

Shopping for Faith, by Richard Cimino and Don Lattin.

reviewed by [Wade Clark Roof](#) in the [March 17, 1999](#) issue

*By Richard Cimino and Don Lattin, Shopping for Faith. (Jossey-Bass, 224 pp.)*

The hard statistics on church membership, religious attendance and belief have not changed much lately, but religion's "softer" side is in flux. The undercurrents of change have to do with spiritual experience, with divine imageries and sacred realities, with a search for meaning and belonging. Veteran religion journalists Richard Cimino and Don Lattin capture these undercurrents in vivid personal stories from which they draw major inferences about the rapid and often barely visible transformation of the religious landscape. Indeed, they do a better job of portraying these changes in "lived religion" than do many sociologists and commentators who rely primarily on institutional analysis and statistics.

Cimino and Lattin show that people today not only choose between religious options but have considerable control over the formations of religious identity. People move across old boundaries, drawing on the spiritual teachings and wisdom of various traditions. Our vast, multifarious spiritual marketplace is broader than the traditional religious structures it overlaps. Much of what is available in this marketplace is little more than secular spirituality. But our spiritual stirrings also lead to new formulations of faith and environmental consciousness, to changing sensitivities to gender-related spirituality, to the rediscovery of long-buried religious traditions, to social service and acts of charity and to involvement in community organizing. Though these are all themes deeply rooted in or inspired by faith communities, concern for them must often be reactivated. American religious life is bumptious and eruptive, ever capable of forming new configurations of meaning and conviction. As always, religion's life-giving and sustaining potential expresses itself around particular causes and concerns.

An ambivalent note rings throughout the book. "Shopping for faith," the authors say, "can trivialize religion or empower the spiritual search." American religion has always been vulnerable to the first, but the fact that religion can be trivialized should not blind us to its ability to empower.

Cimino and Lattin speak of "varieties of spirituality," but do not provide complete profiles of the kinds of people who embody them, or show how people of the different groups differ in lifestyle and outlook. Given an expanded spiritual marketplace, we need to know more about the suppliers as well as the consumers of religion. In particular, we need greater clarity about the emerging subcultures of those who say they are "spiritual but not religious," those who claim to be "both spiritual and religious," and those who reject spiritual (and perhaps even religious) discourse altogether in identifying themselves.

The big question for religious communities is what to make of all the current talk about spirituality. Much of it is shallow, offering promise after promise of instant enlightenment, personal well-being, health and prosperity. "How did we move from Isaiah to *The Celestine Prophecy*? From Donne's *Devotions* to *A Course in Miracles*?" asks Philip Zaleski in the *New York Times Book Review*. We cannot answer that question without attending to the massive shifts in religious culture or realizing the role that mass media and expanded cultural production play in making spiritual themes all the more pronounced. People's search for coherence amidst the fragmentation of our culture invites seemingly endless genres of narrative construction. These are not issues that Cimino and Lattin address. They simply describe the lay of the land.

Religious communities should not act as if the larger spiritual climate does not exist--even within their own borders. Today's spiritual-quest culture cannot be neatly contained. Life inside and outside the religious establishment is fluid and multilayered. Religious leaders need to explore more deeply the resources within religious traditions and the affinities between these resources and people's spiritual questions and concerns. Traditional languages of faith and current rhetorics of spiritual searching already represent a gigantic cultural divide for many, especially the young. For religious communities, the creative and perhaps religiously responsible course would be to structure ways in which believers and seekers might learn from one another and work toward creating a shared vocabulary and practice. To presume that seekers must, or necessarily will, come around to some normative standard set by believers will certainly drive seekers away. Religious leaders and scholars would do well to ponder the many pressing questions raised by Cimino and Lattin's impressive book.