed, at the time, the Hannah Montana series was considered one of the few entertainment sanctuaries for children (Barnes 2008). Parents followed Burness' advice and reacted with outrage when they saw Cyrus' topless pictures on television (Barnes 2008). Different parent groups said Cyrus had crossed the line (Chmielewski 2009). The *Christian Post* published an article, in which they encouraged people to “think twice before fully promoting [Cyrus] as the role model she set out to be” (Kimball 2008). A media spokesperson for one of the nation's most prominent pro-family groups encouraged parents to use *Vanity Fair* pictures as an opportunity to discuss sex and moral principles (Leichman 2008). A faith-based organization, dedicated to combating sexual slavery, declared that publishing such photographs of a sixteen-year-old was an “act condoning pedophilia” (Leichman 2008). Finally, a Protestant website framed the event in a Christian narrative, affirming that Cyrus' faith seemed sincere, despite committing a sin such as the publication of nude photos in *Vanity Fair* (Tubbs 2009).

Several months later, a *Christian Post* guest columnist expressed his disappointment in an open letter directed to Cyrus after having seen her stripping in front of teens and preteens across the United States of America:

Instead of keeping the faith it looks like you sold out to the pagans for ratings, [...] the Spirit of God truly does dwell in you,

he wrote, she would know that what she did was wrong. The author declared himself the father of a four-year-old girl who could not be allowed to continue being a Hannah Montana fan. He made a personal appeal for repentance, “[w]ith Jesus it is never too late”. And he finished his letter reclaiming Cyrus' statement that she does everything for Jesus:

I will be praying for you Miley. God has allowed you to be on a big stage. My prayer is that you will use it for his glory instead of your own (Stier 2009).

Several months later, Cyrus seemed to reply to this kind of criticism and to hint for an imminent end to her conservative Christian public discourse:

[m]y faith is very important to me. But I don't necessarily define my faith by going to church every Sunday. Because now when I go to church, I feel like it's a show (Christianity Today 2010a).

The release of *Can't be tamed* seemed to be the definitive blow to Cyrus' Christian image. A *Christianity Today* editor headlined an opinion article of his own "Britnification: Goodbye, Hannah Montana". In it, the author questioned Cyrus' maturity to shoot videos such as "Can't be tamed". He confessed to have given Cyrus and her family "the benefit of the doubt, trusting that her few missteps in the past have been relatively innocent ..." – something hard to believe for a family in the music industry for years – and that he prayed that Cyrus would not follow in Britney Spears' and Christina Aguilera's footsteps (Christianity Today 2010b). In the readers' comment section of this opinion piece, disappointment was the main feeling among readers. Months before the release of "*Can't be tamed*", Adam Bonnett, in charge of Disney Channel Worldwide, mentioned the following:

It's one of the things she's been wrestling with for months – whether it's time to make a decision to continue being Hannah Montana or just be a regular, ordinary girl (Starr 2010).

A *Christianity Today* review of the album "*Can't be tamed*" explored the social and economic consequences of this career move. The economic prospects seemed excellent. Soon after its release, the single hit the Top 10 and had more than twenty-three million views on YouTube. However, it seemed hard to think that the same public that had made her so successful, socially and economically, was willing to accompany Cyrus down this new road. The new album, the reviewer wrote, may be

burning too many bridges that connect her to the people that helped keep the spotlight on her with this new aesthetic and sexed-up approach (Ham 2010:).

#### 4.7 Economic results

A celebrity, once focused on parents interested in giving appropriate social values to their children, became a celebrity to rebel teenagers who no longer depend on their parents to choose what they consume. This had social and economic consequences. Her newly adopted social and language values meant a twenty-five per cent reduction in appeal among teenagers between the ages of 13 and 17 (Holson 2010). As *The New York Times* reported, at the time, nine-year-old girls felt "bored with Ms. Cyrus's new act. She's become a fan of 'iCarly'" (Holson 2010). Regarding economic values, this change proved less profitable than what even Christian reviewers



presumed. Not long after “*Can’t be tamed*” was in the stores, it had sold seventy-two per cent less than the Cyrus album “*Breakout*”, released in 2008. While on Forbes’ 2010 list “The Celebrity 100” Cyrus ranked 13<sup>th</sup> with a total pay of \$48 million (Forbes 2010), she was not even on the 2011 list. It took Miley four years to appear on the list again (Forbes 2014b). Even so, in 2014, she ranked lower (17<sup>th</sup>) with fewer earnings (\$36 million) than in 2010 (Forbes 2014a).

#### 4.8 Value analysis

Cyrus’ transformation from a Christian commodity to a secular one did not mean a loss of social and moral value among the Christian community. It simply meant a change of sign. As long as she represented a Christian identity, she enjoyed a positive social value among evangelicals. Once Cyrus decided to represent a secular and liberal identity, Christian social values toward her turned negative. This negativity affected her worth as a commodity and Cyrus’ use-value and exchange-value in the Christian market were drastically reduced. Cyrus’ labour-time value was suppressed, since she was no longer a Christian celebrity. Leaving the Christian market behind, Cyrus has been working on becoming a desirable commodity – a secular celebrity – in the secular market through a set of public discourses and practices that embody unchristian social and language-meaning values. In other words, this commodity named Cyrus has been acquiring value in the labour-time sense. From an economic perspective, this public identity change has not proven to be a profitable investment yet. In any case, this shows that commodities always have a moral value.

### 5. CONCLUSIONS

The case of Miley Cyrus represents a sophisticated interplay of social, economic, and language-meaning values. Presented to the world as a celebrity embodying conservative Christian social and language-meaning values, she was the star of *Hannah Montana*, a Disney Channel sitcom with neutral language-meaning values and conservative social values. The formula of a neutral show with a Christian star proved to be a success in economic values for both Cyrus and Disney, reaching out to secular and religious consumers alike, while fostering loyalty among the evangelical community.

Thanks to a Christian celebrity, Disney was able to appeal to both Christian and secular audiences simply by viewing them as consumers, thus ensuring that the show was in tune with whatever social values both consumer groups had in common. In this instance, “consumer” is the

transcendental identity that everyone shares in the context of the market in the same way citizenship is the transcendental identity that all communities share in the context of the state. It is in the marketing process though, where differences in sociological and language values must be taken into account, in order to appeal to secular and religious people.

In 2010, Cyrus initiated a public transformation of her identity as a commodity. Leaving conservative Christian social and language values behind, she embraced a set of secular and liberal discourses and practices. Using new language-meaning values, she recast herself as a commodity apt only for the secular market. Cyrus' use-value as a role model for younger Christians, in addition to her labour-time value (by this we mean, in this instance, the social time and skills needed to produce a Christian celebrity, i.e., a celebrity that embodies Christian social values) was now reduced to a minimum. Consequently, Cyrus' exchange value in the Christian market decreased accordingly. It should also be noted that Cyrus' identity change was a change in social and language-meaning values only. Her identity in the market was always the same: a commodity.

Cyrus' transformation from a Christian commodity to a secular one did not mean a loss of social and moral value among the Christian community, but a change in its sign. While evangelicals valued her positively as a Christian celebrity, they saw Cyrus negatively as a secular star. This showed that commodities, beyond their use-value, exchange-value and labour-time value, have a moral value.

Finally, in the search for a place in the secular market, Cyrus has been working on becoming a desirable commodity – a secular celebrity – in the secular market through a set of public discourses and practices that embody unchristian social and language-meaning values. In Marxist terms, the commodity “Cyrus” has been acquiring value in the labour-time sense. While it is still too early to say whether Cyrus' identity change will be successful in economic values, so far it has not proven to be a more profitable investment.

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