



The Bread of Angels (and the Cream Cheese): the Afterlife in Food and Drink Commercials

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Representations of the afterlife in TV programs have often included the presence—or absence—of food and drink as part of a comforting—or discomfiting—image of what sort of existence we might lead after death. Thus, for example, in the 2005 Simpsons' episode «The Father, the Son, and the Holy Guest Star», Marge imagines a Catholic heaven where the Irish drink stout, the Mexicans tequila, and Italian families share pasta and wine around a red-checked table-clothed table; on the other hand, food is conspicuously absent from the snobbish, aseptic Protestant heaven of her destiny. In the 1999 «Bible Stories» episode, on the other hand, the wonderful smell of barbecue covers for the lack of hotdogs in hell and the presence instead of pineapple in the coleslaw.¹ The unlimited number of flavours of frozen yogurt and the unavailability of real ice cream are part of a running joke in the Netflix's series *The Good Place* (2016-).

This very human hope of maintaining the comfort of food and the conviviality of family in the afterlife has been exploited in the last several decades in many TV food and drink commercials as well. In heaven, the best of food and drink will be easy to obtain, wonderful to taste, and will add no fat to our newly resurrected bodies. But the central message of all these afterlife TV commercials is that such heavenly food and drink are already available here and now; they are non-fattening, excellent tasting, and for sale in all good supermarkets. Why wait for paradise when we can have heavenly cream cheese and celestial coffee every day, today, now?

¹ See Pinsky 2007 on religion in *The Simpsons*.

In this article I will look at how the traditional realms and inhabitants of the Christian afterlife—heaven, purgatory and hell—have been depicted in selected international TV commercials for food and drink. I will discuss in particular several advertising campaigns set in heaven: «Paradiso» of Lavazza coffee, broadcast in Italy in several formats since 1995; international ads for Philadelphia Cream Cheese; US commercials for Halo Top ice-cream and Snickers chocolate bars; and international commercials for the Nespresso coffee machine. I will make a further brief reference to purgatory and hell (or their inhabitants) which appear in commercials again for Lavazza coffee, Halo Top ice cream and Philadelphia Cream Cheese, but also for milk, Segafredo coffee, and McDonald's hamburgers. After analysing the ways in which these commercials represent the afterlife and their residents, and identifying the biblical roots of their representations, I will then discuss in what form the advertisements take advantage of national or cultural stereotypes to create a version of the afterlife which may attract the specific consumers they are targeting. My contention is that the varied representations of the afterlife in all these commercials are of interest not as much for the way they commercialise biblical sources, but rather or what they reveal about ourselves, our traditions, wishes and aspirations.

IMAGES OF HEAVEN IN CHRISTIANITY AND IN TV COMMERCIALS

What happens when we die? Do heaven and hell exist? Does purgatory? And if they do, where are they? What do they look like? Who gets there? What will happen to our bodies? What will we do for eternity? These are questions for which many religions have attempted to provide answers. They are «human questions, time-old questions», which Jesus' disciples also asked him, said Pope Francis in his general audience of 26 November 2014. In that same audience, Pope Francis declared that heaven, more than an actual place, is «a 'state' of soul in which our deepest hopes are fulfilled in superabundance and our beings [...] reach their full maturity» and where, as stated in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, «we will come face to face with [God]» (Francis, 2014). More recently, on 27 October 2017, the pope described paradise as «the embrace of God, infinite love [...] the most beautiful place in existence», but not, as some may believe, «a fairy tale or an enchanted garden» (Catholic News Service, 2017).

These words by Pope Francis contrast with many of the West's shared traditions regarding the afterlife which TV commercials tend to exploit. Journalist Lisa Miller in her book *Heaven: our enduring fascination with the afterlife* reveals that 71% of the Americans who believe in heaven imagine it as an actual place, eternal and infinite, set above, a perfect place where the blessed live with God after death (2010). 13% of Americans imagine heaven as a city, and 19% as a garden (Miller, 2010). Such images, which are also found in TV commercials set in

the afterlife, of course have biblical roots: in his second letter to the Corinthians (12:1-4), Paul sets paradise somewhere in the sky: he writes that a believer—possibly himself— was «caught up to the third heaven. [...] he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter». Sky and clouds appear prominently in all TV commercials set in heaven, from Philadelphia Cream Cheese and Halo Top ice cream to Lavazza and Nespresso coffee.

The image of heaven as a city comes from the book of Revelation, chapter 21: the narrator recounts his vision of the new Jerusalem, «God's dwelling place [...] among the people, a city laid out like a square, as long as it was wide", which had "a great, high wall with twelve gates [...] The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl. The great street of the city was of gold, as pure as transparent glass». From this Bible passage also comes the iconic image of the gates of heaven, which appear in a number of the aforementioned commercials, including Lavazza and Nespresso.² Another biblical source which suggests a city with homes is the gospel according to John (14:2) when Jesus tells his disciples: «My Father's house has many rooms». In the Lavazza commercials there are several homes, often with no walls.³ (St Peter's house in particular has the same characteristics of gold and light as the new Jerusalem from Revelation).⁴ The Philadelphia Cream Cheese commercials from different parts of the world do not show actual homes but furniture, beds, kitchens and, of course, refrigerators containing the advertised cream cheese.⁵

The second most popular image of paradise—that of the garden— finds its origin in the root of the word itself, which comes from the ancient Persian *pairidaēza*, meaning enclosure, park («paradise», 1996). Revelation (2:7) adds that the tree of life is there, thus connecting the image of a future heaven with the ancient garden of Eden. In the German Philadelphia Cream Cheese heaven, a female angel wearing green gardener gloves and gumboots grows the herbs that will be used to season the spread.⁶ In the Lavazza heaven, St Peter is often shown in gardener overalls, cutting tree branches.⁷ The famous tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the snake and the apple (Gen 2-3) also make their appearance.⁸

² The image of the gate of heaven also appears in Gen 28: 17, at the end of Jacob's dream.

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r3GILLzs3LA&index=11&list=PLDGzUwGPx0070JzsJ2OohV4y0I7mFSvni>

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=omKgW3XAoBY>

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Im2AnBI7AUk> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BB8dQfmj7Ws>

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GfmQJEIRWIY>

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rNV-8u5njK8>

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n9t-qKkb84>

In TV commercials, heaven and earth —and all space in between— are not completely separated; stairs often join them. Such an image probably refers to the ladder of Jacob's dream in Gen 28:12, where Isaac's son saw «a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it». In the Nespresso commercials, George Clooney climbs a flight of steps made of clouds.⁹ In the Halo Top commercials, it is not the angels or blessed souls who ascend and descend on the stairs to heaven, but the devil himself who wishes to complain about the heavenly Halo Top ice-cream, which, thanks to its low calorie count, can be eaten without feelings of guilt or shame.¹⁰ At the end of the commercial, the devil descends the cloud stairway happily carrying with him several tubs of the product.

In all reality, it may be that stairs are not the quickest means to move from heaven to other realms. The protagonist of a 1998 Lavazza commercial uses an old-fashioned elevator to smuggle Lavazza coffee down to purgatory, where celestial coffee is unavailable.¹¹ In a more recent 2018 Lavazza commercial, it is the devil himself who ascends to heaven in an elevator to drink Lavazza coffee, creating dismay among the cherubs.¹² Again, in a 1995 Lavazza commercial, St Peter proudly shows off a remote control very similar to the buttons of an elevator which allows him to move between the different circles of the heavens and earth. The fact that in Italian the ground floor of an apartment building is indicated in the elevator with the letter T as in «terra» —also the word for Earth— makes the scene even more comic.¹³

FOOD AND DRINK IN HEAVEN

Some commercials make explicit the connection between the advertised product and heaven: the name itself of Halo Top ice cream suggests the sanctity of the product which, according to the commercial, has been «just creationated» in heaven.¹⁴ Philadelphia Cream Cheese offers us a little taste of heaven,¹⁵ and only a coffee as good as Lavazza deserves to enter Paradise. In fact, Lavazza has not always been heaven's chosen coffee. In one of the earliest commercials of the Lavazza «Paradiso» campaign, the protagonist (comic actor Tullio Solenghi), recently arrived in heaven, is unable to find the same Lavazza coffee that made

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UjtwCf5WWUU>

¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3fm3BGLQRCg>

¹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B5TO3MbNANA>

¹² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Z_9dIB3OIo

¹³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6EJvhPQm1ic>

¹⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3fm3BGLQRCg>

¹⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vISV7c6hEzE>

him feel in heaven during his lifetime. He thus asks St Peter to «be a saint» and go down to a supermarket to buy his favourite coffee. After trying it, St Peter decides that Lavazza deserves to be heaven's coffee of choice.¹⁶

This frequent association between food and heaven, of course, has very deep biblical roots. Psalm 78:25, for example, refers to the «bread of angels», and Luke's gospel reports Jesus saying: «Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God» (14:15). The kingdom of heaven is further compared to a king who prepares a wedding banquet (Mt 22:2), perhaps influenced by the image of God and the banquet depicted in Isaiah 25:6: «the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine – the best of meats and the finest of wines». The communal, festive sharing of food and drink, of course, is also central in the first miracle of Jesus at the wedding feast in Cana (Jn 2:1-11). In fact, one could say that food and drink are *the* most important symbols of Jewish and Christian salvation. The Passover meal commemorates the Jewish liberation from slavery. So too the last supper that Jesus shared with his disciples to celebrate the Passover (Mt 26:17-30; Mk 14:12-25; Lk 22:7-23), continues to be remembered in the Christian Eucharist of bread and wine – which traditionally in Italy has been followed by a large family midday Sunday meal. In fact, one of the Lavazza commercials from 2015 shows a typical Sunday meal in heaven, to which not only the redeemed souls and saints are invited, but also all human beings on earth.¹⁷ The table with St Peter and the other saints recalls the traditional iconography of the last supper. Even more importantly, however, this connection between the heavenly meal and the Italian tradition of the family Sunday meal reminds us of the Catholic belief in the communion of the saints, that is, the spiritual connection between all the believers, alive and dead. Having said that, in this Lavazza advertisement, spirituality gives way to mirth when the protagonist, who has refused to bring coffee for everyone for the following Sunday, finds himself having to wash all the banquet plates by hand.

HEAVEN'S GATEKEEPER

Just as iconic as the pearly gates is the person who stands at the gate admitting the blessed into heaven; according to the biblical tradition that is the apostle Peter, to whom Jesus gave the keys of the kingdom (Mt 16:19). In the Lavazza commercials, St Peter is identified by name. He holds the keys in his hands and has keys embroidered on his dressing gown.¹⁸ In fact, the Lavazza St Peter appears to have reached what on earth we would call an elevated social status: he has

¹⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6EJvhPQm1ic>

¹⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MhHFpjS5h3I>

¹⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6EJvhPQm1ic>

an enormous home, from which one can see the dome of St Peter's; he has his own cook – an angel who also prepares and offers coffee;¹⁹ sometimes he even leaves heaven to go on holiday.²⁰ Other characteristics attributed to the apostle in the Lavazza commercials are a passion for soccer,²¹ a welcoming attitude towards the newly arrived,²² and the aforementioned love of gardening.²³ The biblical roots of the character —a fisherman during his life— emerge in particular during one episode in which we see St Peter very happy on a paddle boat; as he tries to reach the beach, he even seems to be walking on water, as recounted in Mt 14:29.²⁴

The Lavazza St Peter could not be more different from the gatekeeper of the Snickers heaven, characterized as a middle-aged, white-dressed, pedantic bureaucrat, who sports a mug saying «do I look like I care?» and whose duties consist of first, reminding each and every dead soul of all the sins they ever committed (including not lowering the toilet seat) and then opening a (hellish) chasm for those souls that demonstrate impatience for the long line.²⁵ Only a little more than a receptionist is the winged angel who sits at a desk behind the doors of heaven in the Halo Top commercials receiving frequent visits from the devil regarding the new heaven-«creationed» ice cream.²⁶ This lack of emphasis in the Snickers and Halo Top advertisements on the figure of St Peter —commonly associated with the pope and the Vatican— may be due to the fact that, in contrast to the Lavazza commercials which are directed to an audience which is traditionally Catholic, the Snickers and Halo Top commercials were broadcast in the United States, where Protestantism is more widespread.

The white-dressed character who welcomes George Clooney into heaven in the Swiss-based Nespresso commercials, moreover, is not clearly named either; viewers' comments identify him either as St Peter (Daily Mail Reporter 2010; Browning 2012) or as God himself (Colyer 2011).²⁷ Whoever the gatekeeper is —played in the advertisement by John Malkovich— he obviously understands that this heaven lacks the essentials, for he is willing to «come to an agreement» with George Clooney (sending him back to earth, as in fact happens in one version of the ad), in exchange Clooney leaves his brand new Nespresso

¹⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=omKgW3XAoBY>

²⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NnpDI9I9qfU>

²¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MdnJfR7WwOc>

²² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rNV-8u5njK8>

²³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VfZVzLME1p8>

²⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RnXKbOpbRbU>

²⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6dliNp2stZM>

²⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hnoxJuVx11k>, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3fm3BGLQRCg&index=1&list=RDlkY_Fjr4T6 and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lkY_Fjr4T6o&list=RDlkY_Fjr4T6o&index=2

²⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=23j1B4-lroM>

machine with him – Clooney's Porsche and home on lake Como having been deemed not sufficient for the barter at hand.²⁸ Again, the fact that the figure of St Peter is not greatly exploited may be due to the fact that Nespresso advertises internationally, not only in traditionally Catholic dominant countries.

ANGELS, SAINTS AND THE BLESSED SOULS

Of course the gatekeeper —whether St Peter or not— is not the only character to appear in heavenly TV commercials. Angels (identified by their wings), saints (wearing halos) and of course the blessed souls also contribute to the heavenly environment. White, a traditional and biblical symbol of purity, is the colour of choice for everybody's clothing.²⁹ However, while there appears to be a general agreement that angels populate heaven, commercials from different countries attribute different characteristics to these heavenly creatures, using national stereotypes for marketing and comic purposes. For example, in international commercials for Philadelphia Cream Cheese, the protagonists (usually female, wearing long white dresses and wings) possess a number of heavenly powers.³⁰ They need only snap their fingers to obtain light rain or sunshine to grow their plants;³¹ clap their hands to attain an impeccably remade bed with perfect corners;³² or whistle and receive a little winged refrigerator full of the advertised cream cheese.³³

In contrast to these superhuman characteristics, Philadelphia Cream Cheese angels from all over the world still seem quite obsessed by the very human desire to lose weight, and the consequent need to count calories.³⁴ That's why they insist that their product has less calories than butter or margarine, or recommend Philadelphia Cream Cheese Light instead of stomach-reducing machines.³⁵ Some, moreover, suffer from curiosity and envy —capital sins that should have no place in Paradise— when with a telescope they spy a fellow female angel sharing bread and cream cheese with a handsome male angel.³⁶

²⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UjtwCf5WWUU>

²⁹ The most recent Lavazza Paradiso campaign, however, sees St Peter dressed in grey, sporting a short grey beard, with a much more modern look than the previous Lavazza St Peters with their long, white hair and beard. See Maurizio Crozza's St Peter at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uVDxCvZUNsY>

³⁰ On the Philadelphia Cream Cheese angels, see also Macleod, 2005 and jaholst, 2014.

³¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GfmQJEIRWIY>

³² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BB8dQfmj7Ws>

³³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GNB2dAJk330>

³⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LrPHRnyu8OU>

³⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zcBTZe6B148>

³⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lm2AnBI7AUk>. Most of the male angels in Philadelphia Cream Cheese commercials, in fact, seem to play a role as sexual object, serving trays of bread spread with the advertiser's product to female angels, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vISV7c6hEzE>), helping

Calories do not cause much concern in the stereotypically Italian Lavazza heaven, where sharing a meal and drinking coffee are among the earthly routines which one could not possibly give up in the afterlife.³⁷ The protagonists of the Lavazza commercials are normally souls that have arrived in heaven and must learn to negotiate their new environment, from meeting St Peter at the gate,³⁸ and obtaining new clothes,³⁹ to learning to fly,⁴⁰ go on dates⁴¹ and even get married.⁴² But though they have joined the ranks of the blessed, these inhabitants of the Lavazza heaven —almost always men— are less than perfect; in fact, they show themselves to still be very human: they sometimes lie (as in the episode when they refuse to admit having stolen the famous apple);⁴³ become frightened (when they must take flying lessons);⁴⁴ are selfish (when they don't wish to share their Lavazza coffee with the other inhabitants of heaven)⁴⁵ and are always interested in possible sentimental liaisons. In one episode, in which American Julia Roberts played the role of the model for Botticelli's *Venus*, the commercial's protagonists explicitly played with national stereotypes when they explained that there are three things that Italians know how to do well: make laughter, make love, and make coffee.⁴⁶ Keeping with the Italian male stereotypes, the blessed souls in the Lavazza heaven play soccer,⁴⁷ cheer for their national team,⁴⁸ and would do just about anything (even descend to purgatory), to watch the soccer world cup on TV.⁴⁹

All the recurring actors chosen for the Lavazza commercials are well-known male comedians.⁵⁰ Female roles are usually reserved for angels and minor characters

out with the gardening (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GfmQJEIRWIY>), or with a manicure (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EZalZpppsQE>).

³⁷ When the new face for Lavazza in 2012, Enrico Brignano, meets St Peter, for example, his first question concerns the time of meals (<https://www.youtube.com/embed/p-KHwYPG3kE?rel=0>).

³⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p-KHwYPG3kE>

³⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/embed/tNPDLnkCTCo?rel=0>

⁴⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/embed/limb7I9hGbs?rel=0>

⁴¹ https://www.youtube.com/embed/3_Kztb2S08g?rel=0 and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OvrA-HlBdHu4&list=PLDGzUwGPx0070JzsJ2OohV4y0I7mFSvni&index=21>

⁴² <https://www.youtube.com/embed/cZhHLvXiWBw?rel=0>

⁴³ <https://www.youtube.com/embed/n9t-qKkjb84?rel=0>

⁴⁴ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7DbX8qd_D5Y

⁴⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MhHFpjS5h3l>

⁴⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QHfOIm8vezo>

⁴⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MdnJfr7WwOc>

⁴⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lcSNDIYFjek>

⁴⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B5TO3MbNANA>

⁵⁰ Since 1995 various comic actors have appeared as protagonists in the Lavazza «Paradiso» campaign: the first were Tullio Solenghi and Riccardo Garrone (as St Peter); then the «odd couple» duo Paolo Bonolis and Luca Laurenti (2000-2012); in 2012 Enrico Brignano joined the Lavazza campaign with Tullio Solenghi returning in 2015 in the role of St Peter; and since 2016 Maurizio Crozza plays all the characters: St Peter, the blessed souls, the twin cherubs and even the devil.

(love interests or, in the 2012 season, the protagonist's sister).⁵¹ In the Lavazza heaven, angels have well defined gender roles:⁵² beautiful female angels cook for St Peter,⁵³ or appear from nowhere holding a tray of espresso.⁵⁴ Male angels work as *carabinieri*.⁵⁵ Only male souls and angels are playing soccer, when in one commercial the protagonist complains that you can never score a goal with a winged angel as goalkeeper.⁵⁶ Guardian angels (Mt 18:10 and Psalm 91:11), who ready themselves to board trains toward their earthly destinations, make up another category of angels in the Lavazza commercials.⁵⁷

Saints in the Lavazza heaven are frequently mentioned in a comical way:⁵⁸ St Remus sings – in reference to the Sanremo annual music competition;⁵⁹ St Bernard sports dog-like hairy legs;⁶⁰ and St Honoré wins the heavenly competition for being “the most excellent”.⁶¹ In one episode, one of the protagonists is about to give a Lavazza coffee machine to St Valentine, hoping for his help in finding a girlfriend, when the other protagonist suggests that the present would be more useful if directed to St Rita, the patron saint of impossible causes.⁶² In my research I have not encountered saints in any TV commercial for food or drink except those of Lavazza, which targets an Italian audience with a long tradition of attributing roles and patronages to their favourite saints.

LAVAZZA OR NESPRESSO: ITALIAN OR INTERNATIONAL COFFEE / ITALIAN OR INTERNATIONAL HEAVEN⁶³

Is heaven divided into sectors for the various Christian denominations, as Marge Simpson fears in the already mentioned episode «The Father, the Son and the Holy Guest Star»? If so, the Lavazza commercials —again, targeting

⁵¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HbR343IG3xg>

⁵² Dulbecco (2015) reports on a petition asking Lavazza to avoid sexism in its coffee commercials.

⁵³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=omKgW3XAoBY>

⁵⁴ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OzJhHh__dcg

⁵⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n9t-qKkjB84>

⁵⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MdnJfR7WwOc>

⁵⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vfPWbho8waQ>

⁵⁸ The protagonists of the commercial themselves wonder if one day they too might become saints; the only level of sanctity they might hope to attain, however, according to St Peter, is the that of the wine Sangiovese or the tomatoes Sanmarzano. <https://www.youtube.com/embed/ltgehc7tufs?rel=0>

⁵⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BufidR116-s>

⁶⁰ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DP_YROVSfrQ

⁶¹ <https://www.youtube.com/embed/ltgehc7tufs?rel=0>

⁶² <https://www.youtube.com/embed/fg3wNzR90Kw?rel=0>

⁶³ On the dispute between Lavazza and Nespresso over the rights to set their advertisement campaign in heaven, see Hall (2009). Mancini (2010) reports on the judges' decision in favour of Nespresso.

an Italian audience— point to a Catholic heaven, even though the words «Catholic» or «Catholicism» are never explicitly mentioned. In addition to the Catholic traditions of St Peter as the holder of the keys of heaven, and saints and guardian angels mentioned above, these Italian coffee commercials clearly show the dome of St Peter's basilica in Rome⁶⁴ and St Peter explains that the Vatican soccer team plays at home in the Lavazza heaven.⁶⁵ In other words, in this Catholic Lavazza heaven saints, angels and the blessed souls live in harmony, eating, dating, getting married, sleeping, playing soccer and going on holidays, offering the viewers what has been referred to as an anthropocentric vision of heaven, that is «an idealised version of life as we presently know it. The focus is on family reunions, human relationships, and the full range of activities that make this life interesting and meaningful» (Walls, 2009).⁶⁶

Quite different is the image of heaven that emerges from the Nespresso TV commercials. After passing through the gates of heaven, George (Clooney) finds himself seated on a couch next to the man who had welcomed him—either St Peter or God, as discussed above—and two beautiful women, presumably angels. Thanks to Clooney's questions, viewers learn that in this place everybody wears white, there's no need to sleep or eat, there are beautiful bathrooms—but no need to use them—and no movies to make because there are no producers or agents. This, then, concludes Clooney, is heaven: «Coffee, beautiful angels, just you and me. I like it».⁶⁷ Such an image of heaven, as direct contact with the divine, corresponds to what Walls has called «theocentric vision», which focalizes in individual contemplation and divine vision, instead of community and sharing (2009).

Even though it is doubtful that the Lavazza's and Nespresso's creatives tried to make a theological distinction on the topic of heaven, it is clear that the two sets of commercials do send different messages. The Lavazza's advertising campaign «Paradiso», directed to an Italian audience,⁶⁸ suggests inclusion, a sense of community, the continuation of at least some of life's pleasures and values that hopefully we will maintain even in the afterlife, such as friendship, love, family, Sunday meals and good coffee. As the Lavazza's marketing company affirms, the «Paradiso» campaign throughout the years has reached the «identification of Italians with the Lavazza heaven» thanks in part to the simplicity of the narration

⁶⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=omKgW3XAoBY> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p-KHWYP-G3kE>

⁶⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lcSNDIYFjek>

⁶⁶ The definition was originally used by Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang in their seminal book *Heaven: A History*, first published in 1988.

⁶⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=23j1B4-lroM>

⁶⁸ On Lavazza's commercial for its international markets, see Lukovitz (2015). Several recent international commercials for Lavazza can be found at https://www.adbrands.net/it/lavazza_it.htm

but especially to the values expressed in each episode: goodness, altruism, love, respect for others and sharing («Campagna Paradiso», 2014). Despite the recent trend toward a more multicultural and secular Italian population, these commercials are based on a Judaeo-Christian Catholic cultural context, making comic and sometimes even slightly irreverent use of biblical themes and characters for a commercial use: selling coffee.

Selling coffee is also the goal of the Nespresso commercials, which, on the other hand, target an international audience, as demonstrated by the choice of world-famous actors as protagonists, and the languages used in the commercials themselves – spoken English with subtitles in other languages. Here the emphasis is not so much on community as on the exceptional individual: elegant, refined, unmoved and brave even in the afterlife, in the company of angels and divine beings who have an eternity to do nothing.⁶⁹ In fact, one can't help but wonder how the inhabitants of this heaven passed the time before the arrival of George Clooney and his Nespresso machine.⁷⁰

BUT HOW DO WE KNOW THIS IS REALLY HEAVEN?

As Netflix's *The Good Place* has managed to prove, it is sometimes not immediately easy to understand in which section of the afterlife one finds him/herself. Just as in the already mentioned Simpsons episode «Bible stories», where enticing barbecue smell did not correspond to enticing barbecue food, some food and drink commercials use a modern form of the torment of Tantalus to demonstrate that, although we may think we are in heaven, without a certain food and drink we might find ourselves truly in hell.⁷¹ Thus, a selfish young male executive reckons he has arrived in heaven when he discovers an endless supply of chocolate chip cookies. Very soon, however, he discovers that all the milk cartons in this afterlife's enormous refrigerator are in fact empty. The slogan «Got milk?», appears on the screen surrounded by a flaming border indicative of hell.⁷² In another commercial, a young man first wonders «This is hell?» when he finds himself surrounded by beautiful young women offering him trays filled

⁶⁹ Walls (2009) discusses several views of theologians on the question of whether the endless pleasure of heaven may lead to boredom.

⁷⁰ The dance company Tanzwerk has exploited the Nespresso commercial suggesting that heaven does not need coffee, since George Clooney has already delivered it; it doesn't need Red Bull either (an energy drink which, according to its slogan, gives you wings) because in heaven everybody already has wings. What it does need is entertainment to avoid monotony, which Tanzwerk is happy to provide (<https://vimeo.com/53972162>).

⁷¹ See also the «This Isn't Heaven» webpage for several examples of confusion between heaven and hell taken from comics, cinema, literature and games, in addition to advertising.

⁷² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eph6_fz49rc

with McDonald's hamburgers, fries and soda, but then finds himself muzzled and thus unable to try the tantalising food. He finally has to acknowledge that, as the writing on the door advised, he was in fact in hell.⁷³

Often in food and drink commercials, what distinguishes one realm from the other does not even refer to food or drink. In Lavazza commercials, for example, you know that you are in heaven because you need not pay exorbitant sums to buy your home – on the contrary you receive funds to maintain your property;⁷⁴ during body corporate meetings, everybody agrees and in fact defers to the opinion of the others, begging to pay a larger share than their neighbour;⁷⁵ and during the soccer world cup, every national team wins, so every blessed soul can proudly celebrate.⁷⁶ The 1998 soccer world cup even offers the protagonist of the Lavazza commercials the occasion to visit purgatory, where he will be able to watch TV in exchange for the heavenly Lavazza coffee (TV programs being unavailable in heaven). However, he will soon discover that in purgatory the world cup games are not shown live. He can, however, together with the poor souls in purgatory, watch the final from the 1970 world cup. In other words, re-watching a famous Italian national team defeat constitutes the sort of suffering that will help purify souls from their sins.⁷⁷

While the Italian Lavazza commercials refer to homes and soccer to give an idea of heaven, an Australian Philadelphia Cream Cheese commercial refers to the work environment: as an experienced angel explains to the new girl, the work hours are between noon and ten past, there's plenty of trashy magazines to read, and especially, you can use Philadelphia Cream Cheese instead of butter, and it has 60% less fat.⁷⁸

Marketing food and drink through images of heaven may seem more logical than using images of hell.⁷⁹ Yet, setting its commercials in hell proved a winning strategy for Segafredo (a competitor of Lavazza in the Italian coffee market), which raised its market share 3% in the year it inaugurated its new infernal

⁷³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1SWD2QGBbvU>

⁷⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VfZVzLME1p8>

⁷⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NnpDI9I9qfU>

⁷⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lcSNDIYFjek>

⁷⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B5TO3MbNANA>. If heaven is depicted as white and hell or hell-related characters are fiery red, purgatory is in fact all grey, an in-between area where not even strong colours can exist.

⁷⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LrPHRnyu8OU>

⁷⁹ An exception is the Hell Brand of pizza that is widely popular in New Zealand and also has stores in the UK, Canada and India. While all their pizzas and marketing use images of hell (see their website www.hellpizza.com), their TV commercials are not set in hell. See some examples at <https://www.bestadsontv.com/client/4750/Hell-Pizza>

campaign (Panzeri, 2006). The protagonist of the commercial, popular TV host Renzo Arbore, ends up in hell quite casually (having said to his taxi driver «go to hell»⁸⁰) and is given a tour of several infernal circles – in particular, that of the gluttons, where beautiful female devils devour food but prevent the damned souls from touching it.⁸¹ Other torments for the condemned include listening for the 300th time to the same out-of-tune live song.⁸² When he can no longer stand the noisy and smoke-filled environment, the protagonist asks for a coffee break, and suggests Segafredo coffee. The marketing message, in other words, in addition to implicitly placing Segafredo as «the other coffee» in opposition to Lavazza,⁸³ suggested that if Segafredo can provide relief for infernal torments, even more can it help with life's difficult moments (Carboni, 1998).⁸⁴ The stereotypical reddish, fiery, smoky, noisy depiction of the infernal realm in the Segafredo commercials, reminiscent of the biblical «fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth» (Mt 13:42), comically contrasts with the welcoming attitude of the main devil toward the visitor. The devil also positively comments on the quality of the advertised coffee. However, his comments that Segafredo coffee is «divine»⁸⁵ and that «it warms your soul»,⁸⁶ receive in response a thunderous reply from above.

The same sort of righteous anger greets those devils or demonic figures trying to enter paradise in other commercials. In addition to the already mentioned case of the devil in the Halo Top commercials, female devils complain that chocolate-flavoured Philadelphia Cream Cheese should rightly belong in hell for being so sinful;⁸⁷ or the devil takes the elevator up to heaven, singing «Voulez-vous café avec moi ce soir», as he too wishes to drink Lavazza coffee, like St Peter and his cherubs.⁸⁸ Both in the Lavazza and Philadelphia Cream Cheese commercials, demons are easily defeated by a superior heavenly power, that either humiliates them with thunder, or by pushing them down to the ground.

⁸⁰ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s_O6f8zXtgA

⁸¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Geskgx5hCwk>

⁸² <http://www.segafredoshop.com/commons/imgsUpl/100/videos/inferno4.mp4>

⁸³ Advertisements in Italy cannot make reference to a competitor product.

⁸⁴ While the creatives of the Segafredo marketing company counted on the sense of humour of the Lavazza's, the two companies became involved in a legal battle over the rights of having their coffee drank in the afterlife (Carboni, 1998; Dipollina, 1998). On the two opposing campaigns, see also Giannitrapani (2004).

⁸⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Geskgx5hCwk>

⁸⁶ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s_O6f8zXtgA

⁸⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kNWY-3jikY0> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6lgnsmQ-bfJU>

⁸⁸ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Z_9dlB3OIo

CONCLUSION

In our audio-visual era, biblical texts and religious culture are used for many goals, not least of which for selling food and drink. As my research has shown, however, advertising companies have chosen to use particularly those aspects of the biblical texts that are part of the collective imagination of Western societies imbued in the Judeo-Christian tradition, such as the garden of Eden with its apple tree, stairs that connect paradise and earth, a heaven in the clouds populated by angels and a fiery noisy hell, where one's soul will experience the worst of torments. And what could be the favourite spread for the bread of angels if not Philadelphia Cream Cheese? And what torment could be worse for one's soul than the inability to dunk one's chocolate chip cookies in milk?

Thus, although knowledge of biblical texts may appear necessary in order to appreciate the meaning or the humour of these commercials, it would seem that the advertising companies have created heavens (and hells) that are just as rooted in national traditions and popular imaginations as they are in their biblical sources. As Greg Garrett wrote, «much of what Christians believe about the afterlife does not come from the Bible, but through human imagination, whether theological or creative» (2015, pp. 5-6). In fact, the realms of the afterlife of food and drink commercials appear to be made in our image and likeness, cravings and desires: places where we will be able to drink barista-style coffee at any time of the day and eat bread smothered in cream cheese without getting fat. Jesus' parables suggest that the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed (Mt 13:31), a hidden treasure (Mt 13:44), a pearl of great value (Mt 13:45-46). The commercials of Philadelphia Cream Cheese, Lavazza coffee, Halo Top ice cream, and Nespresso coffee suggest, on the other hand, that heaven is very similar to us.

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